

Untangling Colonial Knots in the Line of the Present

Decolonial e-zines on Fashion Series as Cultural Production to further Fashion Knowledge Pluriversality

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The idea of engaging in decolonial fashion activism as education outreach aiming to promote *fashion knowledge pluriversality* is based on my experience of living and working between Brazil and the United States while conducting a multi-sited decolonial fashion ethnography research in Salvador, Bahia, Brazil, and Luanda, Angola. During the research period, my work agenda focused on diversifying and disseminating narratives of fashion experiences, engagements, theories, concepts, and methodologies in the social sciences and fashion studies. The intention was to circulate fashion knowledges (plural) through cultural production to further fashion social justice and social change. Therefore, I edited the *decolonial e-zine on fashion series* published by the *Research Collective for Decoloniality and Fashion* to spell out modes of engagement and cultural practices that resist fashion universalism and homogenization. *Fashion knowledge pluriversality as an education outreach project* intends to address the urgency of raising analytical awareness and criticism on the going Western/modernity, well-known as the Euro-North American values framework that wraps the fashion higher education system, industry, and scholarship. The writing style of this decolonial essay dialogues with Amita Nijhawan's reminder to decolonize disciplines and institutions: "We must extend this project to include forms of writing and not just the content" (2024). Thus, its style weaves affects, myself, theories, and descriptive thoughts to demonstrate how fashion plays a transversal role in our everyday.

From Anthropological Fieldwork on Fashion to Decolonial Activism

As Marilyn Strathern points out, the 'ethnographic moment' (312) in ethnographic writing only works if it recreates some of the field research's effects and affects. In this sense, the writing process creates

a "second field"; the relationship between these fields is "complex" as the theoretical premises and information collected from the on-site activity are reordered and repositioned. That was precisely what happened to me. In 2018, I visited Luanda, Angola, for the first time. A few months later, back in Santa Monica, California, in the United States, I felt uncomfortable if I were to apply theories and methods based on what classical social sciences had established for fashion canon. I would be analytically unethical, for example, if I had used the frame the German sociologist and philosopher George Simmel (1858–1918) understood as fashion. According to him, fashion could only correspond to societies where fashion styles change quickly and, therefore, European territories. However, what I experienced and learned about Luanda's cultural and market economy affected me (Faavreda Saada, 2005). Acknowledging that, after visiting the city of Luanda to learn more about it; I wondered which implications of not being aware of what is happening in an African urban fashion or on "the rest of the world" would impact fashion knowledge, production, and circulation. Such queries invited me to think about how gaze, perception, and visuals as well as theories, concepts, and methodologies have Western/modernity been regulating.

The multi-sited ethnography effects invited me to examine colonial knots in the lines of the present, whose stopping and breaking it free involved me in a decolonial turn to re-articulate my theoretical and methodological perspectives to bring decoloniality into praxis to denaturalize the erasure that fashion education and research have for diverse forms, silhouettes, colors, and textiles. My decolonial fashion activism went towards creating fashion knowledge through cultural production to further fashion social justice and social change while fostering praxis, dialogues, and critical

conscientization. Paulo Freire's (2019) pedagogy on social criticism bases my initiatives on fashion knowledge decentralization, and bell hooks (1994) on critical pedagogy to nurture multiculturalism and language inclusion to challenge esthetics. Along with this, Walter Mignolo and Rolando Vazquez **juxtaposition** of "*aestheTics* as being an aspect of the colonial matrix of power, of the imperial structure of control that began to be put in place in the 16th [and] have played a key role in configuring a canon, a normativity that enabled the disdain and the rejection of other forms of aesthetic practices" (1) **contrasting with** decolonial *aestheSis* "as critical intervention, to decolonize the regulation of sensing all the sensations to which our bodies respond, "from culture as well as from nature" (Mignolo & Vazquez: 1).

Along these lines, thinking on how to convey decolonial *aestheSis* to fashion cultural production, I created an analytical conversation with what Faye Harrison (1997) has postulated for decolonizing Anthropology on the urgency of doing, practicing, writing, and experiencing anthropology based on those who are still considered subordinate today on the scale of economic and political relations, in line with Arturo Escobar's proposition of pluriverse: "building bridges between the various forms of knowing and ways of being embedded in the multiplicity of practices of social actors worldwide" (2018:3). Then, positioning myself in such elaboration, as a thin and tall female Anthropologist from a Brazilian working-class family with social mobility throughout education and a non-white cisgender individual residing in Los Angeles, I contemplated my fieldwork experiences in Luanda via social class and racial fluidity and how, in the United States, Brazil, and Angola they differ. This affected how I interacted with and accessed people and places and how the idea of fashion in research was received and perceived. Indeed, pondering my experiences, I noticed how social sciences and fashion research and studies have neglected the diversity of fashion worldviews, which draw my attention to elaborate cultural practices to overcome fashion western as commonsensical as to be natural, to decolonizing fashion research and criticism and moving further toward fashion liberation (Medrado, 2023:212).

Fashion knowledge pluriversality as an education outreach project became a way of shifting and thinking ways, thus rethinking fashion ethnographic research to resize social sciences on fashion and their analytical premises. As Sandra Niessen (2021: 12) pointed out, the "legacy of the colonial era has been insufficiently addressed [on fashion in social sciences field] but rather obscured by layers of theory and practice." Heloísa Santos and I argue that colonialism is still present in today's fashion social sciences, which in the case of Brazil helped to erase the historical, visual and materialism of Brazilian fashion and Afro-Brazilian fashion knowledge and references (Santos and Medrado, 2023). Indeed, Tansy Hoskins (2014: 4) states that countries considered producers *in* and *for* the fashion system are "white and rich demographically located in Paris, Milan, London, New York," and the "rest of the world" does not account for that, they have dress/clothing. These perspectives are commonsensical and carried out around the fashion higher education system, industry, and scholarship. Decolonial fashion social scientists, positioned in different geopolitics of knowledge, such as Heloísa Santos, Sandra Niessen, and Angela Jansen, agree that for the colonizer's gaze, the colonized society should be evaluated as a non-fashion society, there is categorical binarism involved in this system since the ideological colonial apparatus seeks to disallow clothing production in non-whites. Non-white societies can be sacrificed zones for the good of colonizers' lifestyles that are self-titled as modern and innovative. Thus, non-whites are understood as non-fashion societies, unable to produce fashion with a capital F; as small f societies they manifest traditional dress/clothing (Niessen, 2022).

Consequently, to address the complex and often uncomfortable realities of the global fashion industry while acknowledging the limitations of conventional social sciences approaches to research and studies in areas of African and Fashion studies, it became crucial to elaborate conditions to examine nonwhite societies, such as the "decolonial fashion ethnography: before yesterday method" (Medrado, 2023) that offered methodological conditions to raise analytically awareness and criticism on the going western/modernity and

promote decolonial aestheSis on fashion cultural production, paving the conditions to be involved or initiated coalitions with scholars in institutions and universities in Angola, Brazil, Belgium, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands to produce knowledge creatively and experimented with fashion forms of criticism through podcasts, radios, e-zines, fashion films, academic article adaptations into theater performances, conference workshops, and working groups. After all, as sung by the Brazilian musician Milton Nascimento on Para Lennon e McCartney, Eu sou da América do Sul Sei, vocês não vão saber [...]

Por que vocês não sabem Do lixo ocidental? | “I’m from South America I know, you won’t know [...] Why don’t you know From Western trash?”

Meanwhile in Angola ...

The Department of *Fashion Design Education and Research* at Luanda University was opened in 2016 as part of the College of Arts. According to their website, the faculty core comprises three teachers, and instructors are industry professionals or academics with experience in fashion and design. The fashion design curriculum aims to offer technical guidance to students to be successful in the fashion industry, nationally or internationally, and insights into fashion trends and stimulate students’ creativity to create and develop collections that reflect their artistic and aesthetic vision, reflecting the identity and culture of Angola.

In August 2024, I was honored to lecture on Weaving Sensitive Propositions -- Fashion in Research on campus. *Ethnographic Processes: Creative Elaborations*, followed by a Q&A with students and a visit to campus facilities. I presented how my doctoral research is interlacing geopolitics of knowledge based on what I have been learning about the Luanda fashion system and how such correspondence had invited me to reflect, engage with Afrocentric, non-Eurocentric epistemologies and practice liberatory pedagogies to decenter fashion western knowledge, such as on the *Decoloniality e-zine on fashion*, precisely the issue number one on *Decoloniality and fashion in Brazil* | *Brasil* (2021), published by the *Research*

Collective for Decoloniality and Fashion. After my presentation, we had a lively and analytical conversation on the challenges to engaging in fashion from a local perspective, the difficulties of accessing knowledge from local fashion and dress such as Bessangana and its references, and the urgency to Angolan fashion expression be the center of what is being taught at the university.

During the Q&A, one student, contrasting what the fashion curriculum at the university entails with what I had just presented, shared that fashion designer students had as a part of in-class activity to dress like North American 1920s flappers style. She pointed out the absence of Angola fashion history sources, and the challenges faced when searching for data; to elaborate a reference system, she went to a friend’s photographic family archive to collect such aesthetic notion. She also noted how rarely Angolan families have pictures from past generations. Notably, complaints about the absence of historical, aesthetic, and social materialism in Angola’s fashion data and investment also appeared during the interviews with fashion executives and designers in the first semester of 2024 in Luanda. They highlighted the lack of sourcing and infrastructure to improve the fashion industry and its system, mentioning how the only fashion higher education school in the country must strengthen its faculty, laboratories, libraries, etc. For them, who have been striving in the local fashion industry for a long time, even before the establishment of a fashion university, the only option to attend fashion school in higher education was to go to European or Brazilian universities, the *Fashion Design Education and Research* course at Luanda University still needs investments and improvements to become a reference in the country.

Interestingly, students from diverse social and racial backgrounds and geographies experience subtle biases and structural fashion narrative inequalities when attending fashion higher education. Movements to decolonize fashion curricula are seen in the global north axis by racialized scholars. Sarah Cheang and Shehnaz Suterwalla (2020) wrote about their experimental teaching within the MA History of Design program at the Royal College of Art, London, demonstrating how decolonizing

the curriculum involves disrupting the Eurocentric definition of fashion, exploring decolonial praxis in practice and criticism while fomenting perspectives toward more profound reflexivity and professional development. The *Fashion Design* course at the Federal University of Ceará, which replicated the Royal College of Art, London, in Brazil (Queiroz, 2011), between 2021 and 2023, carried out a curricula research project to examine racial relations and whiteness in its content and the urgent need to include marginalized groups—LGBTQIA+s and people with disabilities—in Brazilian fashion histories. (Queiroz et al, 2021)

Decolonial AestheSis in Fashion knowledge through cultural production

Fashion is visually and materially expressed by shapes, colors, textiles, and silhouettes. The logic of its production is covered by theories, methods, practices, and politics of fashion with capital F. This essay thinks with Afro-Brazilian sociologist Lélia Gonzalez on her emphasis on anti-colonial thought regarding the Eurocentrism of Social Sciences and with Sueli Carneiro on the role of science in building racial equality and the importance of acknowledging human diversity knowledges [plural]. As already mentioned above, the colonial matrix of power and its canon and normativity configuration still imply today that non-whites do not produce a form of science. This argument is extended to fashion. The fashion and knowledge production of these territories is often reduced as a primary source of research and informants of knowledge. Still, it does not recognize them as authorities or bearers of knowledge, constituting epistemic-ide (Carneiro, 2023). Epistemicides are practices that deny or expropriate subjects outside the northern axis as subjects of knowledge, producers of culture, knowledge, and science.

That was a fashionable ethnographic insightful moment where the theoretical premises and information collected from the on-site activity were reordered and repositioned. I therefore initiated, as part of research-led teaching, an educational outreach that became a decolonial academic activism to convey decolonial aestheSis to confront the western/modernity fashion gaze and contribute

to a pluriversal fashion future. As Rolando Vázquez points out, if aesthetics can be read as a "domain of social life equivalent to epistemology [that] brings to the fore control of perception and representation" (2021: xxi), it is essential to strengthen decolonial aestheSis on fashion gaze "as a re-valuation of what has been made invisible or devalued by the modern-colonial order" (Achinte and Palermo Apud 2013).

Here, I draw attention to decolonial e-zines in the fashion series created in 2021. Zine is short for magazine—fashion magazines, and it dialogues with the underground style, subverting the scholarly journal editorial. It is an experimental and plurilingual publication that challenges editorial practices, writing, and narrative styles. Each issue is organized by coalition with collectives, with an invited cover designer and a graphic designer, who write their conceptual thoughts, with an invited foreword, supervised by a librarian, and published with the following ISSN 2773-0883. The project is institutionalized at the *Research Collective for Decoloniality and Fashion* RCDF, a not-for-profit foundation in the Netherlands that aims to critique the denial and erasure of a diversity of fashioning systems due to eurocentricity, unequal global power relations based on the modern-colonial order and the Euro-American canon of normativity materialized in modern aesthetics. (RCDF, 2024). I joined the RCDF in 2020 as a communication officer and have been involved in several projects in the organization, such as *the Decolonial Fashion Film Festival*, *Global Fashioning Assembly*, and *Introductory Decolonial Fashion course* for the sake of writing space. I share about the decolonial e-zine on fashion series production and circulation.

The RCDF decolonial e-zine on fashion series project as fashion knowledge creation and dissemination embedded on decolonial aestheSis—cultural production brings perspectives, criticism, and creative crossings through five axes to indicate fashion works as a transversal role in culture: knowledge production—material production —senses of production + coalitions and knowledge circulation, which enables to raise analytical awareness and criticism to overcome the monocultural trapping of fashion history, subjects,

theories, and methodologies, widening pedagogical and research methods to access what has been erased due to the untrustworthy Eurocentric and white-homogenized Fashion industry. It diversifies languages and voices facing or concerned with colonialism and sheds light on how decoloniality in *F/fashion* is being carried out.

The first bilingual (Portuguese into English) issue on “Decoloniality and Fashion in Brazil” (2021) was organized in coalition with the *Fashion and Decoloniality: Global South Crossroads* collective. The thirty-five entries were from undergraduate students to researchers and professionals at any rank. It became the first fashion publication in Brazil to gather mostly Afro-Brazilian authors. It addressed topics on Afro-Brazilian and Indigenous aestheSis through research, institutions, markets, networks, art, objects and accessories, drawings, territory and landscapes, theater, songs and lyrics, colors, and silhouettes in a fashion publication. Fashion scholarship from France has considered this first edition as a way to engage sustainable narratives on fashion media; an interview about it will be published in the forthcoming book *Remaking Fashion Media: Sustainable Narratives and Visions of Change*, Bloomsbury Academic.

The second issue was on the “Research Collective for Decoloniality and Fashion’s 10th anniversary!” (2023). The thirty-two entries brought decolonial practices and perspectives covering topics *from* flax flowerings, dying textiles, sustainability, garments workers’ conditions, gender and sexualities, Indigenous identity, Afro diasporas, territory and geographies, the nature of writing, and research *to* design. Nurturing multiculturalism and language articles were written in English plus the author’s second or third language, which made it possible to circulate digitally fashion content in Arabic, Dutch, English, French, Spanish, te reo Māori, and Portuguese. The *Design History Society Annual Publishing* gathering in 2023, in Porto, Lisboa, invited me to present the project at the *Diversity, Inclusion, and Design History Publishing* workshop.

In addition to that, the *e zine as the vital project of fashion knowledge pluriversity as an education outreach* led me to, workshop *The | Hands-on | The*

De-fashion Epistemology act that aimed to exchange and elaborate didactic material for classroom use, at the De-Fashioning Education Conference (2023), in Berlin, Germany; to curate a podcasts series on *Decolonial Aesthetics Transit* part of the Outras Costuras: histórias do vestir no Brasil [Other Sewing: History of Dress in Brazil] with History of Dress researcher Rita Andrade, at the Federal University of Goiás, Brazil, interviewing fashion researchers from Brazilian Afro-indigenous researchers and practitioners, Belgium, The Netherlands, and United States. In Luanda, Angola, I presented the two issues at the Dina Simão fashion store school, which led me to the TV program *Sexto Sentido* on February 23, 2024, at the TV Zimbo to be interviewed by Dina Simão, to discuss on national television at *Doce Café*, decoloniality on fashion for Angola designers.

Other fashion zines inspired by the decoloniality ezine on fashion series are being produced. The Afropen fashion researcher Pierre Antoine Vetorello in Antwerp created *The Yarn*. The first issue, published in November 2023, was on colonial fashion violence in fashion schools. The Canadian/Dutch cultural anthropologist and founder activist at the *Fashion Act Now*, Sandra Niessen, is organizing an upcoming zine publication on *Defashion*. As we can see, the decoloniality and fashion series initiative has put the fashion field on the move while moving us in the field, inviting fashion scholars to address time western/modernity issues in the social sciences and fashion field. Collectively, we enable perception, visual, and auditory sensation, mobilize engagements on criticism, innovate, and improve fashion knowledge production and circulation. That is a way to challenge the coloniality of power (A. Quijano) manifested in fashion, social sciences, and African scholarship, which still dismisses the value of fashion knowledge pluriversity.

Decolonial Activism as practice of Fashion Education

I sense that my academic activism became a practice of education in terms of what Tim Ingold (2014) calls anthropology education: Luanda is transforming me, shaping the person I now am and

the anthropology I do. Informing and elucidating a *fashion knowledge pluriversality* while entangling foreign worldview, offering a way to reflect, trace, and weave, has pointed out how coloniality in fashion, as I refer to this as the coloniality of dress (Medrado 2023), hierarchized fashion practitioners, knowledges and fashions.

In Angola, fashion decolonial activism practice as educational outreach has deeply informed my research-led teachings, indicating creative entanglements in fashion scholarship and its geographies. Indeed, given the need for initiatives to decentralize Eurocentric fashion knowledge and circulation, Angola has a manifold challenge with several positions and contractions. The youth generation has noticed how Angola's fashion system faces coloniality in its cultural and market aspects. Therefore, the artists Ari AVX and Danilson Nzala asked to support them in untangling colonial knots in the line of the present, to igniting the decoloniality practices in Luanda, together with the fashion designer Dey Tchissapa and undergraduate on social development Precious Mumena, we created the Mwneno Collective Fashion and Art, which aims to strengthen Angolan cultural identity and empower artists and fashion creators once it is urgent to recognize the country's cultural, historical, and artistic diversity and value local production.

In October of 2024, Mwneno Collective participated organizing the Sanzala Fashion and Art event at the Global Fashioning Assembly organized by the Research Collective for Decoloniality and Fashion. Sanzala, as the word carries a sense of collectivity and social gathering, referred to the deepness of Angolan roots culture, particularly to the language and ethnicity of Kimbundu and Kicongo. Sanzala, as a fashion and art event, celebrated Angolan cultural heritage and identity, a moment when tradition and innovation met. Stitching the present of yesterday into the present-future, a *Cotton Route* was conceptualized to raise de colonial awareness and to highlight the importance of local fashion and art, bringing together emerging and established fashion designers and stylists, visual artists, and creatives. Angola, as being part of the whole but outside

of Western/modernity, experiencing, producing meanings, and challenging fashion with capital F, manifest their knowledge power. Sanzala showed willingness to explore possibilities to bring their perspective, coming from the margin occupying the center (bell hooks, 1984) with fashion and art experiences. That is why, to keep the conversation and challenge forms and not just content, it is necessary to further studies pose questions related to the practice of education outreach: How does it dialogue on/with academic freedom? What would be the best practices for fashion scholar activism? How should activism be defined, perceived, practiced, and considered (un)welcome in Fashion and textile sensibilities on Africa and its Diasporas? How should we think about new forms of collaboration? ■

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Endnotes

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