This is a wonderful and timely contribution to fashion scholarship and to cultural geography and sociology. The authors produce a highly original and meticulously researched account of the entrepreneurial activities of women fashion designers in New Zealand while also raising many issues about work and employment in this sector as a whole.

Angela McRobbie, University of London

In this path-breaking book, Molloy and Larner weave a theoretically sophisticated and empirically rich account of gender and globalisation that characterises the global fashion industry. Molloy and Larner illustrate how globalisation has impacted the lives of female fashion designers in New Zealand, giving rise to new possibilities as well as constraints. They present a fascinating account of how a female-dominated creative industry gained a high profile within neoliberal policy-making circles in New Zealand, a story that illuminates the impossibility of separating the material and the symbolic, economy and culture, and production and consumption in an understanding of globalisation.

Deborah Leslie, University of Toronto

This book reports on the phenomenon of a new, globalised market for off-the-peg designer clothes created by independent artisans, exemplifying the twin imperatives of globalisation and female emancipation. Even as women (and others) in outsourced sweat shops suffer a form of modern-day bondage, women in developed nations and select developing economies are carving out new careers in the fashion industry as mid-level entrepreneurial designers. Operating between the spectacular pleonasms of haute couture and ubiquitous ‘designer diffusion’ lines such as DKNY, these artisans of ‘high casual’ fashion are implicated in a number of features of late capitalism, such as creative cities, cultural mediation and ‘work-style’ businesses that are distinctively gendered.

At the heart of this volume, which focuses in depth on the dynamics of independent fashion design in New Zealand, lies the assertion that there exist as-yet untraced links between the entry of first world women into paid employment and the wider processes of globalisation. This revealing 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 fashion industry are not only coterminous but intrinsically connected.

Maureen Molloy is Professor of Women’s Studies at the University of Auckland.

Wendy Larner is Professor of Human Geography and Sociology at the University of Bristol, UK
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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)
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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