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Fashionable Dunedin and “Rooted Cosmopolitanism” in the Twenty-First Century: NOM*d and Company of Strangers

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ABSTRACT | *Typically, fashion has been associated with the large urban centers that are considered the hubs of contemporary culture, or “fashion’s world cities,” to borrow from the title of an oft-quoted edited volume; however, in the twenty-first century, fashion may play a role at a local or regional level, even in relatively isolated contexts such as that provided by Dunedin, located in New Zealand, at the bottom of the South Island. The work of Dunedin designers such as Margarita Robertson and Sara Munro, creative directors for their respective clothing lines, NOM*d and Company of Strangers, illustrates Walter Benjamin’s conceptualization of fashion as expressing utopian desires, in this case a form of “rooted cosmopolitanism,” to borrow from Kwame Anthony Appiah, while furthering an economic system dependent on commodity fetishism.*

KEYWORDS | *fashion, Walter Benjamin, Kwame Anthony Appiah, rooted cosmopolitanism, New Zealand, Dunedin*

Fashion in the form of dress has long been trivialized by popular culture scholars, with notable exceptions such as the German cultural theorist Walter Benjamin, who recognized it as a particularly complex dimension of modernity.¹ Rightly or wrongly, outside of fashion studies itself, fashion is considered a dimension of feminine culture, and thus has suffered from a general neglect and derogation of popular culture for women, from romance novels to soap operas—a trend that was initially reversed by the feminist scholar, particularly feminist film scholars in the 1980s. As a result the fashion in film began to receive some attention and fashion generally acquired increasing legitimacy as an area of scholarly inquiry across the Humanities from that point onward.² While recent research in design and fashion scholarship has begun the task of exploring fashion’s complex

relationship to the social fabric of everyday life,³ as yet, scholars have provided very little understanding of how fashion in the form of clothing functions at a regional or local level.

Typically, fashion has been associated with the large urban centers that are considered the hubs of contemporary culture, or “fashion’s world cities,” to borrow from the title of an oft-quoted edited volume.⁴ Scholars such as Elizabeth Wilson have highlighted how “it was the rapidly growing cities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that provided the ideal ecology for fashion.”⁵ While scholars like Wilson now call for a reappraisal of the contemporary “fashion/city symbiosis,”⁶ the terrain of the urban metropolis remains the primary locus for research. And yet, what I will call “local fashion,” for want of a better term, at a moment in which fashion is considered a largely globalized phenomenon, has also enjoyed increasing visibility and attention, as will become apparent in considering the meaning of style in a small, yet influential New Zealand town. Elizabeth Wilson remarked in 2006, “It is sometimes difficult to remember whether one is in Oxford or Oxford Street, Stafford or Stanford, California Shopping Mall, for the same chain stores are everywhere to be seen, and for that matter Nanjing Road more closely resembles Bond Street or Fifth Avenue than it resembles Shanghai in the 1930s.”⁷ Yet this not entirely the case in Dunedin, a city of around about 120,000, located in New Zealand’s South Island—that is to say, literally on the other side of the world from the major fashion centers of Europe and the United States.⁸ While its high street shops include globally recognized names, such as Levi’s, Dunedin has a distinctive style, highly recognizable, at least within New Zealand, which is not independent of international trends, but is also inflected by its local designers and their sense of place.

In this sense, “fashionable Dunedin” offers a visible example—“figuring forth,” if you like, to use sixteenth-century English poet Philip Sidney’s term⁹—of the ideals of “rooted cosmopolitanism” as defined by the contemporary philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah.¹⁰ Appiah himself makes little or no reference to fashion, except to construct it as associated with a misleading (in his view) negative stereotypical interpretation of the term “cosmopolitanism,” in which “celebrations of the ‘cosmopolitan’ can suggest an unpleasant posture of superiority toward the putative provincial.” Appiah explains “You can imagine a *Comme des Garçons*-clad sophisticate with a platinum frequent-flyer card regarding, with

kindly condescension, a ruddy-faced farmer in workman's overalls. And you wince.”¹¹ Dunedin asks us to imagine another situation, in which the world traveler and the farmer compliment each other on their sartorial choices, beginning the kind of exchange that Appiah sees “as the task of cosmopolitanism,” that of “conversation across nations.”¹² Fashionable Dunedinites are, then, at once world citizens, but also “rooted” through a sense of local identity. Fashion in Dunedin expresses a utopian vision of a new global subject, while also contributing to an international economy grounded in commodity fetishism—the two contradictory sides of fashion described by Benjamin.¹³ Fashion as a potential expression of rooted cosmopolitanism has emerged in part due to changes in the fashion system and attitudes toward culture that occurred during the second half of the twentieth century.

Repositioning Culture and the Fashion Hierarchy

Some time in the 1960s, as a society, our ideas about culture changed, most visibly through our art galleries, museums, and university curricula. In part, this shift was the consequence of the influence of academics like Marshall McLuhan and Raymond Williams in English literature, and Clifford Geertz in anthropology.¹⁴ But perhaps even more fundamental was the rise of a new generation whose outlook was the product of a global youth culture, suspicious of the past and looking forward to a utopian future, generating the counterculture of the 1960s. Although the political influence of the 1960s waxed and waned in the years that followed, the decade's suspicion of the past and its conventions, especially European traditions, persisted, with its effects being felt, perhaps belatedly, in New Zealand in the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁵ Culture was no longer defined as “the best that has been thought and said in the world,”¹⁶ but was considered “a whole way of life,”¹⁷ an expression of the *Zeitgeist*, of a particular era—its “structures of feeling,” in Raymond Williams's terms.¹⁸

Attitudes toward fashion, in particular, were transformed. Clothing as fashion increasingly became, in the words of New Zealand scholar Peter Shand, “a means by which individuals can declare and negotiate their individual identities in the complicated environs of the modern world. It is arguably *the* mode of contemporary public self-expression.”¹⁹ The street as the province of the young and impoverished became the privileged

source of inspiration for the tastemakers of the era, incarnating an ideal of self-expression, not necessarily defined by an assertion of, or striving for, status. Magazines no longer looked to the plutocracy—to rich heiresses and movie stars—for fashion tips, they looked to the kids.²⁰

In contradistinction, fashion as it developed with the onset of modernity in the nineteenth and early twentieth century is largely understood in terms of its social function, in which it gave expression to a new hierarchy, one that was mutable, transferable, and often ephemeral. Cultural theorist Peter Wollen explains, drawing upon Benjamin, that clothing in this period (as it is today) was no longer “subject to fixed sartorial codes, through which prestige and distinction were distributed according to rank,” as was the case under the premodern “ancien régime.” He elaborated: “The new system was one that required an ability to discriminate, to make judgments of taste. Within this new system, wealth rather than rank as such became important, but also the ability to deploy wealth, through fashion, as a form of symbolic capital, one that attracted both attention and envy, as well as respect.”²¹

Though this dimension of fashion exists today, particularly with regard to the cult of luxury brands and designers, such as Chanel and Vuitton, it is no longer the dominant discourse propagated by the fashion system.²² As Pamela Church Gibson reminds us, “The fashion industry does not only involve the manufacture of garments. It is now an enormous and complex industry with a number of interlocking sectors.”²³

Multiple factors were responsible for the cultural changes that led to the de-legitimation of a fashion system grounded in a social hierarchy, and its accompanying discourse—a discourse associated with fashion as an expression of the upper classes in the form of haute couture, especially as manifested in luxury brands and the couture houses that sponsor them. Firstly, the late twentieth century witnessed the relative democratization of luxury items, meaning that many more consumers are able to own luxury products, especially fashion accessories, ranging from sunglasses and scent to the more expensive handbag, without, for that matter, dressing head-to-toe in the creations of high-level designers, or actually belonging to an economic or social elite.²⁴ A second factor was the franchising of designer’s names and, to a lesser degree, their designs, which contributed to the more generalized consumption of so-called luxury items. This in turn diminished their quality, if not their price, and made them much more widely accessible.²⁵

Designers such as Yves Saint Laurent, or in any case the CEOs that ran their companies, were eager to take advantage of a new middle class and its discretionary income, increasingly attuned to consumerism as a way of life through film and television. This included the new burgeoning youth market, with the young keen to dress in ways that set them apart from their elders, as well as their younger siblings. The ready-to-wear market, along with mass markets, became more significant than haute couture in terms of purchasing power. The waning of the dressmaker, who could not compete with the inexpensive production processes inaugurated by factories and sweat shops (usually located on another continent than that of the client), contributed to this trend. For reasons of economy and convenience, women preferred purchasing clothing that was prefabricated, rather than sewing for themselves or relying on the services of a single individual.²⁶

The end result was the rise of what is known as “fast fashion,” another significant factor in the undermining of the dominance of haute couture. The global availability of cheap, attractive, yet poorly made clothing that mimics within weeks the trends announced by the couture houses and the prestige ready-to-wear lines diminished high fashion’s aura of authenticity and exclusivity. Being literal copies, or, more often, streamlined versions of items that represented what was considered at the moment a “hot” trend, fast fashion garments were difficult to distinguish at a glance from their more expensive and better made counterparts. These items were poorly constructed out of cheap materials and not designed to withstand the test of time; however, they were also endlessly renewable at relatively affordable prices. Apparel emerged as primarily a consumer nondurable, conceived as something that would be replaced within a short period of time with an implicit (or sometimes explicit) used-by-date. For example, clothing labels might contain warnings such as: “Even when kept as new, with time (usually after three years), the material may deteriorate with exposure to the elements (humidity, UV rays, and heat).”²⁷ The fashion system increasingly focused on marketing rather than design. Issues of construction, fabric, and fit became less important than the kinds of images and “stories” a particular line might evoke for its customer.²⁸

This emphasis on image had, however, an unintended effect in that it highlighted the need for innovation and creativity in order to persuade the customer of the validity and authenticity of each new look or story. In the search for authenticity, one of the primary sources of regeneration became

the street, together with the young more generally, whose sartorial choices were not motivated by a search for status, at least in the first instance. By the 1970s, the promulgators of haute couture, such as Yves Saint Laurent, famously took their inspiration from the new counterculture. Others, such as Vivienne Westwood, who emerged initially as a card-carrying member of the punk music scene, developed to become luxury brand designers, illustrating what Pamela Church Gibson has described as “the transformation of sub-cultural styles into mass-produced commodities.”²⁹ With the development of fast fashion, those who considered themselves fashion-forward sought to distinguish themselves by focusing on practices ranging from the wearing of vintage clothing and the recycling of already-worn clothing to a revival of home-sewing and the creation of sustainable designs in order to give expression to their reluctance to participate in the current fashion system, which itself attempted to incorporate these new idioms as part of its own discourse.³⁰

As a consequence, two very distinct trends emerged during the twenty-first century. In the first instance, promoted by the fashion system and the easy access that the Internet affords to the fashionable across the globe, the circulation of international cult brands on a global, but not necessarily on a mass scale, has become a major characteristic of the market. The second important factor, also due to the same factors, is a fragmentation within fashion culture in which no single style predominates. Rather, style emerges within what P. David Marshall calls “micropublics”³¹ that are constructed across national lines, enabling like-minded individuals to recognize each other whether in Paris, Sydney, or Singapore, using fashion as a form of self-expression, or what Boris Groys calls “self-design.”³² One of the characteristics of the new micropublic is the way in which it tends to constitute itself around a notion of the self that is grounded in the image, epitomized by the “selfie,” but also in the various other ways in which subjects systematically construct an image of themselves, most notably through social media, that can be circulated on the internet—meaning that, as Groys maintains, in the twenty-first century “we have been condemned to be the designers of our selves.”³³

Southern Gothic and the Dunedin Story

This shift toward personal expression had significant implications for New Zealand fashion: local designers, inspired by the street, began to gain

purchase on the antipodean imagination, which meant a turning away from a European standard of style and its dominance in European culture. The history of Dunedin designer Margarita Robertson, affectionately known as “Margi,” reflects this journey, and, indeed, her line NOM*d (established in 1986), for which she serves as creative director, continues to reference its local street-culture origins, in particular Dunedin’s role in developing the alternative music tradition.³⁴ Robertson, born in Central Otago and raised in Dunedin, can claim authenticity as expressing a local sensibility not only because of her personal history and current location, but also on account of her choice to retain Dunedin as the financial and creative center of her line. Her flagship store Plume is housed in an old storefront on George Street, which dissects Dunedin’s center city, and which is, in many ways, a landmark of local culture, with other fashion-oriented retail outlets developing around Plume over the last three decades—a trend that has revitalized that area of the town.

With regard to her design sense, Robertson believes: “There’s definitely a Gothic thing going on with us, which I think comes from being based in Dunedin—that thing of being part of a sub-culture and coming from a place where the Dunedin Sound happened.”³⁵ Robertson clearly positions her line in the context of a specific history through which she herself has lived and which is routinely referenced in her garments. For example, the stenciled T-shirts designed by her son Sam frequently reprise motifs from the Dunedin-sound era. The typefaces that he uses are distinctive and often Gothic in feel. The font (which is emphatically Gothic) employed in the “NOM*d Dunedin T-shirt” has been adopted “with the permission of NOM*d” for the city logo “Dunedin,” thus assisting in perpetuating the Gothic image of the city and its character as a center of authentic indie or street culture as part of its “brand.”³⁶ New Zealand designer and director of the NZ Fashion Museum Doris de Pont noted that “Dunedin’s ‘dark Gothic’ label [has] become part of the mythology that serves the commercial branding of the local fashion industry.”³⁷

The term “Gothic,” or “Southern Gothic,” while strongly associated with Dunedin as a city, has been applied quite broadly to New Zealand culture more generally, encompassing fashion, literature, art, and film, for example, losing any association with its European origins or, for that matter, with American literature, in which context the term “Southern Gothic” has also been widely circulated, with reference to works exhibiting particular

regionalist themes linked to writers from the Southern states of the United States of America. As New Zealand cultural studies scholar Jennifer Lawn writes, with regard to “New Zealand Gothic,” commenting on its uneven yet widespread use, “Gothic slides, it insinuates; its split time-space and structures of displacement leave us with the sense that the given scene is not the whole picture.”³⁸

“Southern Gothic,” as a descriptor, despite its fungible nature, has been institutionalized as part of Dunedin’s identity, justified through references to its Gothic revival churches, its Victorian architecture, its chilly climate and short, dark winter days. Student culture contributed significantly, represented in films such as the iconic *Scarflies* (Robert Sarkies 1999), the movie itself often referenced as an example of Southern Gothic sensibility.³⁹ The film’s title quotes the local moniker attributed to the many university students who inhabit the city during term time and who frequently wear long wool scarves against the winter chill for which Dunedin is famous, an accessory that is also featured by many local designers.

Stereotypically, Dunedin wardrobes include a preponderance of black, with perhaps the chilly climate (median temperature in summer is 15 °C)⁴⁰ encouraging a more subdued palette that also echoes Dunedin’s history as a home to underground culture. The alternative music movement of the 1980s, “typically characterized by the Flying Nun label’s early Dunedin bands,” privileged “black” in the forms of “black jeans, a T-shirt . . . , op-shop shirt and jacket . . . , and Dr Martens boots for footwear,” as “the fashion of anti-fashion.”⁴¹ The tradition of black clothing and “the fashion of anti-fashion” was sustained into the twenty-first century by Dunedin’s large student population, attached to the University of Otago as well as the Polytechnic, consisting of young people motivated by a desire to distinguish themselves from their more conservative elders and to live within their meager budgets. New Zealand critic and curator Andrew Clifford quoted “music columnist Grant Smithies” who “noted that the black jumper was an important part of student life, which is a big part of Dunedin,” because it was cheap, and forgiving when it came to beer, in particular “spilled Speight’s,” as well as “burn marks,” perhaps from a “spliff,” or a cigarette.⁴²

Further evolutions in street culture associated with what is often known as “Goth” subculture (as distinct from the anarchic and regionally demarcated “punk” of the twentieth century) spawned a global phenomenon that governed both sartorial codes and a broader lifestyle, further

encouraging this “darker” sensibility.⁴³ “Goth” style added an emphasis on accessories that highlighted the “two key garments in the alternative wardrobe: the black jumper and the leather jacket,” both staples in various iterations of Dunedin design, as well as favored by students.⁴⁴ The addition of jewelry (rarely expensive and often cheap) encouraged a more personalized and perhaps ultimately more transgressive appearance, distinguishing the young from their more restrained parents, advocates of good taste and often a Presbyterian austerity. As the twenty-first century rolled on, “Goth” as a style (and its various iterations such as “Crust,” “Screamo,” and “Emo”) became an internationally entrenched dimension of youth culture. Thus, in 2013, Ismat Tahseen of the *Times India* instructed his readers on how to achieve the “Goth” look, one equally appropriate to Dunedin in the same time period, if also a ubiquitous feature of street culture more generally in preceding decades: “The style borders on edgy so think of spiky earrings and necklaces, boots, leather jackets, studded silver belts, spiked cuffs, and skull motifs on clothes and pendants. Team gun metal chains over a long black or white T-shirt and drape on a coat or just wear a leather jacket with silver zips.”⁴⁵ This look would be widely echoed by designers, one that could be said to have influenced not only Margarita Robertson’s NOM*d line, but her own look. In this sense, the term “Southern Gothic” represents a confluence of a number of trends in Dunedin’s history, with its music scene (which also continues into the twenty-first century) and the pervasiveness of student culture decisive influences.

Although Dunedin fashion, arguably, did not establish itself as a creative industry until the end of the twentieth century, with government support,⁴⁶ Dunedin style, thus, predates the rise of designers such as Robertson and the younger Sara Munro, being associated most notably with its now iconic rock groups prominent in the 1970s and 1980s.⁴⁷ Munro, in fact, began her career in Robertson’s workroom, initially trained at the local Polytechnic, and now serves as creative director for her own line Company of Strangers (established in 2008), whose eponymously named flagship store is located just up the street from Plume. While these designers enjoy national prominence, with their work featured in magazines, on the Internet, and on television, Dunedin’s status as a fashion center has also been enhanced by the Otago Polytechnic, located in the city, which offers a degree in fashion design. Significantly,

the Otago Polytechnic fosters a spate of competitions that provide show-cases for young designers.

These very popular events are complemented by the yearly iD Dunedin Fashion Week (not to be confused with the British fashion magazine), including the iD Dunedin Fashion Show, inaugurated in 1999, and currently held in the local Railway Station, an architectural icon within the town and New Zealand more generally.⁴⁸ Sponsored by a nonprofit society incorporated in 2000, the event serves to consolidate Dunedin's sense of itself as having an identity as "fashionable" within the New Zealand context. National news coverage highlights the event, and it draws crowds from the town and surrounding regions; however, unlike the shows associated with various Fashion Weeks in major urban areas, the program is not oriented toward wholesale buyers. Instead, iD features clothing already available in local retail outlets, primarily in Dunedin, but also elsewhere around the country. Significantly, the show (and other related events, which have burgeoned around it) offer the occasion for a massive weekend of shopping, in which local retail outlets, including Plume and Company of Strangers, participate enthusiastically.

Dunedin Designers

Dunedin has generated a number of influential designers showcased at this occasion, known as its "own fashion event, iD Dunedin . . . itself becoming increasingly internationally connected"⁴⁹; Robertson's and Munro's prominence derives, however, from the fact that they both continue the "street-style" "alternative" tradition associated with the term "Southern Gothic," particularly with reference to Dunedin.⁵⁰ In addition to emphasizing black as a traditional Dunedin sartorial staple,⁵¹ Robertson's designs incorporate a range of local references from the flannel shirts associated with the Southern Man stereotype (repurposed as skirts)⁵² to printed fabric that takes its motifs from her collection of vintage scarves produced for the New Zealand tourist.⁵³ Company of Strangers' clothing is characterized by its strong abstract shapes, a marked and vivid color sense (complemented by a range of items in Dunedin black, most notably jackets and leggings), and a modernist aesthetic; however, the focus on black leather and silver accessories echoes the street style associated with an international alternative music scene, in which Dunedin continues to participate. Munro's jewelry,

designed in collaboration with the jeweler Anne-Mieke Ytsma, initially also located in Dunedin but now more recently working in Australia, also includes a recasting in silver of her grandmother's wedding and engagement bands, affectionately referred to as "Nana rings," an overt reference to her own history.⁵⁴ As in the case of Ytsma, Munro systematically works with other local craftspeople and artists as part of her design process. Dunedin's Toitū Otago Settlers Museum has highlighted the work of both Robertson and Munro, a formal recognition of their special relationship with the city, most recently as part of the exhibition "Creative Dunedin" curated by Michael Findlay in 2015.⁵⁵

Though these two designers consistently reference a specifically Dunedin past, they are also influenced by international trends in fashion design in which the focus has systematically moved away from haute couture to ready-to-wear, represented by Japanese designers such as Rei Kawakubo (founder of Comme des Garçons, mentioned by Appiah above) and the expatriate Californian Rick Owens, who is based in Paris. Robertson carries ready-to-wear garments designed by both in her Dunedin and Christchurch shops, and can be observed sitting in the front row of Rei Kawakubo's Comme des Garçons fashion parades held in Paris, on vogue.com.⁵⁶ Munro's Dunedin boutique features clothing from Equipment, the French cult line

Figure 1 | Flannel Shirts as Skirts. *This Is Not a Love Song* (A-W 2005). Photographer Ben McDade. Stylist Alastair McKimm. Courtesy of NOM*d.

Figure 2 | “In Good Company.” Painting by Jon Thom of an image from the Company of Strangers Winter Campaign (2015) shot by Charlie Bryce. Courtesy of Company of Strangers.

created by Christian Restoin, partner to international style icon Carine Roitfeld, former editor-in-chief of French *Vogue*.⁵⁷

In terms of style, both designers echo the strategies of the extremely influential Japanese designer Yohji Yamamoto, who has also been linked with Rei Kawakubo, whose client has been described in the British newspaper the *Independent* as “the sartorially discerning male or female who has little time for bourgeois notions of status-dressing and the more typically ostentatious display of power and wealth that goes hand in hand with that.”⁵⁸ New Zealand fashion scholar Angela Lassig argues that both the NOM*d aesthetic and what she calls Robertson’s “store styling aesthetic” have “roots in Robertson’s trips to Japan.”⁵⁹ According to fashion historian

Jane Malthus, “Robertson often traveled to Japan in the 1980s with her sister, Elizabeth Findlay, of Zambesi, to help her source fabrics.” Japanese designers such as Rei Kawakubo and Yohji Yamamoto proved to be a significant influence “in the way they challenged Western ways of cutting to fit the body and experimented with different silhouettes, avoiding joining pieces of cloth on the shoulders or sides. Their use of muted colors also resonated with Robertson.”⁶⁰ Robertson herself noted, confirming the influence of these Japanese designers, “They used black and sober colours or work colours. There was always indigo, there was always black.” She was also struck by, in her words, the way these designers drew upon “their own traditional style of dress, which is very uniform and very easy to fit.”⁶¹

Notably, both Robertson and Munro share with Yamamoto their affection for visual puns (jackets as trousers, and vice versa), the color black, and asymmetrical design, but also the creation of garments that are “very easy to fit.”⁶² Yamamoto highlights designs that adapt to the fuller and less normative body of the client (rather than the model) and encourages an androgynous perspective on fashion, as do Robertson and Munro. Indeed, in 2015, Plume offered a carefully selected range of garments from the “Y’s” line, designed by Yamamoto and his team, to their customers. While Yamamoto’s biggest market is Japanese, he and Kawakubo began showing in Paris in 1981. Both continue to show in Paris during Fashion Week, which Robertson attends on a regular basis. His company has flagship stores around the globe, as does Rei Kawakubo’s *Comme des Garçons*.⁶³ The affinity of the aforementioned Dunedin designers with this designer evokes the way that they participate in a visual idiom that is internationally grounded, without for that matter replicating actual designs. Indeed, each designer’s work is distinctive, being recognizable at a distance as an example of the line. Thus, Robertson and Munro, in addition to specific references to Dunedin style—from T-shirt motifs to school uniforms—use different fabrics, in particular viscose (which is employed rarely, if at all, by Kawakubo and Yamamoto), the weight of which is particularly well suited to the South Island climate and lifestyle (including price point), while Munro favors vivid saturated colors as well as black.

Shopping in Dunedin

Dunedin’s designers rarely make clothing to measure; their clients purchase items off the rack—whether imported or fabricated locally. Reflecting

the general trends in design as exemplified by Yamamoto, Kawakubo, and Owens, garments are often either made from stretch fabric, such as wool jersey, or are loose fitting, with various belts and other accessories that allow the wearer to adjust the garment to her size and whim—a facet of contemporary design that reflects the focus on ready-to-wear, but also the constraints of contemporary women who cannot afford the hours of pinning and adjusting that most tailored garments require (or the subsequent upkeep in terms of dry cleaning, ironing, hand washing, starching, etc.). These attributes are also associated with the Japanese designers mentioned above. In Robertson's words: "NOM*d offered a completely different approach to dressing, a far more relaxed and 'one-size-fits-all' aesthetic."⁶⁴

While NOM*d has had a menswear line in the past, and while both NOM*d and Company of Strangers offer androgynous styles that are frequently worn by males as well as females, their primary customers are women, especially South Island women; however, both clothing lines, NOM*d in particular, maintain an international presence and cultivate a strong following in Auckland and the North Island more generally through events such as New Zealand Fashion Week and exhibitions such as "A Darker Eden: Dunedin Fashion," sponsored by the New Zealand Fashion Museum and the Otago Polytechnic School of Design in 2015. A dedicated core of loyal Dunedin clients purchase NOM*d and Company of Strangers on a perennial basis, their wardrobes and style marked by Robertson's and Munro's distinctive design choices. The less fortunate, including university and polytechnic students, wait in line at the big biyearly sales, haunt the secondhand shops, or seek out bargains at Trade Me on the Internet⁶⁵—highlighting the remarkable success of Robertson and Munro in designing for women across generational and class lines.

Dunedin fashion thus reflects the changing world of contemporary women who remain attached to a sense of local identity, while avidly consuming images from all corners of the globe distributed by internationalized media platforms—women whose lives are shaped by the increasing demands placed on their time. Less intuitively, Dunedin fashion, as exemplified by Robertson's and Munro's creations, is only occasionally about the roles that women fulfill in their daily lives, but frequently serves to externalize an interior sense of self. In the words of Massey University fashion graduate Judith Yeh, who was employed by NOM*d in the workroom and on the floor for two years, "The reason why we select certain items off the rack is

because there is a connection or a relation there, direct or indirectly. It may even be something that is very different from our everyday style. . . . I cannot help but think that the history of women and clothing have come . . . to this point where it is all about using it as an expression of who we really are.”⁶⁶ A contemporary woman’s apparel rarely constitutes a meaningful gauge of her profession, activities, or even income; rather, her fashion choices are more likely to express her location in Dunedin, and also her sense of being elsewhere, at the center of a new world culture in which style has become a form of personal expression rather than an indicator of status.

Dunedin Style

Dunedin style has generated sufficient interest to be featured on the website, i-D.vice.com, of the cult British fashion publication i-D. Founded in 1980 and noted for its edgy publications over the past twenty years, i-D is associated with a style of photography known as “the Straight Up,” used in this posting.⁶⁷ i-D describes Margarita Robertson and NOM*d as having a definitive influence on what it calls “‘the New Zealand Look,’ formed in the mid ’80s,” while also signaling that “Dunedin, aka little Edinburgh, is very different to other Zealand cities.”⁶⁸ i-D explains that Robertson’s “intuitive interpretation of her surroundings and the New Zealand psyche generally are, in large part, responsible for this pervading look. Margarita’s loyalty to her hometown and her influence is draped all over the kids you meet on the street.” The posting includes fourteen full-length portraits of young inhabitants of Dunedin, including a further similar portrait of Robertson, shot at various sites around Dunedin, many in what was known as the warehouse district, which has recently been revived and renovated. Participants range in age from seventeen to twenty-five, including a number of university and polytechnic students and graduates. Robertson, at sixty-two, is the oldest participant by several decades. The two male participants stand out, outnumbered by the twelve female participants, counting one high school student. Many are involved directly and indirectly with a local alternative art gallery and collective, Fresh and Fruity, co-directed by one of the participants, Mya Morrison Middleton, a recent graduate in art history from the University of Otago.

The group’s affiliation with Fresh and Fruity underlines the Janus-faced aspect of contemporary style or fashion in Benjamin’s terms. Fashion here

is clearly implicated in a form of global consumerism, while also serving as an expression of a utopian ideal. In the words of Loulou Callister-Baker, a University of Otago law student and frequent contributor to the student newspaper, the *Critic*, “Fresh and Fruity is not just a gallery space up the stairs at 140 George Street—it is also a social media endeavor with its own manifesto,” highlighting the utopian intentions of the collective.⁶⁹ In an interview with Callister-Baker, the co-directors of Fresh and Fruity, Hana Aoake, a Dunedin artist, best known for her performance work, and Mya Morrison Middleton explained:

Fresh and Fruity is a reflection of lifestyle imagery. It is a simulacra of capitalist ideals and the problems within the art world. Fresh and Fruity is intended to offer a challenge to the white cube gallery system which is inherently faux progressive and exists between the same power structures which operate within corporate spheres. . . . Fresh and Fruity aims to create space for people who are both excluded and exploited within the art world and market, especially under a neo-colonial capitalist framework. . . . We are interested in the disappearance of “capitalist subjectivity” through the use of language and imagery in social media.⁷⁰

The idealism of the collective, rooted as it is in Dunedin local culture, with the desire to support local artists, can be understood as a manifestation of the “rooted cosmopolitanism” that Appiah invokes, in which here a local group, with a strong Dunedin presence and idiom, articulates its goals in terms of larger international issues (capitalism, colonialism, and feminism).

The participation of the group in a photo shoot about local fashion destined for publication in an international context highlights this double position, in which idealism is tempered or offset by the consumerism and the imperative of “self-design” that the collection of photographs, and the itemization of each model’s apparel, invokes. While many of the participants pointed to op-shops or secondhand clothing as a major ingredient in their look, supplemented with high street items (all carefully detailed by i-D), they also included many internationally produced items by designers such as Bernhard Wilhelm, Rei Kawakubo of Comme des Garçons, Rick Owens, not to mention a Balenciaga T-shirt, coupled with the ubiquitous

“Dr. Martens shoes.” A number of local brands are mentioned beyond NOM*d, such as Company of Strangers, Jack Hill (also featured on i-D.vice.com), Rebecca Scarlet, and Lou Clifton, as well as a few North Island New Zealand lines such as Zambesi and Jimmy D (both available at Plume). Also notable is the fact that two of the individuals featured in the posting are employed as sales assistants in Plume (as explained in their interviews), while two of the others work for Company of Strangers part time (which is not indicated). Importantly, all are at least implicitly associated with the Dunedin fashion scene, usually in a more or less explicit context, with Robertson modeling her own line, head-to-toe, using Rick Owens boots (available in Plume) to complete her look.

The i-D fashion spread encourages the viewer, especially if located in Dunedin and its environs, to patronize Plume and, to a lesser degree, Company of Strangers,⁷¹ as well as a specific collection of international brands, while also promoting in that same viewer an understanding of herself as living in a world that is defined both locally and internationally. By highlighting the “kids” and Robertson (who, due to her age and appearance, offers a more realistic template for the majority of her customers, many of whom are forty and older), NOM*d (and Plume, by offering a carefully “curated” collection of garments) enhances its credibility—its “street cred,” if you like—without excluding its more affluent and usually older clients. As such, the posting gives expression to a democratic ideal in which neither age nor social position are determining.

Conclusion

Fashion in the twenty-first century gives expression to a world in which the Internet has challenged the long-held view that fashion falls largely under the purview of large urban centers, with style and fashion constituting potentially significant influences even in far-flung locations, such as New Zealand’s Dunedin. Yet fashion continues to have the double role attributed to it by Walter Benjamin at the beginning of the twentieth century, whereby it is deemed to give expression to utopian impulses while furthering an economic regime grounded in commodity fetishism. In the words of Pamela Church Gibson, “on the one hand, the world of fashion is a world of material things; on the other it is a world of constant change, transformation, [and] shifting surfaces.”⁷² These changes, transformations, and shifting surfaces

permit fashion to figure forth both the hopes and realities of a contemporary identity caught between the expanding horizons of an increasingly global society and an acute awareness of the material constraints imposed by current economic and political institutions.

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NOTES

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