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Fashioning Globalisation

*New Zealand Design, Working
Women and the Cultural Economy*

Maureen Molloy
and Wendy Larner

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A few years ago there were just four or five designers selling their gear. Now it's been turned into a wholesale industry.

(Laura NZ2NY Phase II Fashion Show, 2002)

Preface

The global fashion industry has recently undergone a significant change in form and content. Over the past ten years a gap has opened up between the increasing spectacle and decreasing practicality of haute couture, and the ubiquity of designer diffusion lines. It is being filled by what New Zealand designer Karen Walker calls 'high casual' clothing. This clothing typically originates in small to medium sized privately owned firms that produce small runs of high quality original garments in named and themed seasonal collections. Designers of this scale and target markets are now operating successfully in and out of New Zealand, Australia, Hong Kong, Brazil, Canada and a range of other countries not traditionally associated with fashion. The opening up of this gap arises from many things: the relative ease, and indeed necessity, of doing business internationally; changes in the organisation and modes of working for the aspiring middle classes; the opening up of new occupations, including those of mediation and representation; the turn to culture and creativity as privileged modes of being in the developed world; and the consequent emergence of new kinds of global subjects. All of these are underpinned by massive changes in women's lives and careers during the past 30 years.

This book analyses these claims through the exemplary case of the New Zealand designer fashion industry. An unexpected economic success story, this rapidly growing export oriented industry is overwhelmingly dominated by women as designers, design studio employees, wholesale and public relations agents, industry officials, fashion writers and editors, as well as the more traditionally acknowledged gendered roles of garment workers, tastemakers and consumers. Drawing on over seven years of in-depth multi-method, triangulated, empirical research, including a comprehensive archive of media, policy and industry texts, over 50 semi-structured interviews with designers, buyers, public relations agents, intellectual property lawyers, industry specialists, government officials and other associated

occupations and participant observation at four successive New Zealand Fashion Weeks, the book shows how the designer fashion industry's innovative designs, explosive growth and global focus have been harnessed to broader ambitions to build a globalising knowledge-based economy in New Zealand and rebrand the country as creative, cutting edge and sophisticated. In successive chapters we examine the rise to prominence of a group of young, largely self-employed, women designers in the late 1980s and reveal how their new, niche market, export orientation has transformed policy formulations, urban geographies, economic and industry formation, fashion and fashionability and workplace relations.

Our analysis of the New Zealand designer fashion industry underlines the point that the economy/culture production/consumption split that continues to run through broader literatures on globalisation, clothing and fashion is untenable. This industry involves producing garments and images for consumption and consuming garments and images for production. Consequently the ongoing separation of the material and symbolic, the economic and cultural, the producer and consumer is getting in the way of developing the accounts we need to understand these new gendered firms emerging in the global fashion industry. From this starting point the book retheorises the gendering of globalisation by challenging in consecutive chapters accepted explanations for the rise of globalising cultural and creative industries such as designer fashion, the assumed characteristics of 'creative cities', the relationships between production and consumption, the emergence of new feminised entrepreneurial subjects. At the very heart of our account is the claim that there are as-yet-not understood connections between first world women's entry into paid employment and globalising processes. This study of New Zealand fashion demonstrates that economic globalisation, the movement of middle class women into the labour force and the changing structure of the clothing industry are not only coterminous but intrinsically connected.

Finally, and to forestall an obvious and immediate criticism, while it might be assumed that such a small industry in a tiny country at the bottom of the South Pacific must be inconsequential to understanding global processes, it is precisely the improbability of this industry which has forced us to question gendered accounts of globalisation and exposed blind spots in existing literatures on globalisation, the cultural and creative industries and fashion studies. We also know that the rise of these small entrepreneurial fashion firms is increasingly widespread, particularly in North American, European and Asian countries not historically associated with fashion, and that this rise is being harnessed to broader creative industries and economic development strategies. By tracking the ways the New Zealand designer fashion industry is globalising, this book transforms understandings of the processes of globalisation, the significance of first world women's entry into the labour force and the designer fashion industry itself.

The book thus makes three major contributions to economic geography and broader social science literatures: It makes a conceptual contribution to the literatures on globalisation, fashion and gender by explicating the ways in which first world women's entry into the labour force over the past 30 years has underpinned new forms of aestheticised production and consumption.

It is an important contribution to the burgeoning literature on culture and creative industries which virtually ignores the fact that these industries, including designer fashion, are highly structured by gender with women, for the first time, playing significant roles as entrepreneurs, designers, cultural mediators and policy makers, as well as their more traditional roles as consumers and factory workers.

It introduces fashion scholars and economic geographers to a paradigmatic example of the new designer fashion industries emerging in a range of countries not traditionally associated with fashion.

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2013

Series Editors' Preface

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Chapter One

What We Saw and Why We Started this Project

Introduction

The global fashion industry is undergoing a significant change in form. Over the past 10 years a gap has opened between the increasing spectacle and decreasing practicality of haute couture and the ubiquity of designer diffusion lines. It is being filled by what New Zealand designer Karen Walker calls 'high casual' clothing. This clothing typically originates in small privately owned firms that produce high quality original garments in themed seasonal collections. Designers of this scale are now operating successfully in New Zealand, Australia (Maynard, 1999, 2000, 2001; Weller, 2006, 2008), Hong Kong (Skov, 2002, 2004), Brazil (Leitão, 2008), Canada (Palmer, 2004; Rantisi and Leslie, 2010), Sweden (Hauge, Malmberg and Power, 2009) and a range of other countries not traditionally associated with fashion. Indeed, a 2011 special issue of *Fashion Theory* called 'Dreams of Small Nations in a Polycentric Fashion World', focused on small European countries, suggests this phenomenon is now becoming widespread. The opening of this gap arises from many things: the relative ease, indeed necessity, of doing business internationally; changes in the organisation of work for the middle classes; the emergence of new occupations, including those of mediation and representation; the turn to culture and creativity as privileged modes of being in the developed world; the consequent emergence

of new kinds of global subjects. All of these are underpinned by massive changes in middle-class women's lives and careers during the past 30 years.

This book arises from our research on the New Zealand designer fashion industry. An unexpected economic and cultural success story, this high profile export-oriented industry is overwhelmingly dominated by women as designers, studio employees, wholesale and public relations agents, industry and government officials, fashion writers and editors, as well as the more traditionally gendered roles of garment and retail workers, tastemakers and consumers. We were drawn to the research because, in New Zealand at least, this was the first female dominated industry to be identified as a vehicle for the country's new globalising ambitions, after receiving extraordinary attention from government officials, tastemakers and the media. We were also intrigued by the apparent sway that this emergent industry had over the middle-class women around us; our friends, colleagues, sisters and students were becoming amateur fashion aficionados in ways that were both unexpected and unprecedented in a hitherto largely unfashionable New Zealand. As a women's studies scholar long steeped in cultural studies, and a political economic geographer interested in globalisation and neoliberalism, we found ourselves embarking on a research project that would draw on our respective interests and skills in order to explain the unexpected rise and broader implications of this globalising 'new economy' creative industry.

In our efforts to find analytical material which would help us account for the growth and profile of this gendered industry, we became dismayed by the tenor of existing scholarship in relevant academic fields. More specifically, our work has exposed a number of disconnections between our observations of women's positions in, and experiences of, the New Zealand designer fashion industry and the academic literatures on globalisation, fashion studies and the cultural economy. While it is now well recognised that globalising processes are both embodied and gendered, analyses of male dominated areas such as technology, the high skill service sector and finance continue to be privileged over the quieter and more massified changes in women's lives. Nor are we content with existing attempts to gender these accounts which position women only as either low skilled vulnerable workers or, at best, embodied agents of resistance. We argue that the globalising processes of the past two decades have both forced and enabled changes in women's lives. In particular, we claim that processes understood to be central to economic globalisation are underpinned by first world women's entry into the workforce in large numbers at a time when middle-class work is changing profoundly, changes which have come to be glossed as the 'new economy' or the rise of the 'cultural and creative industries'. It is these changes that contribute to the unexpected success of the New Zealand designer fashion industry.

This book is an attempt to rethink the relationship between changes in the global cultural economy over the past 20 years and changes in middle-class