

Material Intimacies:

The Labor of Creativity in the Global Fashion Industry

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Abstract

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My dissertation explores the global fashion industry through *Material Intimacies*, the social relationships and intimate encounters of new classes of fashion workers in the material and immaterial making of fashion. Based on three years of ethnographic field research in New York, Los Angeles, Paris, Guangzhou, and Seoul, my dissertation explores the everyday and rarefied spaces of the fashion world to connect the experiences of fashion workers with new forms of creative practice and labor emerging from the global fashion industry. These fashion workers connect global fashion design capitals with vast manufacturing landscapes around the world, refigure the meaning of value, labor, and creativity in the fashions they make, and powerfully shape our experience of clothing and material realities. Countering the impersonal forces of economics that often characterize the global fashion industry, these fashion workers paint an intimate landscape of ongoing transnational social ties and cultural exchange, challenging the anonymity of how global capitalism operates.

INTRODUCTION

“A highly embroiled quarter, a network of streets that I had avoided for years, was disentangled at a single stroke when one day a person dear to me moved there. It was as if a searchlight set up at this person's window dissected the area with pencils of light.”

Walter Benjamin

A powerful transformation occurred in the garment districts of cities and regions around the world at the end of the 20th century. With the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, the economic resurgence of India, China's introduction into the World Trade Organization, innovations in transportation, the privatization and deregulation of mass communications, and the emergence of powerful neoliberal trade laws including the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and the expiration of the Multi-fiber Trade Agreement, the garment industry would undergo a dramatic transformation in both industry and imaginary: the emergence of new culture industries in fashion with global systems of garment production in the formation of the “the global fashion industry.” While the deindustrialization of the Global North and super-industrialization of the Global South both destroyed garment districts and propagated sweatshops and factories around the world, these new global configurations of trade intersected with new subjects in fashion, creating new imaginaries, aspirations, and cultural possibilities for workers in the global fashion trade. This dissertation examines the emergence of these new cultural possibilities, yet seeks to tell a different story beyond the political economy of global

commodity chains and the emergence of global markets. In an effort to seek new ways to understand and write contemporary global processes and histories, this dissertation explores the aspirations, new forms of work, and intimate details involved in the everyday work and lives of fashion workers in the global fashion industry.

This dissertation explores the global fashion industry through *Material Intimacies*, the social relationships and intimate encounters of new classes of fashion workers in the material and immaterial making of fashion. Countering the impersonal forces of economics and anonymity that are often used to characterize the global industry, this dissertation illuminates instead the *intimacies involved in the everyday work of making fashion* among new classes of fashion workers. Rather than tracing the object of fashion through global commodity chains or circuits of consumption, this dissertation attends to the *intimate realms of fashion production*: in the affectations for fashion worlds and imaginaries, in the forming of social relationships and practices that have connected vast garment industries with fashion worlds, and in the socialization processes that have inspired new workers into fashion. Not only have these fashion workers refigured the meaning of labor and creativity in their everyday work, they have redefined the meaning of value in the things they make, dramatically shaping material landscapes and altering material realities in the forming of new social and cultural worlds. In search of “the global fashion industry,” *Material Intimacies* locates it in the intimate encounters and everyday social relationships, which *are the global connections* that enact and drive the industry.

The emergence of the “global fashion industry” is a story often told by those who are either for or against globalization and the neoliberalization of trade. Economists hailed the emergence of a new global era of economic progress, where the unencumbered movement and global flows of capital, people, goods, and ideas uninhibited by national barriers and protective state policies produced progressive and competitive environments of economic freedom and natural selection.¹ Their anti-neoliberal critics, however, pointed to the path of destruction left behind, where a growing anti-sweatshop movement made visible the implicating threads between multinational design corporations and the exploitation of female garment workers in sweatshops and factories of the Global South. The arguments on both sides divide the world into North and South, exploiter and exploited, CEO and sweatshop worker, producer and consumer, seeking to answer who benefits in an end-sum analysis. While their analyses may depict the causes and consequences of globalization in large-scale historical transformation, their arguments obscure the motives for *why* individuals aspire to work in the industry and *what* they imagine it to be, and how new workers continually shape and change the nature of the global fashion industry.

Amidst the de-garmenting of global cities like New York, new industries based on the “cultural” and “creative” began to appear and rapidly expand. With the offshoring of garment production, manufacturing companies reoriented their industry focus from one based on the making of garments to the making of “fashion” -- the cultural production of

¹ See discussions in Ellen Meiksins Wood, *Empire of Capital* (New York: Verso, 2003). Pp. 5-6; 130-142.

immaterial values thought to drive desire and consumption in the industry. Within one decade, domestic manufacturing companies in New York such as Calvin Klein, Donna Karan, and Ralph Lauren, suddenly grew into powerful, multinational branding and design corporations complete with new global licensing agreements for manufacturing around the world. In global cities of Europe such as in Paris and Milan, new global alliances and financial mergers which invested in champagne and pharmaceutical industries, now backed fashion houses such as Gucci, Prada, Chanel, and Louis Vuitton. Media companies such as Conde Nast in New York globalized their best selling women's fashion magazine, Vogue America, into subsidiary editions such as Vogue Brazil, Vogue Korea, and Vogue China. Marketing and modeling industries exploded into global culture industries in and of themselves, trafficking new trade routes of images, bodies, and beauty from Latin America and Eastern Europe to global fashion capitals around the world. Powerful retail coalitions developed new global distribution channels and "markets" for the consumption of international fashion designers in department stores, outlets, and malls in varying regions of the world. Designer labels once thought only for the wealthy, underwent "mass customization," suddenly becoming available, affordable, and accessible to a global mass mainstream. In the emergence of this "global era" throughout the 1990s, cities transformed into "global cities" but also "global fashion capitals," complete with "global fashion weeks," where new cultural, social, and production interdependencies appeared between supranational design institutions and third-world nation-states. While fashion as a global industry is thought to have always

existed, often synonymous with the cultural capitals of New York, Paris, London, Milan, this ‘global fashion industry’ has only emerged within the last two decades.²

Little known, however, is that these large-scale shifts in industry and the rise of the global fashion capitals that appeared during the 1990s, was only made possible through the *cultural labors of local immigrant populations* who buoyed and transformed what remained of garment industries in deindustrialization.³ Although the deindustrialization of the Global North and super-industrialization of the Global South destroyed local garment districts and propagated sweatshops globally, these same global configurations of trade produced and intersected with new kinds of workers in the fashion industry, who in turn formed powerful new spaces for cultural possibilities. Curiously, it is the cultural labor of immigrants and their children who have played a significant role in transforming cities like New York into global fashion capitals, in their forming of new kinds of work, intermediary roles, cultural exchanges, and transnational social ties within the industry. These new fashion workers, found within this dissertation, include immigrant garment workers creatively making the runway collections for New York Fashion Week; Asian American fashion design students redefining the meaning of

² I am referring here to “global” as opposed to “international.” This global fashion industry emerges at a time of massive relocation of manufacturing – deindustrialization; mass urbanization processes and the emergence of global informal economies occurring around the world; the mass migration of students into universities and the importance of formal education to occupations, where universities have become a powerful site for the making of social thought and movements; the transformation of the household which have shaped the structures of work, sexuality, and domesticity; the emergence of privatized and deregularized mass communications networks which have established global markets in cultural commodities dominated by transnational corporations.

³ In New York and Milan, immigrants from China are responsible for sample-making and garment work. In Paris’s Le Sentier, West African immigrants dominate the garment trade. Finally, the Tokyo fashion industry relies heavily on the sewing work done in Korea, Taiwan, and China.

“American” design; Korean fashion designers and interns providing technical design labor for multinational design corporations; and Korean Brazilian American mass-fashion designers and wholesalers connecting garment production in Asia with the giants of corporate retail across the Americas. These fashion workers, in their daily work, create new aesthetic regimes of value in the creative making of fashion and have, in the process, coordinated new configurations of production, consumption, and distribution networks across vast and wide cultural distances. Who are these new cultural workers and what compelled them to work for the fashion industry? What kind of work do they do and how, through their work, have they refigured value, labor, and notions of creativity in the global fashion industry? Furthermore, how have they formed transnational ties between fashion worlds and garment industries in varying regions of the world? Finally, what global connections make up this global fashion industry and how to describe such an enormous, abstractly imagined, thing? Little understanding continues to exist on who these new fashion workers are, how they participate in the global industry, and how their migrations and work have distinctly transformed the industry alongside the deindustrialization, globalization, and neoliberalization of the apparel trade.

This dissertation examines the cultural labor of multiple fashion workers from fashion designers, design students, interns, sample-makers, factory owners and clothing wholesalers engaged in the material and immaterial making of fashion. I worked for three different design firms from 2005 to 2008, including a multinational design corporation, a high-end fashion company, and a mass-fashion (or ‘fast-fashion’) wholesale company run by a single family. This work took me into design studios, factories, corporate offices, and fashion runway shows of New York, Los Angeles, Paris, Hong Kong, Guangzhou,

and Seoul. In an industry often depicted through the consumption of objects, this dissertation is situated within fields of fashion production. Expanding on ideas of production and labor in the making of garments, I explore new forms of cultural and creative labor in the making of fashion, examining notions of creativity and labor in design and material production. Methodologically, I interpret the aspirations, imaginings, desires, and memories of these fashion workers, along with the socialization processes that informed them into the industry. Therefore, a central goal of this dissertation is to illuminate the palpability of everyday human experience -- how people affectively imagine and feel the “global fashion industry” and “global fashion world” and come to work in it. This research shows how while workers reproduce a system that endlessly values profit and capital accumulation, they themselves seek and embody values of the opposite: creativity, beauty, kin, family, and social ties through their everyday practices of work. Countering the impersonal forces of economics often used to characterize the industry, these fashion workers paint a deeply intimate portrait of ongoing transnational social ties and cultural exchange, challenging the anonymity of how global capitalism operates.

This dissertation poses as a critical reminder that the industry is constituted by working subjects who enact, perform, and create the relationships that powerfully transform the global fashion industry – transformations that occur on a daily basis. In exploring who these workers are, what they do, and why they’ve come to fashion, *Material Intimacies* elucidates the precarious nature of such given totalities as “Globalization,” “Neoliberalism,” “Global Capitalism” and the limits to which these phenomena are claimed to co-opt and commodify lives, or destroy and fragment social

communities and networks. I offer not so much a map of ‘circulating commodities,’ but instead, *an ethnography of relationships*, to argue that, by attending to these relationships is to methodologically and sensitively consider the intimating threads and spaces which bring to light every day enactments and gestures of cultural possibility and change.

Summary of Chapters

Chapter One is based on the New York Garment District, humanizing the story of deindustrialization that occurred in the district throughout the 1990s. While histories of the New York Garment District often focus on either the migration of Jewish and Italian immigrants at the *turn of the century* who provided the sweatshop labor of a burgeoning ready-to-wear industry, or the proliferation of sweatshops in the city from the 1970s onwards worked by Dominican and Chinese immigrants, I focus instead on the contemporary, historical moment of the 1990s – the deindustrialization that occurred in the wake of a “globalizing era.” I trace the district’s transformations into a cottage industry of sample-making among Korean and Chinese factory owners and sewers in tandem with the the development of the fashion culture industries, the neoliberalization of trade, and the rise of New York Fashion Week.

Chapter Two introduces a burgeoning “global fashion industry” in New York that exponentially expanded and mainstreamed throughout the 1990s. Amidst the collapse of the garment trade appeared the imagistic visions of a “global fashion capital” made by designers and industry leaders, who, in tandem with local government, aimed to brand New York as a premier tourist destination, “global city,” and “*global fashion capital*” of the world. From preservation efforts on the social memory of garment work, to the territorialization of the fashion shows in neighboring Bryant Park, I explore the changing built environment, and physical and cultural geography of the neighborhood during the 1990s, which set the conditions for the development and expansion of new culture industries in New York Fashion.

Chapter Three is based on my ethnographic work at a ‘high end’ fashion design studio in the days leading up to their fashion runway shows during New York Fashion Week. New York Fashion Week is the site in which an imagined global fashion world materializes in actuality, the one-week material manifestation of the collective embodiment of time, energy, and capital, labored by entire workforces of culture industries that come together to produce the shows. New York Fashion Week, however, is also the site of ritual where the politics, practice, and contestations of a fashion show produce, react, and shift social and cultural values, appearing then disappearing in just one week. In search of new ways to describe the production of fashion and the making of cultural value using strategies beyond the description of “fashion systems,” this chapter explores instead the everyday social practices of several fashion cultural producers in their making of New York Fashion. By attending to the everyday social and cultural

practices in the making of fashion, rather than the object of fashion or the abstraction of a fashion system, I highlight the dynamic, shifting, and ever-changing nature of an industry in constant transformation and constantly produced by social relations.

Chapter Four is ethnographically situated within my work internship at this multinational design corporation, exploring the creative labor practices involved in the making of fashion designs. I worked as a “front room intern” among hired fashion designers, public relations agents, fabric and trims coordinators, production managers, and secretaries, and then as a “back room sample room intern” among patternmakers, sewers, and other interns. I explore the communicative and interpretive labor of front room workers involved in the organization and maintenance of relationships and the management of appearances and impressions. I then explore the work of back room sample makers who are responsible for creatively and materially making the fashion runway collection for New York Fashion Week.

Chapter Five looks at the intersection between labor, globalizing design institutions, and multinational design corporations in the socialization, training, and recruitment of workers into new professional fields of fashion design. Although fashion design is publicly understood to be a highly creative profession involving the work of an artist creating beautiful objects, the new field of technical design in which the majority of design graduates seek work, was in actuality, considered highly uncreative work within multinational design corporations. This chapter explores how the desire to be creative brings new cadres of design students and designers to fashion each year, yet is also the desire that is exploited by design corporations looking to recruit much needed design laborers into a highly casualized segment of work within the industry.

Chapter Six focuses on the ethnicization and racialization of this design labor as it intersects with migration, desire, limitations and possibilities. I focus on Korean and Asian American design students and designers, the reasons why they desire to become fashion designers, their migrations to New York, and their encounters with a powerful circulating stereotype within the industry, “the technical Asian designer.” Rather than reiterating the success stories of the most lauded New York Asian American designers that have risen, in recent years, within the industry, I follow that *other* Asian/Asian American designer in fashion -- the growing numbers of Koreans and Asian Americans subjects who are socialized into particular forms of work, and who make up an anonymous workforce of designers, technical designers, tech pack workers, and design interns creating value in the industry.⁴ This chapter illuminates the intimate encounters between transnational circuits of labor and new recruitment and disciplinary regimes, with the desires of racialized subjects as they migrate and maneuver through notions of race within the industry.

⁴ Within the last two years, the Asia Society, Museum of Chinese in the Americas, Asian American Writers Workshop, have organized panels on the “rise of the Asian American fashion designer,” inviting the most recognizable and most famous Asian American fashion designers to speak on their panels. Some of these designers have family ties in garment production.

Chapter Seven, explores the Korean Brazilian American families of the L.A. Jobber Mart, and the socialization processes which informed children into the work of mass fashion. Set in the Jobber Mart of the Los Angeles garment district, this chapter explores how children of the L.A. Jobber Mart have creatively transformed their parents garment businesses into mass-fashion/fast-fashion businesses, forming new cultural, social, and familial ties between the design, production, and distribution of wholesale mass fashions that span Asia and the Americas. Expanding the business into new realms of fashion, these families have powerfully connected garment production in Asia with the giants of corporate fashion retail across the Americas.

The dissertation's **Epilogue** is a final ethnographic reflection and summary on the material intimacies of global encounters and connections involved in the making of fashion. Shadowing a New York based fashion designer to China, I show how makeshift performances of 'family' and 'intimacy' forge new kinds of social ties and global connections in the industry. This conclusion asks, what elaborate storytelling and intimate inflections are fictively created – fictions of family, race, ethnicity, and diaspora – and performed in the making of global connections? Further, what moments of misrecognition illuminate how makeshift, tenuous, and fictive these intimacies are within these relationships?