

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**Maureen Molloy and Wendy Larner**, *Fashioning Globalisation: New Zealand Design, Working Women, and the Cultural Economy*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013. ISBN: 978-1-4443-3701-3 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-4443-3702-0 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-118-29576-2 (ebook)

***Precarious neoliberal formations: Situating gendered work and identity in the globalising New Zealand fashion industry***

In their book *Fashioning Globalisation*, Maureen Molloy and Wendy Larner present a highly original and provocative case: the rise of New Zealand independent designer fashion as a global industry. The case is unique for a number of reasons. First, the industry is situated in a country that is far removed from the established fashion centers and that has not traditionally been associated with style or cosmopolitanism. Second, this successful export sector is a female-headed industry, and the first female-headed industry to be mobilized by the New Zealand government in its efforts to position the country as ‘creative’ and enterprising. Indeed, in their account of the rise of the industry, the authors show that these factors are inter-related. The new forms of gendered work that constitute designer fashion (*i.e.* small-scale, artisanal enterprises) are blurring the boundaries between culture and economy and giving rise to a global ‘niche’ that both supports and is supported by the government’s global aspirations.

The book’s analysis is extensive, exploring how the industry’s development is linked up with the changing nature of work, a new gender regime (*e.g.* parental leave, child care), inner-city revitalization, as well as the broader policy agendas associated with globalization. Here, in this brief review, I would like to focus on what I see as the book’s key contribution: the way it troubles conventional readings of economic

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

globalization and gender, and the neoliberal subjectivities on which economic globalization is said to rest. Its strength lies in positing globalization and working women's subjectivities as precarious (rather than inevitable) formations—formations that may signal danger but also possibility.

## *A new angle on globalization and gender*

The literature on globalization and gender is vast and has to date centered on the implications for women in the third world or migrant women in the first. As noted in the book, this literature has documented the exploitative conditions for women and the constraints that are placed on the possibilities for securing just livelihoods. In some cases, the literature posits women as embodied agents of resistance; however, much of the literature suggests that the terms and nature of resistance are defined by the pre-existing constraints imposed by globalization (cf. Wright 2006). One of the limitations of the globalization narrative today is, to quote Molloy and Lerner, “the tendency to see globalization as something that happens ‘out there’...” (p.23).

The authors wish to introduce an alternative perspective and to illustrate the way that women's work is constitutive of the global order and not just reacting to it. The objective is to show how globalization is re-produced or produced anew through the practices and agency of actors on the ground. To do this, they draw on the experiences of first world working women—a group of women whose experiences have often been neglected in the literature on globalization and gender due to their position as ‘consumers’ within the global order. With the growing entry of middle-class women into paid employment and with the increasing economic valorization of consumption and culture (stereotypically feminized activities), however, middle-class women are

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

increasingly occupying the positions of *producers* as well as consumers, and are exercising new forms of agency within broader globalization processes. More specifically, in the case of New Zealand independent fashion, women designers have been able to identify a gap between haute couture and mass-produced designer lines and to carve out artisanal careers within the gap suited to their professional and personal aspirations. What is more, their activities and economic success have shaped—not merely responded to—broader government policies and initiatives, with government increasingly viewing the support of smaller-scale, export-oriented niche enterprises as a model for economic and cultural positioning.

## ***Neoliberal subjectivities: Troubling homogenizing conceptions***

Another critical theme foregrounded in the book relates to the new subjectivities that are produced with the rise of new (global) economic subject positions. To date, much of the literature on contemporary economic globalization has emphasized an association with neoliberal governmentality (see, for example, Brown 2003). Following Michel Foucault and Mitchell Dean, this governmentality not only implies new policy directives (*e.g.* trade liberalization, privatization, deregulation, *etc.*), but the production of self-interested, calculating, enterprising subjects, who apply a market logic to all spheres of their lives. Indeed, this perspective is now prevalent in the literature on cultural industries as well, which contends that independent cultural producers are increasingly assuming the role of self-disciplining, self-managing subjects who cultivate and deploy networks (during work-hours and off-hours) as means to further their own human capital and secure future economic opportunities (see McRobbie 1998 for an analysis of independent fashion designers as ‘model entrepreneurs’).

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

The authors challenge this prevailing narrative by suggesting that designers' subjectivities, as articulated through practices and identities, are not based solely (or even primarily) on market-based principles but represent a hybrid of contradictory logics. On the one hand, the authors suggest that women designers are not immune to neoliberal governmentality. This is evident in the way in which they not only produce fashion but produce themselves as fashionable, cosmopolitan, and urban to garner media visibility or new networks, tying their own image and names to the brand. At the same time, though, they are not fully defined by such a governmentality. For instance, even when presented with the opportunity to expand their production volume (and associated earnings) or to relocate to one of the major fashion centers, designers have chosen to remain small-scale and New Zealand-based, and to adopt a distinctive form of 'work-style' based on work-life balance as well as community outreach (see p.158). Moreover, the growth of the independent fashion sector has triggered a rise in support occupations (*e.g.* stylists, fashion writers, fashion educators, business managers), with many of these new opportunities being filled by family members and friends. Thus, designers are not merely reliant on existing 'weak ties' to realize their objectives; their economic practices are generative of altogether new network formations. Do these new formations represent a blurring of the economic and social? Yes. Does the blurring automatically imply the dominance of an economic logic over a social one (as anticipated in much of the governmentality literature)? Not necessarily. In what the authors call a "gendered form of entrepreneurial subjectivity", the interdependence between actors (social and economic) is recognized, which holds out the possibility for curbing the individualistic and exploitative tendencies of neoliberal globalization.

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

## *Can an alter-neoliberal mode of globalization be realized?*

While a possibility for countering the dangers of neoliberalism exists, there are moments in the book where those dangers are clearly lurking, and tensions between individualized and collective subjectivities—as well as the modes of governmentality they sanction—surface. This raises questions about how such a possibility can be secured and extended. For example, in terms of the designers' image-making practices, their presentation of self as hyper-individualized means that both government and media privilege autonomous entrepreneurs as the exemplary globalizing agents and reinforce a discourse of personal responsibility. To the extent that this discourse is shaping the subjectivities of New Zealanders more generally, including a new generation of designers, it may serve as a disciplining technique that limits the spaces in which a social logic could prevail. Indeed, the risk is most evident in the high failure rate encountered by new designers, who are now held to professional standards and yet lack the street markets and counter-cultural networks of an earlier generation.

There is also a question of whether the supportive networks that characterize designers' relations with other fashion professionals extend to their relations with production workers. Recent studies suggest that immaterial labour (*e.g.* design) and material labour (*e.g.* garment manufacture) are highly interdependent, co-constitutive processes (Banks 2010). In the case of fashion, this is reflected in the way that production work gives form to a designer's vision and thereby shapes the (immaterial) 'look and feel' of a garment. Yet, there are hints in the book that a designer-garment manufacturer divide exists and that this divide maps onto ethnicity as well, as the garment manufacturing workers are primarily of Asian descent (see p.120). It is not clear how this manifests in terms of the nature of labour relations. Are they long-term or short-

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

term, consensual or conflictual? And what are the effects on workers? Moreover, in new policy orientations that privilege small-scale, export-oriented enterprises, emphasis is increasingly placed on ‘creative’ and ‘knowledge-based’ activities at the expense of support for manufacturing. This is evident in the removal of garment manufacturing instruction from schools and the associated rise in design incubators and fashion marketing programs. To what extent might these changes prop up a class divide and impede the formation of cross-class collaborative relations? This is an issue that merits further examination, and could provide additional insight into the possibility for countering neoliberal dangers and enabling a more collective ethos.

The emergence of these questions points to the book’s ability to open up a space for new lines of inquiry. The authors push us to rethink our taken-for-granted assumptions about the relation between globalization and gender. They illustrate how women are *implicated* in—not just responsive to—the development of a global, aestheticized economy and how their mode of insertion might depart from that of the *homo economicus* figure that informs most new economy studies today. The analysis is pathbreaking, as this perspective is lacking in both the globalization and cultural industries literature, making it a must read for scholars of globalization, feminist analysis, cultural studies, and fashion. The work is empirically-rich, building on over ten years of research, and it is theoretically nuanced, drawing on the diverse but complementary fields of the two authors (women’s studies and cultural studies for Molloy, and political-economic geography for Larner). It is not only intellectually engaging, but politically potent. Following Gibson-Graham (1996), their aim is to make interventions that are “constitutive rather than reflective” (p.47). One of the ways this is accomplished by

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

positing new working women's subjectivities, and the globalizing processes they enable, as incomplete and multi-faceted formations—replete with possibility.

## References

Banks M (2010) Craft labour and creative industries. *International Journal of Cultural Policy* 16(3):305-321

Brown W (2003) Neo-liberalism and the end of liberal democracy. *Theory and Event* 7 (1) [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory\\_and\\_event/toc/tae7.1.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theory_and_event/toc/tae7.1.html) (last accessed 15 May 2014)

Gibson-Graham J K (1996) *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It)*. Oxford: Blackwell

McRobbie A (1998) *British Fashion Design: Rag Trade or Image Industry?* London: Routledge

Wright M W (2006) *Disposable Women and Other Myths of Global Capitalism*. New York: Routledge

*Norma Rantisi*

*Department of Geography, Planning, and Environment*

*Concordia University*

*norma.rantisi@concordia.ca*

*May 2014*