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von Pezold, J.

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Patching Sites, Patching Data:

Patchwork Ethnography on Fashion in and beyond Pandemic Times

Abstract

This paper explores the innovative method of patchwork ethnography, which was first introduced by Günel et al. (2020), and its applicability to the area of fashion studies. It elaborates on the features, qualities, and limitations of the method. The paper does so by reflecting on the ethnographic research I conducted for my PhD thesis. In March-August 2019 and January-July 2021, I used a patchwork ethnography approach to participant observation, interviews, digital ethnography, and visual analysis to study the trade and retail of Chinese-made garments and textiles in Mozambique. The paper puts a special focus on the difficulties and restrictions arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, and how these can be offset by the specific characteristics of patchwork ethnography. Apart from discussing the issues relating to my positionality and privilege as an educated white female researcher in a cross-cultural Global South context, it also hopes to further push the ongoing decolonisation of fashion studies. It therefore aims to show that the applicability and relevance of patchwork ethnography goes beyond periods shaped by pandemic restrictions. More generally, this paper emphasizes the necessity and benefit of an interdisciplinary mindset and creative, flexible, multi-method approaches to understand and tackle the great challenges of our time that relate to the production, trade, and consumption of fashion products.

Keywords

Patchwork ethnography, COVID-19, fieldwork, Mozambique, China, trade

Introduction

From a critical contemporary perspective, the relationship between ethnography and fashion, especially a non-Western one, has long been problematic. Throughout most of the 19th and 20th centuries, anthropologists and social scientists employing ethnographic methods often deemed clothing and other body adornments an unworthy subject of study, and if non-Western fashion was not neglected, it was othered and orientalized (Hansen 2004; Mentges 2019). In the last decades, however, the potential of ethnographic research to gain in-depth understanding of other cultures, practices, and local contexts, has been fruitfully employed in fashion studies, an interdisciplinary field of research that examines the cultural, historical, social and aesthetic aspects of fashion (Jenss 2016). From exploring the design process (Drazin 2021), to gaining insight into fashion communication (Tse 2015), analysing the development of a national fashion industry (Zhao 2013), or even tracking the workings of transnational fashion collaborations (Rofel and Yanagisako 2019), ethnography, the study of particular cultures through personal immersion, has been a valuable and popular tool in contemporary fashion research.

Fashion studies themselves have undergone an important theoretical and epistemological reckoning in the last years. While the Eurocentricity of fashion has been repeatedly criticized since the 1990s (Baizerman et al. 1993; Craik 1994), a systematic postcolonial critique of fashion is now emerging, as documented by Elke Gaugele and Monica Titton in their edited volume *Fashion and Postcolonial Critique* (2019). The decolonial fashion discourse focuses on ‘uncovering, enabling and re-existing what has been deliberately, structurally and consistently denied, erased and de-futured’ (Jansen 2020: 824). By pointing out and criticizing how the Western fashion system is built on the exploitation of non-Western labour, materials, and aesthetics, without acknowledging them, and how it stipulates Western fashion theory as universal and denies the existence of other fashion systems, the decolonial fashion praxis hopes to contribute to ‘delinking from the epistemologies of western Europe and decentering the understandings of fashion’ (Slade and Jansen 2020). In doing so, decolonial fashion critique showcases the multivalent character of fashion, celebrating the large worldwide diversity that exists in fashioning the body (Jansen 2020).

Through the ongoing and incomplete process of fashion decolonization (Cheang et al. 2022), it has been possible to reveal a long history of creative adaptation and cross-cultural fertilisation in marginalized non-Western fashion (Craik 1994; Hansen 2004; Niessen 2003; Rabine 2002; Rovine 2004). Ethnography as a fashion studies method, however, has yet to be adapted to

these new developments. Waisbord and Mellado (2014) make clear that decolonizing efforts should not be restricted to study subjects, bodies of evidence, theoretical approaches, and academic cultures, but also need to be extended to methodological perspectives, which are often rooted in paradigms and premises of various strands of Western academia. Nevertheless, ethnography is often still used and understood in a very traditional way, implying long-term, in-person ethnographic fieldwork that is bound to a specific field site. This approach is becoming increasingly inadequate to account for the fluidity, mobility, and globality that characterize the most important fashion actors and phenomena of today. Especially when studying non-Western fashion systems, their connections, histories, and processes beyond their relations to Western ones, which is a key step towards the decolonialization of fashion studies (Cheang et al. 2021; Jansen 2020), conventional ethnography often struggles to grasp those diverse, quickly developing, and globally entangled fashion systems and spaces of consumption (Jennings 2015; Ling and Segre-Reinach 2018) in their complex entirety. Remote and often largely independent from the workings of Euro-American fashion systems, South-South fashion exchanges in particular offer an avenue to challenge, rethink, and subvert Western-shaped theoretical concepts such as cosmopolitanism (Moors and Tarlo 2007), transnationalism (Rabine 2002), symbolic capital (Almila 2016), authenticity (Sylvanus 2007), cultural mediation (von Pezold 2022), and cultural influence (Ndjio 2022). Those dynamic contemporary fashion systems crossing the Global South are often shaped by disruptions, frictions, shifts, and ruptures (Knowles 2014; Pinheiro-Machado 2017) that are hard to keep track of through ethnographic fieldwork (Hulme 2017).

The limitations of ethnography became even more obvious with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. As a now common response to pandemic-induced travel restrictions, many fellow Western scholars started to employ local research assistants to collect data on the ground. Keeping the accelerating privatization of social sciences research in mind, this practice is not only academically unsound due to the resulting uncoupling of data collection from data analysis and theorisation but also exploitative, Baczko and Dorronsoro (2020) have made clear. Cirhuza (2020) calls this outsourcing practice ‘academic neo-colonialism,’ as it systematically excludes researchers from the Global South from career development through, for example, research process design and co-authorship (see also, Tilley and Kalina 2021). In the context of COVID-19, it was also simply unfair to send local assistants to places and settings that are deemed to be too dangerous for Western scholars such as regions with especially high COVID-19 case numbers or poor medical systems (Bisoka 2020). To continue to be able to study real-

life global practices of fashion production, trade, and consumption in pandemic times and beyond, it was and still is therefore necessary to reinvent ethnography in general.

This paper proposes patchwork ethnography as developed by Günel et al. (2020) as a gentler, more flexible, and more contemporary alternative to traditional ethnography in fashion studies. Also going beyond both the area of fashion studies and periods shaped by pandemic restrictions, this paper thereby aims to further contribute to the urgently needed decolonization of the field of fashion studies. To do so, this paper first recounts the currently changing attitudes towards ethnographic fieldwork and locally bound understandings of the ‘field’ before introducing the novel approach of patchwork ethnography, which addresses how ‘changing living and working conditions are profoundly and irrevocably transforming knowledge production’ (Günel et al. 2020). In the next part, I recount my own experience as a female Western researcher with a social sciences background of using patchwork ethnography to understand the creation of fashion in the context of the Chinese-Mozambican garment and textile trade. Reflecting on the methods I employed, the practical difficulties I encountered due to the outbreak of COVID-19, the opportunities that arose from this situation, and the issues of my positionality and privilege, I map out a way to navigate contemporary fashion research. I do so by giving a practical example of the applicability and relevance of patchwork ethnography to the study of transnational cultural mediation processes in times of increasing complexity and fragmentation of global trade. Finally, this leads over to a discussion of the general benefits and limitations of patchwork ethnography in fashion studies and beyond.

Where Is the Field? Changing Attitudes towards Ethnographic Fieldwork

In recent decades, ethnographic fieldwork, and researchers’ approaches to it, have undergone dramatic changes. In an increasingly globalized world, sociologists and anthropologists have faced the challenge to explicate inherently ‘postlocal’ (Appadurai 1997) issues, such as migration and trade, using largely stationary methods (Smith 2017). Especially ethnographic fieldwork, with its traditional focus on long-term stays in a single, often remote location, a notion and practice that has been continuously perpetuated by anthropology departments at elite Western universities (Günel and Watanabe 2023), had to be refined. This led to a critical examination of ‘the field’ and of fieldwork per se (Coleman and Collins 2006; Verne 2012). Caputo puts it as follows: ‘a continued insistence on a spatialized notion of a “field”, as a site of research involving physical displacement to a geographically distant place in order to pursue

extended face-to-face encounters with “others”, obscures many of the realities faced by anthropologists’ (2000: 19; see also, Jansen 2020).

Most ethnographers agree that transnational links and developments cannot be ignored, yet they also do not want to abandon the richness of data and intimate understanding that can only be obtained through ethnographic fieldwork. The two most well-known concepts that have arisen from this conundrum are ‘multi-sited ethnography,’ popularized by George Marcus (1995), and ‘global ethnography,’ promoted by Michael Burawoy (2000). Both approaches, which try to understand complex phenomena of a larger order through ethnographic fieldwork, have since been revised by a multitude of scholars (Gille and Riain 2002; Hannerz 2003), leading to the emergence of related concepts, such as ‘mobile’ (Blok 2010), ‘translocal’ (Freitag and von Oppen 2014), and ‘transnational’ (Knowles 2000; Kurotani 2004; Tsuda et al. 2014) ethnography, ‘globography’ (Hendry 2003), and even ‘global team-based ethnography’ (Jarzabkowski et al. 2015).

Inspired by Latour’s (2004) actor–network theory, and Marcus’ (1995) proposal to trace the paths of people, things, metaphors, stories, biographies, and conflicts around the world, there also was an upsurge of multi-sited ‘follow-the-thing’ or ‘commodity chain’ ethnographies, which follow certain items around the world from their place of production up to the end customer. These approaches, however, rarely account for the friction and fragmentation that are characteristic of contemporary commodity chains, including the ones connected to garments, shoes, and other fashion items (Knowles 2014). Hulme (2017), for example, has made clear that nowadays, it is almost impossible to personally trace the global path of a commodity. As the global spread of production and consumption is no longer something new, she also does not deem this kind of endeavour very insightful. Instead, she recommends looking into the gaps in an object’s trajectory, the parts where it cannot be followed, the ruptures and collateral damage, as she did in her study on plastic goods (Hulme 2015).

Encouraged by these changing attitudes towards ethnographic fieldwork, Günel, Varma, and Watanabe digitally published *A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography* in 2020. In this, they question the need for long-term anthropological fieldwork. Although often fetishized in the field of anthropology, Günel et al. do not deem ‘traditional’ fieldwork to be up to date with the increasing mobility of most research subjects or the environmental, political, financial, family-, health-, and mobility-related constraints many researchers have to navigate (see also, Adebayo 2020; Hannerz 2003). These specific circumstances certainly also apply to contemporary research on fashion. The authors declare that ‘recombinations of “home” and “field” have now

become necessities – more so in the face of the current pandemic.’ (Günel et al. 2020) They advocate for ‘patchwork ethnography’ as a more realistic, more caring, but no less effective alternative:

‘Patchwork ethnography refers not to one-time, short, instrumental trips and relationships à la consultants, but rather, to research efforts that maintain the long-term commitments, language proficiency, contextual knowledge, and slow thinking that characterizes so-called traditional fieldwork.’ (Günel et al. 2020)

Thereby, patchwork ethnography is proposed as a ‘pragmatic intervention that allows researchers to acknowledge and inhabit the imperfections of their worlds’ (Günel and Watanabe 2023: 6; see also Meneses 2023). Despite abandoning linear research timelines, the authors’ focus on translocal relationship networks, and linguistic and cultural fluency is consistent with many other scholars (Caputo 2000; Freidberg 2001; Marcus 1995). Hannerz (2003), for example, agrees that sustained interpersonal connections are often more helpful for building rapport than long-term face-to-face interactions. Staying in contact with informants became even easier and more common in times of increased digital connectivity, making it possible to maintain personal relationships with participants via social media and messenger services over periods of years and in between fieldwork stays.

Moreover, digital methods such as digital ethnography are booming. While social media environments and digitally mediated social contexts have been researched by ethnographers for more than a decade now (Markham 2013), the COVID-19 pandemic inspired a new batch of virtual research, convincing even sceptics of the benefits and necessity of digital ethnography (Goralska 2020; Kim et al. 2021; Murphy et al. 2021; Schulte-Römer and Gesing 2022). Patchwork ethnography is open to flexibly combining these digital data collection methods with in-person fieldwork (Günel et al. 2020). This is especially sensible in regard to contemporary systems of fashion production, trade and consumption, as many of these processes take place or are organised online nowadays and ‘interactions online structure interactions offline, and vice versa’, as Murphy et al. (2021: 47) stress.

By enabling full immersion, a deep understanding of the context, the possibility of surprise findings, and cross-checking of informants’ statements, occasional fieldwork stays can offset some of the shortcomings of digital ethnography (Tsuda et al. 2014). By integrating various ethnographic methods, such as participant observation, interviews, and digital data collection, patchwork ethnography aims to work ‘with rather than against the gaps, constraints, partial

knowledge, and diverse commitments that characterize all knowledge production' (Günel et al. 2020). Fragmentary data are not necessarily any less rigorous; quite the contrary, they can be closer to reality than anything resulting from linear, pre-planned collection processes. In the following part, I recount how I used patchwork ethnography between 2019 and 2021 to study the trade and retail of Chinese-made garments and textiles in Mozambique¹, combining participant observation, interviews, digital ethnography, and visual analysis (see also, Adalima et al. 2023; Meneses 2023).

Applying Patchwork Ethnography to the Chinese-Mozambican Fashion Trade

Patching Sites

My 'field' was mainly located in Mozambique, but occasionally also extended to Guangzhou in Southern China and the virtual spaces of Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and WeChat. In Summer 2019, I conducted a one-month pilot study in Mozambique, which proved to be invaluable, as all my further planning was disrupted by the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020. I had originally planned to spend February and March of that year in Guangzhou, then five months in Mozambique, before returning to China intermittently throughout Autumn 2020, using my connections to Chinese wholesalers to gain access to Chinese factories producing garments and textiles for African markets. It soon became clear that due to the persistent spread of COVID-19, my plans were unfeasible. Mainland China introduced strict entry restrictions, which were only lifted in early 2023 and also applied to people residing in Hong Kong such as myself, and the Mozambican government suspended all international flights in and out of the country during May-August 2020 (Deutsche Welle 2020).

After almost one year delay, I finally arrived in Maputo in January 2021. For six months, I had the great pleasure and privilege to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in Mozambique as an associate researcher at the Centre for African Studies at the Eduardo Mondlane University in Maputo. Besides the Mozambican capital Maputo, I also spent time in Matola, Inhambane, Maxixe, Beira, Nampula, and Ilha de Moçambique. While I actively planned to visit some of these cities, other places were gradually selected once I had arrived in Maputo. This often happened by chance, depending on, inter alia, transport opportunities, the weather, personal connections, and recommendations. To not put my informants at risk of a COVID-infection, I, for example, avoided using the notoriously crowded public transport in Mozambique, so both long-distance travelling and getting around the city cost more money, time, and planning than

usual. Eventually, I was able to gain a patchy yet ultimately comprehensive view of the Chinese–Mozambican trade and retail activities taking place across the country, while making the most of my fieldwork time and flexibly adapting to changing circumstances (see also, Verne 2012).

Apart from usual COVID-19 precautions such as mask-wearing, avoiding indoor meetings, and cancelling interviews at the slightest hint of a cold, the pandemic slowed down my data collection in many other ways, too. Luckily, all businesses, including shops and markets stayed open, albeit with reduced schedules. It was, however, not possible for me to conduct wardrobe study interviews (Klepp and Bjerk 2014) at consumers' homes, as this would have been an inappropriate intrusion in times of social distancing. Furthermore, I had to completely abandon conducting any further in-person fieldwork in Mainland China. With both the production and the consumption side largely inaccessible, I ended up focusing on the trade and retail part of Chinese–Mozambican fashion chains.

The Chinese megacity of Guangzhou is well known for its large wholesale markets and trade fairs, which attract traders from all over the world. In preparation of this research, I visited Guangzhou several times in 2019. During these trips, I did not trace any particular people or products across continents as would be done in a classical 'follow-the-thing' ethnography (Marcus 1995), but I attempted to immerse myself in the city that has long been the first point of connection between African traders and Chinese producers and agents. By doing so, it was possible for me to get a good overview of the most popular markets, their locations, layouts, range of goods on offer, and price levels. Furthermore, I gained a first impression of the working conditions, trading practices, and lifestyles of the Africans who go to Guangzhou to bulk purchase garments and textiles. In later discussions and interviews with people involved in Chinese–Mozambican trade, these insights served as valuable reference points, building trust, and helping me to better relate to the traders and their experiences. So even though the pandemic prevented me from doing 'proper' multi-sited fieldwork, which would have required me to stay in China for an extended period of time as well, my research still benefited from my preliminary stints to Guangzhou. Or, as Günel and Watanabe put it: 'If the objects of study are the configurations of global power, [...] it cannot be taken for granted that staying in the fieldsite without interruptions is the only or the best methodology' (2023: 3).

Facebook and Instagram pages of traders, brands, and stores, as well as WhatsApp groups of traders, wholesalers, and their customers, and WeChat groups of Chinese people living in Mozambique, constituted my additional 'field sites.' There, I kept up with relevant news,

developments, and rumours, observed changes that took place when I was not in the field, and collected visual and textual data about promotional activities and new products, including their prices, design, and presentation. In addition, I used social media and messenger services to stay in contact with my research participants in China and Mozambique after my fieldwork stays, and to catch up with them regularly. By maintaining these translocal relationships online (some for more than five years and counting), I not only received valuable information, but also showed my long-term commitment and genuine interest in my participants' lives and personal development (see also, Hannerz 2003; Käihkö 2020).

Patching Data

To personally experience the way that Chinese-made garments and textiles are imported, traded, promoted, handled, selected, sold, discussed, modified, and perceived in Mozambique, I participated in and observed their trade and retail in a variety of settings. These included wholesale markets, malls, retail shops, open-air markets, roadside stalls, and a textile factory. At these sites, I collected data through informal conversations with Chinese wholesalers, retailers, trade agents, and sales representatives, as well as with traders, wholesalers, shop owners, salespeople, and consumers of Mozambican and other nationalities. As a participant observer, I immersed myself in the daily lives and social settings of these informants, and observed their everyday work procedures, working conditions, and social interactions with others over more than seven months in total. To build rapport, I made sure to visit each participant regularly (some of them up to weekly) and to familiarize myself with their schedules, workloads, and habits. One pandemic-related change that impacted my research to a greater extent than I had expected was the almost complete absence of any social gatherings. This made it more difficult to get in contact and build relationships with potential informants through leisure activities. Moreover, the drastic reduction of in-person social, business, and academic events also hampered my attempts to extend my personal and research networks.

Unrelated to COVID-19, there were some important people, companies, and processes that I could not gain access to during the course of my research. I, for example, did not manage to talk to any higher-ranking representative of the Chinese print fabric manufacturer that dominated the Mozambican textile market in 2021, even though I had the personal WeChat contact of several of them and contacted them by message in Chinese. After several failed contact attempts, I decided to transform these constraints into opportunities for new insights (Günel et al. 2020), accounting for and exemplifying the secrecy and harsh competition that characterize the Chinese print fabric market in Mozambique (see also, von Pezold 2022).

Experiences like these taught me to see the gaps in my findings as a finding in itself (see also, Hulme 2017) and, in the spirit of patchwork ethnography, to 'write with rather than against the interruptions and disruptions of fieldwork' (Günel and Watanabe 2023: 3).

Hannerz (2003) has pointed out that when time in the field is limited (which, in the field of anthropology, still means anything less than twelve months), interviews, along with other sources and materials, become even more important. During my field research, I conducted about 50 interviews that varied considerably in their length and depth, and their level of formality and structuredness. For most interviews, I selected a semi-structured format with open-ended questions to facilitate free-flowing, improvisational discussion, and encourage answers of greater depth and candour. For this purpose, I usually prepared a list of topics beforehand that I would like to talk about with a particular participant, and then allowed the interview to flow organically, using the topic list as a guide whenever the discussion stalled. Following Hannerz, these 'only rather mildly structured exchanges, with room for spontaneous flow and unexpected turns' (2003: 209) were often closer to conversations or informal dialogues than interviews. I interviewed most of my informants several times over the span of months or even years. These always slightly different repeat conversations allowed me to stay up to date with ongoing developments and to discuss any emerging issues.

To capture, identify, and analyse processes of fashion creation, and the contexts in which they appear, I conducted visual analysis of fabric patterns, clothing and accessory designs, street styles, store displays and settings, product packaging, and advertisements. This allowed me to learn more about the changing aesthetics and presentation of Chinese-made garments and textiles in Mozambique. For documentation and subsequent analysis, I took about 13,000 pictures of products, shops, and outfits with my smartphone throughout my fieldwork. In addition, I collected tens of thousands of promotional product images from WhatsApp groups and status updates (see also, von Pezold 2023). Moreover, observed and recorded traders' and retailers' promotional strategies on WeChat Moments, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok. By collecting and examining the aforementioned texts, images, and short videos over the course of four years (2019–2022), I was able to capture and identify the patterns and designs of Chinese-made garments and textiles sold in Mozambique, and the inspirations, cultural references, symbolic values, and constantly changing trends they represent through their visual images.

I supplemented the data gathered through participant observation, interviews, and visual analysis, through discourse analysis of fashion- and China-related articles in Mozambican

newspapers and blogs, and through conversations with Mozambican scholars. By combining different methods, I intended to adopt a data triangulation approach, thereby cross-checking my results and adding depth to my often fragmentary data. This also made me less dependent on specific sources and the cooperativeness of my informants. Moreover, comparing different types of data allowed me to obtain a more balanced view, fairly accounting for the perspectives of both Chinese and Mozambicans, as well as all the other groups involved in the Chinese–Mozambican garment and textile trade.

Opportunities

However, COVID-19 also had some positive effects on my research. Even though waiting for ten months to enter the field was at times frustrating, it was also productive. It gave me the opportunity to ‘think slow’ (Günel and Watanabe 2023), properly process and analyse the data I had collected during the pilot study, and to reflect on the literature and my preliminary theoretical framework based on this. Additionally, this extended time of reflection (see also, Hannerz 2003) was helpful for me to refine my intended research methodology. While doing so, I benefitted immensely from the wealth of literature (Goralska 2020; Kim et al. 2021; Lobe et al. 2020) and resources (Lupton 2021; LSE Digital Ethnography Collective 2022; Miller 2020; Rao 2021) that was spontaneously created in reaction to the global interruption of fieldwork. Through these works, I became aware of many new approaches, including patchwork ethnography (Günel et al. 2020). What is more, the period of waiting gave me more time for fieldwork preparation, and made me appreciate more profoundly the opportunity to travel abroad to do any fieldwork at all, making me aware that there are always parts of research that cannot be controlled through the agency of the researcher.

After arriving in Mozambique, my COVID-induced focus on trade and retail turned out to be advantageous. Leaving aside the aspects of production and consumption enabled me to gain deep insights into an area that otherwise would only have been a small part of a probably overly broad and ambitious project. Furthermore, even though social distancing made it more difficult for me to get in contact with informants in the first place, it also strengthened many existing connections. With fewer social contacts and almost no leisure activities available, many of my participants were especially eager to meet up with me regularly once they trusted me and my health precautions. I also bonded with many informants – both Chinese and non-Chinese – over our shared experience of not being able to travel to Mainland China. Sympathizing with their situation and exchanging information about promising new flight routes, as well as the most recent Chinese immigration rules, made it possible for me to relate to my research participants

in Mozambique on a more personal level. It is, however, important to note that for many of them, the consequences of being unable to return were much greater than for me, as I have no family or vital business in China. So even though deep immersion and close relationships are key to patchwork ethnography, shared experiences are often still not the same for researchers and informants.

Despite my initial, instinctive aversion to writing a ‘COVID thesis,’ I was eventually very glad to be able to document a time of monumental global change through my research. My reluctance and frustration gave way to curiosity about the way Chinese–Mozambican fashion chains, which depend on the transcontinental movement of goods and people, adapted to travel restrictions (Skovgaard-Smith 2021) and the widespread disruption of production and global transport (Teodoro and Rodriguez 2020). Perceiving the pandemic as a magnifier of underlying but already existing trends and developments (Freedland 2020), it was fascinating – though occasionally also disheartening – to witness how, and to what extent, the trade and retail of Chinese-made fashion products in Mozambique changed through COVID-19.

Apart from changing migration patterns, supply chain logistics, and digital platform use, the pandemic also happened to make me aware of other fascinating developments that are most likely also relevant to a future post-pandemic world. Chinese-made surgical masks in a wide variety of patterns and colours were sold on Mozambican markets in early 2021. Yet, the designs that proved to be most popular and most widely worn during that time consisted of Louis Vuitton logos, usually printed in beige on a brown ground but also in other colours. Other trendy masks designs featured Gucci logos or the chequered Burberry pattern, fruitfully directing my research interest towards questions of brands, trademarks, and intellectual property.

Finally, the difficulties I encountered while trying to embark on my data collection made me more aware of the imperilled status of fieldwork in general. With the advancement of safer, faster, and more cost-effective digital methods, any kind of ethnographic fieldwork is now often seen as dispensable (Baczko and Dorronsoro 2020). I realized through my research, however, that in-person fieldwork, even if only short-term and patchy, is still necessary – despite, and precisely because of, the pandemic. Building close relationships through sustained in-person interaction is key to ethnographic research, as in many contexts, certain information can only be accessed through familiarity and trust (Wood et al. 2020). This was the case for many – often illegal – practices I observed along Chinese–Mozambican fashion chains, that my informants would never have told me about if I had not been physically present. Likewise,

many potentially globally relevant impacts of the pandemic would have gone unnoticed by me from afar. With so many key processes, events, and interactions taking place informally, orally, undocumented, and in person, many research projects simply do not have digital alternatives (van der Hoog 2020). This certainly also applies to many aspects of the fashion world, especially outside of the ‘orderly’ fashion markets in Western countries (Aspers 2010). Therefore, Wood et al. (2020) assert that ‘whatever the possibilities offered by remote research, the resumption of in-person field research is important for social science in the medium- and long-term.’

Positionality and Privilege

Amid the long and problematic history of white Western ethnographers in the Global South, the need to be reflexive about one’s own positionality during fieldwork is now widely acknowledged (Griffiths 2017; Reyes 2018). As Cheang et al. (2022) have pointed out, it is important to pay attention to power relations and how oneself is involved in them when doing research, describing coming to terms with positionality as ‘crucial to decolonizing practice and subjectivity, in a continually unfolding process of action and compromise.’ (Cheang et al. 2022). Therefore, acknowledging one’s positionality is key to both decolonial and feminist ethnography (Huisman 2008; Jansen 2020; Manning 2016; Moosavi 2020). Additionally, patchwork ethnography calls attention to how researchers themselves, their bodies, abilities, living and working conditions, shape research processes and outcomes (Günel and Watanabe 2023). When moving away from the outdated image of the researcher as a white, healthy, financially and otherwise independent man from the Global North, fieldwork inevitably becomes patchy.

Reyes (2018) has developed the concept of an ‘ethnographic toolkit,’ according to which researchers actively and strategically draw from both their visible and invisible traits to shape field dynamics and access. As a white, educated woman with a German passport and both Mandarin Chinese and Portuguese language skills, I felt well-received in both China and Mozambique, and did not find it very difficult to gain access to the places and people I was interested in. I also benefitted from the cultural knowledge I had built up living, working, and studying in Mainland China, Hong Kong, Mozambique, and Brazil before starting my research. Having visited many of the largest Mozambican cities, and being familiar with the wholesale markets in Guangzhou, also gave me a certain degree of credibility in the eyes of the people involved in Chinese–Mozambican trade (see also, Freidberg 2001). With Chinese citizens in Mozambique, I also shared the common status of being a foreigner in the country. In general,

my frequent travels and familiarity with different countries did not raise any suspicions among my informants but was seen as appropriate and expected, fitting the image of a Western expat far removed from the spheres of Chinese–Mozambican trade. Being perceived as a friendly and harmless outsider helped me to build up meaningful relations with participants of different nationalities and backgrounds (see also, Mayorga-Gallo and Hordge-Freeman 2017).

During fieldwork, there were many occasions when I realized that I could not completely separate my private life from my research, agreeing with Chua (2021), who noted that nowadays, the boundaries of the anthropological self are often beyond our control. Following Günel and Watanabe in that patchwork ethnography foregrounds ‘how researchers’ personal lives shape the process of knowledge production’ (2023: 6), my personality and beliefs were closely intertwined with my data collection. Reflecting on how my ‘ethnographic toolkit’ (Reyes 2018) has afforded me extensive access to different places and people in the Chinese–Mozambican context, it is impossible not to mention the privilege I benefitted from in many ways. Even if it was sometimes hidden, it is important to become aware of how privilege shaped my data collection and presence in the field. As Slade and Jansen (2020) explain: ‘to decolonize is also to recognize privilege’. The very possibility to safely travel to both China and Mozambique for research, especially during the pandemic, is a privilege that not every scholar has (Adebayo 2020).

DeLuca and Maddox have stated that feelings of guilt and privilege can be ‘meaningful and instructive beyond our own experiences’ (2016: 297). In my case, these feelings made me more aware of the (as)symmetry of relationships, and the idea of reciprocity (see also, Huisman 2008). While it is true that ‘reflexivity can make us more aware of asymmetrical or exploitative relationships, but it cannot remove them’ (England 1994: 86), it at least made me think about how my data collection could be beneficial for my informants as well. I did not pay my interviewees, to avoid providing a distorted incentive to participate in my research, yet I tried to compensate them in other ways. Many times, I helped with English/Portuguese/Chinese interpretation and translation, filling out documents, and looking up information on scholarships, study opportunities, and visa applications. Upon first entering a relevant store, I tended to buy something small, like a lenço (a Mozambican handkerchief that is often worn as a headwrap), in order to initiate the conversation, and to make the time spent worthwhile to the seller. Whenever I conducted an interview in a café or restaurant, I made sure to pay the bill, and after getting to know research participants, I also gifted key chains, German sweets, and colourful surgical masks from Hong Kong to them as a token of my appreciation.

Discussion and Conclusion

During my PhD research on the trade and retail of Chinese-made garments and textiles in Mozambique in 2019-2021, I had to flexibly adjust both my methods and my field sites to the evolving pandemic and the ensuing restrictions, which caused my fieldwork stays to China and Mozambique to be either cut short or significantly delayed. To make up for this, I resorted to undertaking several shorter fieldwork stays, and combining them with digital data collection and visual analysis. Realizing how these different methods complemented each other fruitfully and ended up giving me deeper and broader insights into my research area than would probably have been achievable through traditional, long-term ethnographic fieldwork, I became aware of the benefits of patchwork ethnography (Günel et al. 2020) for fashion-related research. Transforming constraints into opportunities for new insights, I followed Verne (2012) by reflexively defining and redefining my project according to the dynamically changing circumstances.

Based on my experience, this flexible combination of different ethnographic methods helped me to improve the validity and reliability of the data and add valuable context to it. The visual data I collected, for example, served as a helpful complement to and illustration of my written notes. By constantly comparing the different kinds of verbal, textual and visual data, I could triangulate their content and adjust my assessment accordingly. By leveraging my observations, other interviews, informal conversations (with the same person or others), the literature, and additional sources, I was able to subject the information I received from my participants to continuous cross-checking. Thereby, I patched together many pieces of fragmentary data through a nonlinear, iterative process to create a larger – not complete but at least less fragmentary – image (see also, Günel and Watanabe 2023). In the course of my research, I realized that locally bound understandings of ‘the field’ in ethnography are indeed outdated, as in today’s globalized and digitalized world, it is impossible to keep ‘home’ and ‘field’ separate. Even though this might be unsettling at first, it also reveals the necessity of adapting ethnography to the realities of contemporary life.

Especially when doing research on fashion, an area and industry that is characterized by increasing complexity, diversity, fragmentation, informalisation, globalisation and precarity, patchwork ethnography makes it possible to not only account for these features but also to explore them at a depth that is not achievable through more conventional research methods.

This way, many important developments and processes pertaining to contemporary fashion systems both in the Global South and North can finally be better understood and their potentially far-reaching consequences be uncovered. By being more considerate of the lived experience of both researchers and informants, and accounting for the patchy character of both contemporary capitalism and data collection, patchwork ethnography hence offers a possible path towards the further decolonization of fashion research.

By relying on ethnographic data on processes, practices, events, and interactions that take place informally, orally, undocumented, and exclusively in-person, my research demonstrates that also beyond fashion studies, in-person ethnographic fieldwork is still possible and needed, as patchy it might be. Agreeing with Baczko and Dorronsoro (2020), van der Hoog (2020), and Wood et al. (2020), it shows that despite budget cuts in higher education, and constraints to global mobility, sustained in-person interaction remains key to understanding and analysing many aspects of contemporary society. This is all the more the case during major global events, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to uneven digital connectivity and the nature of the South–South garment and textile trade, this paper shows that first-hand experience is needed to realistically capture the disruption and mending taking place along fashion chains crossing the Global South.

Going beyond the context of the pandemic, this paper advocates for acknowledging, not avoiding, any challenges to ethnographic fieldwork, be they related to ethics, logistics, funding, politics, safety, bureaucracy, the environment, or a researcher's health or family situation. Not all of these challenges can or have to be overcome. Instead, they are an intrinsic and valid part of the messy reality of doing research. Only by accepting these person-specific restrictions, it will be possible to move away from a fetishized, outdated ideal of what ethnographic fieldwork is and should be. This paper therefore proposes patchwork ethnography as one possible approach to adapting fieldwork to the changing demands of our times. No less effective, but gentler, more empathetic and more flexible, patchwork ethnography makes it possible to fruitfully combine fieldwork stays with the many innovative digital methods that have been developed in recent years. With a strong focus on sustained interpersonal connections and linguistic and cultural fluency, patchwork ethnography is able to address the difficulties that arise when researching highly complex and fragmented contemporary commodity chains.

Yet, it is important to note that this is only possible if patchwork ethnography is not treated as a 'quick fix' or 'easy alternative' to traditional ethnography. Building up and maintaining the long-term translocal networks, language proficiency, and contextual knowledge that is needed

to conduct patchwork ethnography successfully might even be more demanding than conventional ethnographic fieldwork, not to mention the significant amount of planning, replanning, and logistics involved. Despite these challenges, the increased adoption of patchwork ethnography would not only be an important and necessary step towards the holistic decolonisation of fashion studies, but also paves the way for future creative, engaged, inclusive, flexible, multi-method approaches in fashion research and beyond. Eventually, this can contribute to a better understanding of the great challenges of our time that relate to the production, trade, and consumption of fashion products.

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Endnotes

¹ This research was conducted as part of my PhD in sociology at the University of Hong Kong. In my thesis, which was submitted in 2022, I originally planned to trace Chinese-made garments and textiles from their design and production in China all the way to their consumption and use in Mozambique, examining the concepts of authenticity, agency and cultural mediation while doing so.

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