

# The Fashion Crossroad Method: Political and Epistemological Practices



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**Abstract** The article aims to shed light on theoretical engagements in fashion and decoloniality and brings concepts conceived by the Fashion and Decoloniality: Global South Crossroads working group - CoMoDE. We are proposing a graphical representation of methodological steps to undertake the decolonial turn in/at fashion research. Based on a pluridisciplinary perspective, the fashion crossroad method consists of two concepts: social backstitch in fashion and tears up in fashion, which is represented graphically through the sewing machine bobbin. The fashion crossroad method as a concept and image yields broad knowledge of fashion gears. Its political and epistemological practices show how to transgress western canon and the kind of fashion studies taught in countries that are still facing colonialism.

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## 1 Introduction

The Coletivo Moda e Decolonialidade: Encruzilhadas no Sul Global–CoMoDe, is a research workgroup that systematically studies and analyzes fashion from post-colonial and decolonial perspectives. The CoMoDe researchers and professors are from the social science, humanities, and arts disciplines; we first met on June 9, 2020, aiming to challenge Brazilian fashion from established discourses focusing on ways to decolonize it. Our meetings stimulate theoretical debates based on scholarly readings, literature, movies, and newspapers. Our analytical dialogue intends to elaborate epistemological tools to enable researchers and students to take a decolonial turn when examining fashion systems.

**The fashion crossroad method: political and epistemological practices** is an essay aiming to demonstrate the decoloniality movement requested to pursue an interdisciplinary approach to raise awareness and explore steps to undertake the decolonial turn-in/at fashion research. Therefore, we use the crossroad (*encruzilhadas* in Portuguese) as our reference and decided to draw the *fashion crossroad method* graphically. We believe that this kind of representation is embedded with a significant educational value; as you will see, the graphics invite the reader to access the subjectivities faced when studying the fashion field.

The content is organized in two sessions. First, we will introduce the *fashion crossroad method*, then demonstrate how it unfolds into the concepts of *social back-stitch in fashion* and *tears up in fashion* through graphic representations of fabric inside out and sewing machine bobbin.

## 2 Advocating for a Fashion Crossroad Method

The post-colonial debate begins with the decolonization of Africa and Asia in the mid-twentieth century. Intellectuals from these continents, such as Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Alber Memmi, and Edward Said, carried out fruitful work on the need to draw criticism on scientific production, which included (a) analyzing the impacts of colonization and imperialism on the lives of the colonized, which encompassed knowledge production and intellectual work; (b) hear Africans and Asians' voices about themselves, as well as their analytical perspectives on the world; (c) question the traditional methods—related theoretical apparatus—enforced by European intellectuals toward colonized societies. In conjunction with that decolonial thoughts are related to Latin American roots and the debate initiated in the mid-1990s. After that, in the breakthrough of the modernity/coloniality group, specifically with Aníbal Quijano and Walter D. Mignolo, the intent of the rupture with the European knowledge production chose to use concepts involved with references to the Andes, *Abya Yala*, and Latin American knowledges. On these grounds, we articulate our viewpoint with the modernity/coloniality group perspective to argue fashion as a field of knowledge

in the Brazilian context looking at its relationship with the colonality of power to propose two concepts for confronting the colonial matrix.

For CoMoDe, reflecting upon fashion involves recognizing the impact of race, gender, and class in their colonial/modern framework. Such a reassessment process must be called a *social backstitch in fashion*, situated with the post-colonial and decolonial approach that unveils social oppressions when aligned with the fashion system. The word *backstitch* was not randomly chosen. Even though the backstitch shares its meaning with regression and lateness in Portuguese, we want to emphasize that the stitches are made backward to the general direction of the sewing machine. For those who deal with the mass production of clothing, *backstitch* points to the well-known technique of stitching in which, once the seam is sewn, the quilter sews new stitches in reverse to ensure the forward stitches are positioned in place. The procedure design—also known as backstitching—reinforces the seam where the thread is sewn so that it does not unravel quickly and the clothing threads stay strong.

Our goal with the *social backstitch in fashion* notion is to offer ways to reconsider the universal knowledge formulated on what fashion is and on which theory and practices parallel the production of colonality and power. It is necessary to shift the established interpretation of scientific-based on evolutionary ideas. It is time to recall common sense concepts, burn them up, and then continue a reflection that keeps on overlapping the latter. In such a scheme, instead of denying it, we recognize the importance of what is produced and emphasize the urgency of reassessing the concepts; as we backstitch when sewing, the notion of *social backstitch in fashion* represents a way to reinforce and stabilize the stitches of meaning conveyed in fashion.

In methodological terms, we affirm that the *social backstitch in fashion* concept effort is akin to what post-colonial authors offered to the field of criticism on knowledge. Several researchers from Africa and Asia who graduated from north axis universities adopted notions provided by a scholarship from the north to criticize traditional ideas conceived about the South. Post-colonial authors created and established innovative concepts to reflect on themselves, their societies of origin, and the global economic-political logic that promoted colonialism and imperialism, going beyond the structure of values that regimented modernity.

Therefore, to ensure that we are cracking such approaches, we acknowledge the importance of a conceptual rupture to assess to which extent we are drowning and reproducing the colonial logic in our knowledge production, teaching, and research practices. For that, we introduce the *tears up in fashion* concept. The concept is linked with the work of Latin American decolonial researchers as we approach what these authors from the modernity/coloniality group called the *decolonial turn* [7, 4].

*Tears up in fashion* are understood by the CoMoDe as a process of radical rupture in the axiomatic practices, theoretical teaching methods, and other scholarly productions that still portray colonial, hegemonic, and imperialist logic in the field of fashion. Different from cutting a piece of fabric with scissors or any other instrument to separate it into two or more parts, when we tear up a fabric, we act abruptly with our bare hands, and the roughness shows the characteristic of an unstable yarn.

The movement consists of abandoning concepts and pointing out the underlying structures of domination so that, with and from it, we can rethink and reinvent local notions and texts. It is about founding and grounding epistemologies from the South, researching and discussing concepts based and created in *favelas/quebradas* [neighborhoods], ghettos, samba schools, *baile funk* parties, Umbanda and Candomblé *terreiros* [temples], prostitution zones, in *encruzilhadas e esquinas* (crossroads and street corners). In other words, the term comprehends everything the liberal, political and intellectual order based on Northern grammar has discarded as legitimate.

Furthermore, *tears up in fashion* is about carrying out what Antônio Simas and Luiz Rufino called in *Pedagogia das Encruzilhadas* [9] called *rolê epistemológico/epistemological strolls*, which means “refusing to accept the condition of immobility propagated by these effects, we must transgress their parameters.” Analytically the following definitions will offer the reader’s lucubrations of these metaphors. We will use the notion of copying for both analyses:

- (a) The *social backstitch in fashion*: The notion of copy is generally used in fashion studies research to define the relationship between non-north Axis countries and their local ways of dressing in opposition to European dress forms. When *backstitch* is necessary, firstly, to indicate geographically in which intellectual context such reflections were being produced. It is worth considering that much of the debate on fashion is established in a logic of authorization, and authors who engage in the concept of copying, comprehend that only one social group is authorized to have a relationship with fashion. They are the European and North American elite. If we accept this group’s restricted notion, perhaps the concept of copying makes sense. However, to bring our reflections forward, we must challenge and think that **copying is one of the multiple ways social groups, such as Brazilian society, relate to fashion**. In the course of that, looking historically at the circulation of knowledge on clothes in Brazil in the 17th to nineteenth century, we find several enslaved people whose professional expertise was working in the clothes sector. Yet, we must also consider what indigenous, enslaved, and poor colonized populations wore and produced. As such understanding, the *backstitch* works as a way not to disregard the concept of copying but to strive and locate it socially. The core idea is to broaden our view of other productions in the territory and welcome local clothing in the fashion system. **It is known that authors who studied local clothing are aware that they are analyzing the elites**: we sense that the *backstitch* is crucial to stop seeing copying and the elites as the only legitimate means to clothing in the fashion system. We would also like to consider these elites adept at resignifying that. Notwithstanding, comprehend that copying is also an integral act and part of the creative component of northern producers. We acknowledge that what Europeans and Northern elites claim to be a pure and original creation, focusing on the value and concept of originality, is also always a copy. At last, as a mimetic gesture, the act of copying is part of all creative processes.
- (b) The *Tears up in fashion*: We take a different procedure. The idea of copying is considered a perception in line with a perspective that only understands the West

as a fashion producer. In this way, the colonial logic of knowledge production is inverted, and we reach the idea that local clothing production has always had ties with world fashion, **just as all fashions in the world relate to each other.** There is no copying because copying is impossible in societies characterized by crossing/transiting. What we have here are the relationship and exchange.

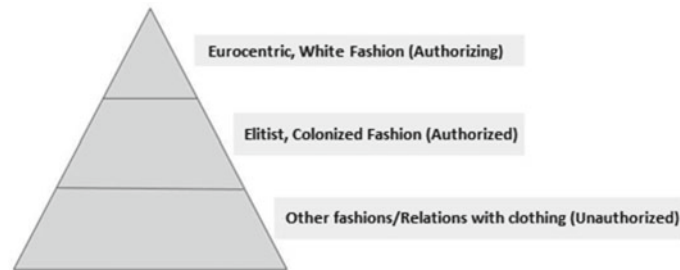
### 3 Crossing Knowledge–Designing Images

In this section, we aim to demonstrate using visual representations how the *fashion crossroad method* unfolds into the: *social backstitch in fashion* and *tears up in fashion* concepts.

Fashion scholars from several geographies, social science, and art disciplines have emphasized the power dynamics inherent to the field of fashion. Niessen [6] highlights the way that an area of dispute was formed, in which the West hijacked fashion for itself and, chiefly, self-laimed authority to judge what is fashion and what is not, as well as decides who is capable of turning objects and ideas into fashion and who is solely able of copying which has the supremacy. Such structure defines the West as modern and innovative. It relates to the colonial spectrum: immersed in an evolutionary logic permeated by the scientific racism that still persists among us, the production by the peoples of the North is continually recognized as superior. Indeed, it is a common practice that when European designers appropriately insert their aesthetic references from other societies, the contemporary colonizer in the neo-fashion colonialism has a presumption of innocence protection. The appropriation *quid pro quo* under this syntagma guarantees that no guilt can be presumed when the West's fashion industry copies. If there are charges, they should be taken positively as inspiration or reinterpretation.

Going along with a legal justice metaphor, we may think of this fashion system as a court trial and its hearings. On the one hand, there is a fashion law court where European fashion producers are responsible for creating a fashion measurement and sentencing on the other. While on the other hand, the jury, the prosecution, and the judge share the same ideology. The strategy is violent. The judge who should apply an isonomic perspective to evaluate and assure equality before the law decides whom and which foreign fashion players will be associated with their party reproduces a fashion world-system prejudices. We see that when local professionals working as it were in European branches in the Global South feel entitled to this micro-power and inspect who is fashionable and who is not. You might be asking why [?] what are the gains or exchanges? Prestige and economic capital. Even though we face geographical discrepancies—when compared with the North. We feel we are seen as exotics—the others. We became evaluated and fragmented by the subalternity grammar, knowledge hierarchies, and the discursivities that control the inequalities defined by the North.

The resemblance to the colonial discourse of racialization and ethnicization is not a mere coincidence. Another way the European fashion law court defines fashion is



**Fig. 1** Hierarchical structure of fashion pyramid representation. *Source* Fashion and Decoloniality: Global South Crossroads working group–CoMoDE (2020)

when they hunt for an endorsement from a local producer as the “fashion heiress.” [1, 2, 8, 5] point out that the quest is usually sustained by the process of exoticization, along with a mark of inferiority. Consequently, Western fashion turned into “The Fashion,” other societies have clothing systems with caveats. So, their fashion must be situated: Latin fashion, African fashion, Asian fashion, and distinguished–exotic, hot, wild, colorful, and sexy.

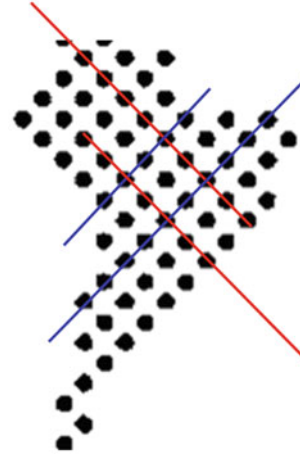
Therefore, to examine the gaze logic attached to his hierarchical structure of fashion, we present a pyramid chart (Fig. 1). You see the western fashionists on the top. Then, below you find those selected by the former and who is not “the West” chosen by the former. Finally, at the bottom are those without fashion. It is essential to say that these poles are not closed structures, i.e., there are several possible configurations between them, as society is much more complex than any ideal type [13] could try to grasp.

CoMoDE acknowledges such a hierarchical structure of fashion pyramid representation and proposes a methodological perspective on fashion to confront the long-established stratified arrangement. For us, it is about shifting our gaze to analyze European productions as equal and parallel to overseas creations.

- (a) Grammatically, use *fashions* (in plural) instead of *fashion* (singular): All forms of relationship with clothing must be understood as *fashions*. Such perspective dialogues with the *social backstitch in fashion* concept.
- (b) Then, *fashions* (in plural) must represent the idea that all kinds of relationships with clothes are legit, equal, and valid. In a given society, they can be only judged from within, evaluated from local development themselves, summing up with their relations with global production, connections of permanent contact, crossing, transit, exchange, and resignification, which inevitably include change.

The perspective led us to a circular perception of fashion and a vision that did not reproduce fashion in a vertical, uncritical way, where the West is seen as the universal and driving force of binarism. Fashion is understood as horizontal. Horizontal because it is also a geopolitical relationship in which colonial cartography placed Europe at the top of the map. We conceived it horizontally as an axis to look at productions and relationships with clothing of the same height. Circularity refers

**Fig. 2** *Fashions and their crosses representation.*  
*Source* Fashion and Decoloniality: Global South Crossroads working group–CoMoDE, (2020)



to perceiving all relationships with fashion as circular structures whose lines contour and are not close to the outside. They exchange, contact, and re-signify even though a circle is closed because they are individual units of varying sizes and complexities.

We redressed the analysis amid the counter-blows versed in the notion of a pedagogy of the crossroads of [9] “a political/epistemological/educational project whose main purpose is to unspell the curse of racism/colonialism by transgressing traditional western canon.” For the group, the relationship we propose to establish between fashions, far beyond contact, exchange, and resignification, is a true crossroads of stories. In this sense, we understand that each circle or clothing structure is, using macro representation, crossed by lines (Fig. 2) that cut through the entire fashion world-system, as this is how established these relationships have been since the first contact between humans: in the encounters, in the crosses, in the delicate meeting between knowledge, which transforms what it touches, renewed and reborn.

The definition of crossroads proposed by Simas and Rufino [9], (p. 18) supports our methodological understanding and its graphical representation to research on fashion. The crossroads enable the notion of a journey; for that, we associate the path to line definition to allow a trace in a drawing. Thus, if the crossroad refers to the crossing of tracks, it can be graphically represented as a crossing of lines.

In drawing theory, a line is formed by numerous points. However, when we think about the practical action of using graphic material on a surface: as is the case with pencil on paper, we can say that the line is the trace, the path, the movement that a point makes on the surface plane. When applying the pencil to the paper, the slightest contact generates a unit defined as a point—the smallest and first visual element [3], p. 14. However, any displacement the point performs will form a line, which can be curved, straight, continuous, or dashed; its characteristics will depend on the movement and direction the point assumes.

Observing the shape of the crossroads, we can see that it is formed by crossing lines that correspond to different paths. The crossing itself marks a specific spot, which is

the one where the two lines intersect. In the geometry parameters, an area alludes to the pair of X and Y coordinates, which we will take for our methodological metaphor, as the starting place of a point of view that we want to emphasize and highlight in the perspectives on fashion.

Acknowledging the notion that the entire graphic and epistemological understanding of crossroads takes place in a given space, we design a planar representation of the world map to visualize the world-system. Then, we can propose a methodology for research in fashion.

To represent the fashion crossroad method, we offer to see the world map from different perspectives. We will abstract their divisions and adopt the notion that spaces are formed by numerous points (Fig. 3). It will help us distance the colonial canon attributions and thoughts of stationary culture for non-European society. At the various crossings of intersections, the fashion paths can be drawn by countless lines that bring out the cultural hubs of clothing systems. This way, the dots of different spaces are connected by the threads that generate the crossings. Fashion crossroads are formed by the paths of other points of the clothing systems that meet through movement in space. In [10], (p. 18) words, “the cross is like becoming, an unfinished, salient, unordered, and inapprehensible movement. The cross relates to an erasure, fissure, contamination, catalysis, bricolage—a manifestation of Eshu [...]”.

From a methodological point of view, thinking about fashion using crossroads means facing the tactical action that the cross represents.

Crosses meet and demarcate border zones. These cross-border zones are places of emptiness that will be filled by bodies, sounds, and words. From these fillings, other possibilities for



**Fig. 3** Embroidery of the world-system: fashion crossroad method. *Source* Fashion and Decoloniality: Global South Crossroads working group–CoMoDE



the invention of life will emerge based on the tones of radical transformations, cognitive justice, and diversity of knowledge [9].

Working with the cross means “erasing the alleged universality of the western canon” [9], p. 19, i.e., transgressing it by crossing other perspectives. This transgression, for us, must be accomplished by a turn in understanding threads and the movements of points. For us, the best metaphor to relate is the sewing machine bobbin.

As we understand, the clothing production system is linked through factories outside the Euroamerican realm; their workforce struggles with low wages, unsafe conditions, and harassment, which seem to shape neo-slavery relationships due to subhuman conditions. The consequences are seen through men’s and women’s exploitation. Indeed, such a system ensures capitalist individualism values and logic, where some fashion items are available exclusively for some bodies. In contrast, the others are left behind, on the edge of the sacrifice zones. According to Niessen [6], “neighborhoods and cultures identified as non-producers [but workforce] of fashion are so through colonial and capitalist constructs of this industry and should be recognized as ‘fashion sacrifice zones.’” Metaphorically, we will expose our perceptions about this relationship we have just mentioned. For that, we will use examples excerpted from sewing machines, their accessories, and their purpose in garment-making.

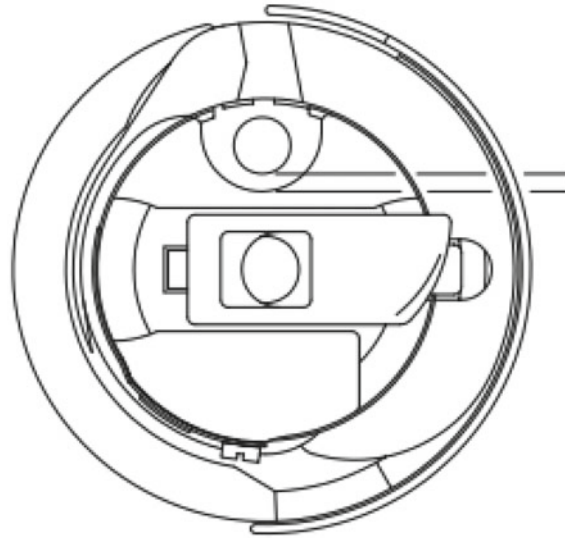
Among fabrics, threads, and needles, there is the figure of a seamstress, a critical piece in the making of clothing. She must have at least one straight-stitch sewing machine to handle the daily production of her clothes. The straight-stitch sewing machine is one of the oldest machines ever created, dating from the industrial revolution when its first gears were developed, and significant transformations have taken place in clothing production. We aim to illustrate how these gears work and how this reflects in the final product. In addition, these gears, whose operators will be taken into account in our reflection through brief associations, are at the core of the debate.

Straightening machines greatly benefited from new technologies in the textile industry, with new devices added to meet the demands of productivity behind clothing confection. Modern engines work through various mechanisms and accessories, many of which are vital for making garments, needles, presser feet, etc.—accessories that accelerate and enhance the quality of the finished product.

We want to bring a fundamental part of this gear to our illustration, the bobbin case, and bobbin (Fig. 4).

The function of the sewing machine bobbin is to provide bottom stitches while stitching the top part, which is evident in the clothing and appreciated by lovers of good finishing, that is, a backstitch. Backstitches are an essential part of a well-made, valuable piece. Almost no one sees behind the beauty of a well-finished outfit are the “invisible” stitches fed by the bobbin. And how does this bobbin gear work, and what is the bobbin case of a sewing machine? We can say that the machine’s heart, the rotation, maintains functionality on the vertical and horizontal axis. It is a cog in the gears, just like the crossroads of an operating system that ignores its existence. The bobbin regulates the stitches, which are adjusted and controlled by the upper mechanism of the machine. The bobbin does not operate by itself: as soon as it stops

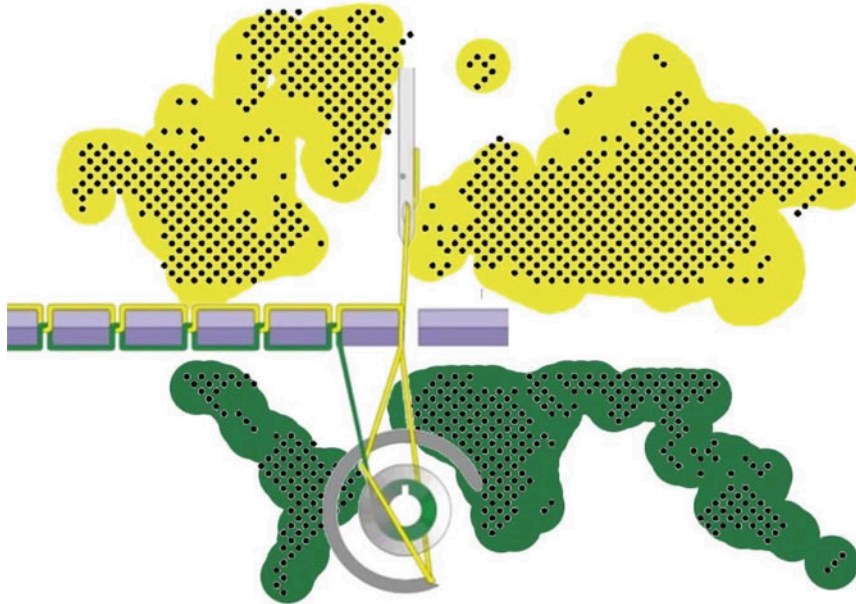
**Fig. 4** The sewing machine bobbin and the bobbin case.  
*Source* Manual Siruba  
 (p. 341)



spinning, the entire system is paralyzed. It is impossible to rotate the axis without what we understand as the heart of the machine. Even in older models, if the bobbin is not seated correctly, there are no clothes nor production. But what about the engine—is it not the heart of the machine? The answer is that engines came into existence at the end of the nineteenth century when sewing devices were still operated using cranks and pedals. Still, they have always needed what we understand today as a bobbin case and bobbin.

You may see from the description how the machine works and the role of the bobbin; the threads intersect during sewing, and each stitch causes tension as one thread is positioned at the top and another at the bottom. In Fig. 5, we recall the stitching process and associate it with an embroidery of the world map representing the crossroads. The map cut in half depicts the division caused by the hierarchy of threads, which is evoked by the colors. In our view, the threads can symbolize the asymmetry between North and South in fashion practices: the bobbin thread is hidden underneath the fabric, thus representing the entire part that sustains the fashion system itself. Although the northern part is delimited by a cut roughly equivalent to the equator, we believe that the division is even more asymmetric since what is considered North is not restricted to the geographic notion of the hemispheres. Different spots on the map above the Equator are considered south on the power scale of the world-system, and at the crossroads of fashion, they are made invisible by the upper seams.

In the face of this metaphor, it is worth mentioning that the role of sewists as agents who feed the entire production chain of fashion can also be understood through the function of the bobbin in the sewing machine. These professionals correspond to those who support the fashion system and are made invisible by the threads that sew the stitches. This image alludes to the one that Françoise [12] portrays about racialized



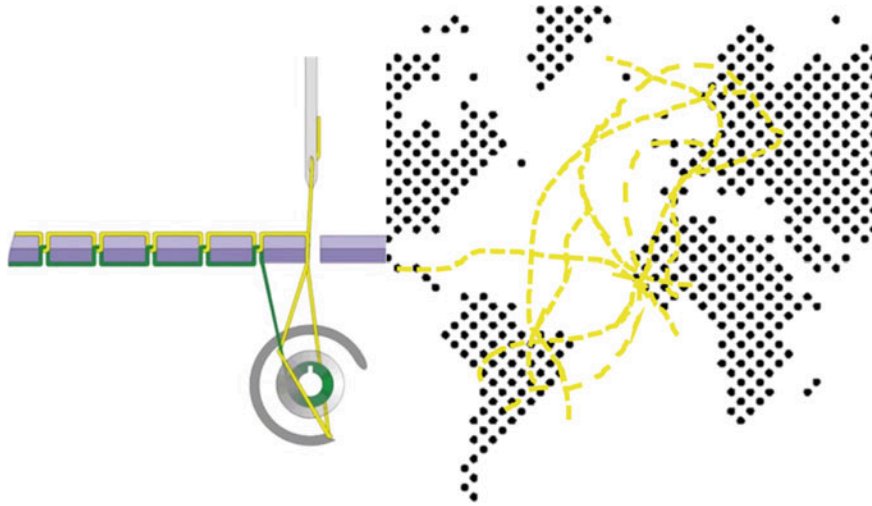
**Fig. 5** “The world sewing” asymmetry: fashion South and North. *Source* Fashion and Decoloniality: Global South Crossroads working group–CoMoDE (2020)

women who do the cleaning jobs in companies in France. The proposal of a decolonial turn based on crossing implies turning these professionals into research agents. This means widening the range of fashion beyond what is visible to include all relations between agents of clothing production. Therefore, this widening corresponds to not looking at the stitches and crossroads from the right side of the fabric: instead, it is crucial to see the results of the upper threads that, in Fig. 6, correspond to the yellow lines.

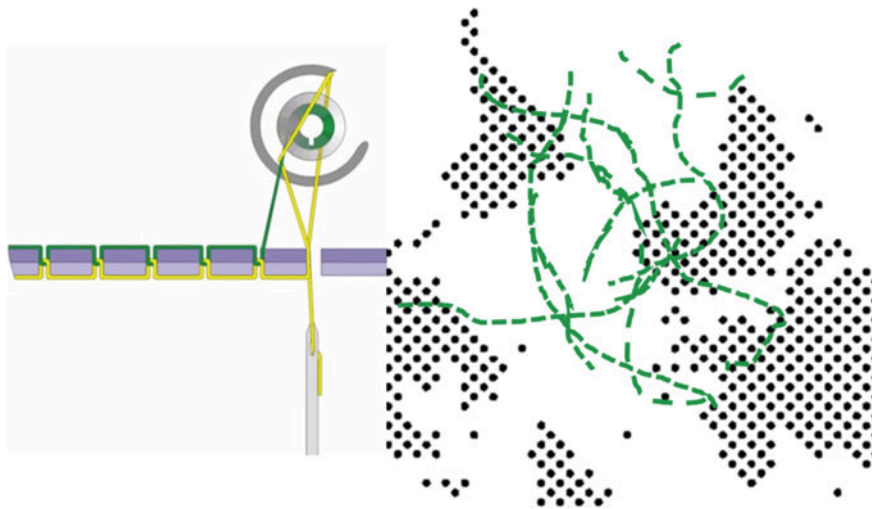
For the group, the *turn* requires looking at the reverse side of the fabric: that side where the bobbin thread can be seen and identified as fundamental for the sewing to take place. The rotation causes the image to be seen in reverse, and the perception is similar to the provocation by Joaquín Torres García in 1943, as he drew an inverted map of South America, stating that “our north is the south.” Seeing the reverse corresponds to changing the poles and highlighting the lines made invisible by the crossroads of fashion, as shown in Fig. 7. The method of crossroads presupposes contact with the place of tension: within the scope of the research, it indicates how the paths cross or, as a result, in sewing, how the threads intertwine. Analyzing the pressure on the machine thread, strength, type, and links on the mechanisms of fashion indicates widening the observation range in the paths of the crossroads.

The method of crossing has challenges as long as ...

Humanity has always faced crossed paths with awe and wonder. After all, crossroads are places of uncertainty, pathways, and amazement of realizing that living presupposes the risk



**Fig. 6** Fabric right side and the upper threads. *Source* Fashion and Decoloniality: Global South Crossroads working group–CoMoDE (2020)



**Fig. 7** Fabric reverse side and the invisible threads. *Source* Fashion and Decoloniality: Global South Crossroads working group–CoMoDE (2020)

of choices. Where to walk? A crossroad is a vexation—that is the thrill. We say about this whole story that we conduct our own lives. The rite must be practiced; we ask permission from the invisible, and we continue as minor heirs of the human spirit, with amazement being the guiding thread of luck. We who are from the crossroads are suspicious of those on a straight path [9].

For the Coletivo Moda e Decolonialidade: Encruzilhadas do Sul Global- CoMode, this theoretical-methodological proposition in fashion research denotes the urgency of connections and correlations that only by crossing and transiting paths will heal the colonial wounds that have regulated the ethical, aesthetic, imagery, and subjective aspects of producing, circulating and doing research in the field of Fashion.

We believe that in this way, we will be able to “get up off the epistemological sofa and dive into the crossroads of alterity” [9]. Because it is through the *social backstitch in fashion* and *tearing in fashion* that we will untie ourselves from the binarism between modernity and coloniality, thus being able to “weave genealogies that were disconnected” [11], to face what has been systematically silenced, although actively planned, behind being, and becoming invisible.

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