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Decolonial fashion ethnography: ‘Before Yesterday’ method

ABSTRACT

This article explores decolonial fashion ethnography, focusing on the convergence of media and fashion in Angola and Brazil. Through fieldwork research, the article examines the production and circulation of fashion goods. The article emphasizes the need to decolonize the media and fashion industries, proposing the Antes de Ontem method for decolonial fashion ethnography. This method encourages a shift away from Eurocentric and binary thinking, promoting inclusivity and diversity in fashion research. The author emphasizes the coloniality of dress and the perpetuation of structural and cultural racism within the fashion industry. The article concludes by advocating for the integration of Afro-Brazilian fashion history and knowledge, challenging structural racism and Eurocentrism in the industry.

KEYWORDS

critical fashion studies
ethnography fieldwork
Global South
decolonial fashion
research
Brazilian media
Brazilian fashion
structural racism
South–South
epistemology

FASHION FIELDWORK: INTRODUCTORY NARRATIVE

In 2018, I researched fashion production and circulation in Luanda, Angola, São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, and Los Angeles in the United States. My main inquiry was how fashion goods were made and distributed in the Global South. I found that *muambeiras* from Angola were in São Paulo buying clothes and accessories resembling costume designs from Brazilian telenovelas produced by TV Globo, to resell them in Luanda market. I framed these facts based on the evidentiary paradigm proposed by the Italian historian Carlo

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Ginzburg, who stated, '[i]f reality is opaque, there are privileged zones – signs and clues – that make it possible to decipher it' (1999: 152). This helped me understand how fashion brands from Brazil were sold in other countries, such as Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe. In Maputo, Brazilian telenovelas heavily shaped African clothing and style (Mendes 2012: 125), while in Luanda, TV Globo's costume designs were organizing commercial practices and cultural exchanges with Brazilian media and fashion professionals.

The few facts I found from 2006 onwards were from newspapers in Brazil, China, England and Angola; all reported economic exchanges between the Angolan State and the Brazilian National Bank for Economic and Social Development (BNDS) (Medrado 2021). These newspapers also discussed Brazilian telenovelas and how languages can be used to explore and enhance cultural and economic interests. In 2012, 200 Brazilian franchises were set up in Luanda, such as media outlets and fashion retailers. In 2014, the Brazilian media and fashion professionals were hired by Angola investors to join the Angola Fashion Week executive board. The Brazilian Textile and Apparel Industry Association (Associação Brasileira da Indústria Têxtil e de Confecção [ABIT]) reported that Brazilian government agencies supported cultural activities and fashion workshops with designers from the Collective Carioca OEstudio at the Cultural Center of Brazil–Angola (ABIT 2016). Altogether, the usage of superlatives in the newspaper created a Brazilian propaganda landscape, producing an attractive image and positive Brazilian politics towards Africa, specifically Angola.

I conducted fieldwork research to trace how costume designs were 'designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations' (Marcus 1995: 105), as well as produced and circulated in malls and popular markets in Brazil and Angola. I sought to understand how Brazilian costume design became a cultural commodity and had a social life (Appadurai 1990). I also explored how costume designs became a cultural biography of Brazil, following Igor Kopytoff's idea that the production of commodities is a cultural and cognitive process that involves not only material production but also cultural marking (1999: 64).

The process of identifying the marks, exchanges and cognitive processes of costume designs was not straightforward. As Marilyn Strathern highlights, the 'ethnographic moment' (2017: 312) in ethnographic writing only works if it recreates some effects of the field research itself. Upon arriving back from the field, the writing process creates a 'second field', which can complicate the relationship between the theoretical premises and the information collected. This complexity arose during my multi-sited ethnography fieldwork, where I began to understand the threads, relationships, interpretations and perspectives of the research, providing unexpected inputs on theory, practice and reflexivity.

Through my fieldwork practice, I began to connect the knots and lines of media and fashion investigations, particularly when examining countries in the Global South with colonial pasts. I realized that my fieldwork was a way to break free from Eurocentric and binary thinking that often guided theories in Euro-North American-centric discourse. By engaging in efforts to decolonize the convergence of media and fashion frameworks, we can challenge the epistemological hierarchies that shape our theories, methods, practices and politics. I suggested a method for conducting fashion fieldwork research from a decolonial perspective, using the biographical documentary *Antes de Ontem* (which translates to 'Before Yesterday') by Caio Franco (2019) as a reference.

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This article is the fourth in my series of anthropological reflexivity and critical thinking from my fieldwork notes (see Medrado 2018, 2019, 2021). I use thick descriptions that focus on dialogues, encounters, feelings and reactions to outline the 'Before Yesterday' method for decolonial fashion ethnography.

COLONIAL KNOTS IN THE LINES OF THE PRESENT

After returning from Luanda, I found myself with more questions than answers. My initial hypotheses, which focused on the fashion industry's vertical understanding between São Paulo and Luanda, were refuted by the fieldwork. I had previously believed that Brazilian media and fashion had a strong presence in Angola due to political and economic relations established during the first administration of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–11). However, my research revealed that journalistic sources only provided a partial picture and overlooked the colonial past between Angola and Brazil. Moreover, the media failed to acknowledge Angola's rich, complex and diverse social landscape.

During my fieldwork in Angola, I discovered that my assumptions about the exchanges of Brazilian media and fashion in the country were incorrect. I believed that Angolans only watched Brazilian telenovelas due to the lack of local TV channels. However, I learned that the first TV broadcast in Angola was in 1962, but the Portuguese colonial government prohibited its expansion, and the Rádio e Televisão de Portugal (RTP) had a monopoly until 1974. In 2018, there were several local TV channels, including TV Record Africa, which was headquartered in Luanda. Its prominent programme was *Fashion School*, hosted by journalist Mell Chaves and fashion producer Hadja El Vaim. It was an attempt to bring a new image to the network and teach Angolans how to dress better (Silva 2016).

To understand the convergence of media and fashion, we need to consider social, cultural, historical, political and economic factors. When discussing media and fashion exchanges between Brazil and Angola, I avoided using the term 'influence', which implies a lack of agency. My experiences in Luanda – including attending parties, meetings in luxury hotels and upscale houses in the neighbourhood of Talatona, interviewing the executive director of TV Record Africa television headquarters, and even being a guest at a white television presenter's wedding, which resulted in a photo of me in the social column of *Lux Angola* newspaper (2018) – allowed me to map out a network of entertainment and commercial elites where models, agents, television hosts, stylists, designers, make-up artists, hairdressers and street vendors intersect. Despite the lack of restructuring in Angola's textile industry since the Civil War (1975–2002), the local fashion retail market has been evolving and shaping the industry.

As a female anthropologist from Brazil, specifically a non-white cisgender individual, residing in Los Angeles, I found myself contemplating my experiences while interacting with the social-elite circles in Angola. The racial denominations that I received in the United States, Brazil and Angola differed, affecting how the research subject was received and how I interacted with it. While examining the production and circulation of fashion goods in the Global South was a minor subject for colleagues in Baixa de Luanda, my engagement with fashion led to dismissive comments about the fashion system in Angola. A reflection on my cultural experiences informed me to the necessity of engaging in critique to propose theoretical and practical investigations to 'situate the interconnected local and global histories of race and racialization

concerning global and local forms of white supremacy' (Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre 2019: 66).

My academic background has influenced my approach to studying media and fashion in different locations. As I conducted my research, I realized that some people did not see the importance of my subject matter. However, I understood that this reaction was the result of a repeated colonialist narrative that viewed Africa as needing to follow western economic models. Ramón Grosfoguel stated, '[t]he global hegemonic colonial culture involves an intricate and uneven set of narratives with long histories that are re-enacted in the present through complex mediations' (2002: 209). Rethinking my research questions and concepts was crucial for me to develop a more nuanced understanding of the subject and to reframe my arguments. This process was given by my own geographic and participatory displacement and the need to re-articulate my own subjectivity.

To avoid reproducing colonial frameworks, it is important to be aware of recommendations for conducting qualitative fieldwork in Africa. Scholars such as Lucy Hovil (2016) and Sandra Niessen (2020) have pointed out the limitations of traditional approaches to research and scholarship in the fields of African studies and fashion. The research collective As Avestas found that fashion schools in São Paulo state tend to reproduce a Eurocentric perspective, with a lack of diversity in the faculty and curriculum (Coletiva As Avestas 2021). Therefore, it is important to question and challenge these dominant narratives and perspectives to ensure a more inclusive and accurate representation of diverse experiences and histories.

As stated by Nelson Maldonado-Torres, coloniality

refers to long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations. Thus, coloniality survives colonialism. It is maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience. In a way, as modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and everyday.

(2007: 243)

To avoid perpetuating colonial perspectives in fashion theory, practice and politics, it is crucial to use decolonial and ethnographic approaches to highlight social actions, agents and contexts in countries in the Global South. This requires a methodology that does not reproduce universalist or homogenizing views of the media and fashion industries on their convergence.

In August 2019, while attending the premiere of my friend Jéferson's short film *Jorge* at the 30th São Paulo Short Film Festival, Kinoforum, I discovered the biographical documentary *Antes de Ontem* (2019) by Caio Franco.

For quite some time, I have been exploring the idea that dress and fashion not only evolve in terms of shapes, silhouettes, colours and textiles (Medrado 2019), but also that they manage to naturalize the white gaze and cultural racism. I refer to this as the coloniality of dress. Against this backdrop, the biographical documentary *Antes de Ontem* deeply informed me of the thick and sensitive layers of coloniality that exist in clothing, and how it shapes our social reality and imagination. In the documentary, we see the everyday clothes of a Black working-class family, which is rarely framed as a fashion

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or scholarly subject. This portrayal highlights the coloniality of dress and how it manages our perceptions of people, their cultures and their everyday lives.

Elizabeth Kutesko notes in her work *Fashioning Brazil: Globalization and the Representation of Brazilian Dress in National Geographic* (2018) that comparative research, which aims to measure exotic differences, often ignores Brazilian self-fashioning practices rooted in cross-cultural exchanges, immigration and slavery. Therefore, they must be recognized and studied as part of a comprehensive understanding of the coloniality of dress. *Antes de Ontem's* script serves as a metaphor for the movements and actions necessary to gear a decolonial approach towards taboo subjects, such as race. These subjects often frighten Brazilian institutions, and those in Luanda, Angola, both inside and outside the fashion industry. It is crucial to adopt a decolonial approach in such contexts, to unveil the coloniality of dress, and to highlight the ways in which it affects our lives and cultures.

Franco, the protagonist and narrator of *Antes de Ontem*, discovers a photo album from his childhood and calls his grandmother because he realizes that his skin colour has changed from white-passing to Black over time. His meditative mode of problem-solving involves stopping, feeling and identifying what is wrong, finding a solution and acting on it (Meher 2016). Franco questions why no one ever talked to him about this change and why it still needs to be overcome. The narrative draws attention to the coloniality of cultural patterns that perpetuate myths of racial democracy and sheds light on how race and self-image are experienced on a personal level.

I borrow from the biographical documentary to create a method for ancestral awareness, reconnecting with the past to unsettle the present. Unfortunately, Brazilian media and fashion scholarship neglects ancestral connections between Brazil and Angola, instead relying on Euro-North American-centric perspectives.

DECOLONIAL FASHION ETHNOGRAPHY: 'BEFORE YESTERDAY' METHOD

Antes de Ontem serves as a fashion ethnographic fieldwork method that allows us to examine, reconnect and reference the past, confront memories, and challenge persistent coloniality within fashion scholarship. Through my ethnographic experiences, I have come to appreciate the importance of exploring various perspectives on coloniality as a problem and decoloniality as a necessary undertaking. It is essential to develop effective tools to establish a scientific method that can identify, question and respond to coloniality based on decolonial fashion fieldwork research. As Livio Sansone ([2017] 2020) suggested, shifting the focus to South–South epistemology rather than South–North epistemology can foster horizontal curiosity and encourage a new ethnographic sensibility.

If we can shift our focus to acknowledging geopolitical relations and the power structures that underlie them, we can begin to dismantle the coloniality of power that has shaped our understanding of fashion and its role in society (Dados and Connell 2012). This requires a critical and reflective approach to fashion research that considers the complex and often uncomfortable realities of the global fashion industry, and the ways in which it intersects with issues of race, class and gender (Quijano 2008).

To conduct effective decolonial research in the field of fashion, it is crucial to develop new perspectives and methodologies that recognize the

social-historical, cultural, political and economic forces that shape the field. This requires breaking away from Eurocentric and binary approaches to theory and methodology, and instead engaging in efforts to decolonize media and fashion practices and politics. By doing so, we can promote a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of fashion and its role in shaping cultural identities and subjectivities. Maldonado-Torres emphasizes:

Decolonial Turn is about making visible the invisible and about analyzing the mechanisms that produce such invisibility or distorted visibility in light of a large stock of ideas that must necessarily include the critical reflections of the 'invisible' people themselves. Indeed, one must recognize their intellectual production as thinking – not only as culture or ideology.

(2007: 262)

I list how we can begin making visible the invisible:

1. Prepare and feel for fashion ethnographic fieldwork in the Global South.
2. Identify and describe individuals, groups and their racial and ethnic identities.
3. Determine where information is available, including oral histories, movements and collectives involved in the fight against erasures.
4. Acknowledge the social space of individuals and their local and/or diaspora relations.
5. Pinpoint the historical processes and contemporary perspectives that shape their social contexts in the present.
6. Be reflexive and aware of how the researcher's identity, including body, gender, sex, class and race, intersects with the topic under study.
7. Analyse the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality of the topic and the researcher.
8. Discuss the production of meaning and how colonialism erased the contributions of marginalized groups.
9. Create multiple narratives using different categories of the same materials.
10. Reflect on methodological and analytical approaches when examining the complexities of time and space.
11. Use a decolonial approach, engaging in ethnography from and with, rather than about.
12. Consider local idiosyncrasies when engaging in decolonial critique.
13. Incorporate local histories alongside global ones.
14. Encourage critical analysis of fashion production and circulation and how they structure feelings and subjectivity in fashion ethnography research.
15. Use various forms of media, such as writing, drawing and audio-visuals, to provide a thick description of the fieldwork journey.
16. Read the work of Afro-Brazilian and Global South scholars on fashion.
17. Include actions, agency and meanings in analytical narratives.
18. Be careful when selecting words to avoid reproducing colonial or modern biases.
19. Question the perspective of a fashion ruler and consider who it includes and excludes.
20. Employ this list as a tool for decolonizing fashion research and criticism and moving further toward fashion liberation.

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This list aims to challenge the dominance of Eurocentric ideas and practices in the research process, offering alternative perspectives and approaches. By doing so, it promotes a more inclusive and diverse approach, encouraging curiosity that values multiple perspectives and leads to deeper insights. Indeed, it aligns with the call of Ramón Grosfoguel that, 'we need to find new concepts and a new decolonial language to account for the complex entanglement of gender, racial, sexual, and class hierarchies within global geopolitical, geo-cultural, and geo-economic processes' (2011: 19).

Yes, we do need it.

To elaborate, it is essential to broaden the scope of fashion narratives to include diverse perspectives and to examine sustainability from a systemic perspective that encompasses production, culture and commerce. Fashion has historically been a core industry of Eurocentrism, closely intertwined with the material, corporeal and ideological underpinnings of capitalism (Niessen 2022; Santos 2020; Square 2020). The media plays a crucial role in perpetuating the white gaze and maintaining structural and cultural racism (Beliso-De Jesús and Pierre 2019). Therefore, the decolonial fashion ethnography method aims to highlight the importance of analysing the cultural industry, specifically media and fashion, to expose how coloniality shapes the field and the goods and professionals within it. By doing so, we can generate critical insights and bring attention to the urgent need for decolonization in these fields.

THE PRESENT OF YESTERDAY

As I conducted my research, I connected the dots and realized how pervasive coloniality is in our daily lives. This prompted me to find ways to transform and change fashion fieldwork. Using the decolonial *Antes de Ontem* methodology, I was able to locate the coloniality of dress in everyday life and develop a better understanding of it. I believe that acknowledging the presence of coloniality and working from that point can help us generate creative knowledge and methodology that will unveil colonial approaches in fashion research. This requires practice and reflectivity, which are necessary to break, turn and conduct fashion fieldwork research from a decolonial perspective, situated through anthropological lenses.

In Brazilian social sciences, particularly in classical Brazilian anthropological thought, there is a lack of attention given to fashion studies, especially Afro-Brazilian fashion history. The *Antes de Ontem* methodology, which is a decolonial fashion ethnography, aims to address this gap by highlighting the silencing of Afro-Brazilian fashion knowledge, hands, people and professionals left behind in fashion studies. In repositioning the present of yesterday, in our article 'Moda e decolonialidade: colonialismo, vestuário e binarismo' (2023), Heloísa Santos and I argue that colonialism is present in today's fashion industry, and draw attention to how Gilberto Freyre and Gilda de Mello Souza perpetuated erasures of Afro-Brazilian fashion knowledge. By analysing their works, *Modos de Homem*, *Modas de Mulher* (Freyre 1988), and *O Espírito das roupas: a moda no século XIX* (Souza [1987] 2019), respectively, we found that they aligned with the modern/colonial project and promoted the idea that legitimate fashion references and values should come from the northern axis. Despite the establishment of federal law number 10,369 in 2003, which requires the mandatory teaching of African and Afro-Brazilian culture at all levels of education, fashion schools in Brazil have yet to include this in their curricula.

As I conclude my thoughts, I eagerly anticipate the first edition of Africa Fashion Week Brazil in May 2023. The event is positioned as a tool to combat structural racism and Eurocentrism in the fashion industry, which aligns with the themes explored in this Special Issue of the *International Journal of Fashion Studies* on Afro-Brazilian fashion. I believe that examining Afro-Brazilian studies from the South–South axis is crucial for decolonizing theoretical and methodological approaches in fashion research. By bringing a horizontal curiosity to fashion studies, we can create a more inclusive and diverse curriculum that moves us towards liberation.

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