Embodying Labor, Then and Now

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In her introduction to the new edition of *Women on the Line*,[1] first published in 1982, Miriam Glucksmann notes that it had been written well before the body and embodiment had become an explicit focus of studies of work and employment. However, rereading *Women on the Line* reminds us that ethnographers have long paid attention to the embodied aspects of work, although few of them have written about them as eloquently as Glucksmann. In the original volume she was able to articulate how it felt to experience herself in relation to her environment, a phenomenological perspective made possible by her adoption of an autoethnographic writing style (a strategy linked to her rejection both of a narrowly academic approach and, in consequence, of the disembodied authorial voice that tended to go with it). Perhaps another reason why Glucksmann was able to write about her working on the line with such sensitivity to the embodiment of the experience is that she was new to assembly line work, so the embodied routines of factory life had not yet been submerged below the level of conscious articulation. It is useful therefore to summarize what she had to say and to think about how we can build on it.

Glucksmann brilliantly captured the dependence of the firm's profits on workers' embodied exertion and learning. Although we might think assembly work involves only the hands, Glucksmann says that the speed of the line at what we now know was Smiths Industries Limited "affected your whole body."[2] The work itself—the pressure of speed and learning new hand movements, the heat and noise of the factory line, the chemical sprays, the glare of lights—resulted in physical exhaustion, psychological stress, eye strain, and excruciating pain in the neck and back from sitting in the same position. The discipline of the line was felt through bodily discomfort and frustration, she says, allowing no time even to blow her nose or push the hair off her face.

Glucksmann's experiences also alerted her to the extent to which the gendered spatial arrangements of the factory floor meant that women workers were bodily tied to their work stations, while men workers' jobs meant they were free to walk about. (Indeed her knowledge of these spatial arrangements of bodies was something she brought vividly into her later accounts of assembly production.)[3] Moreover, with Glucksmann's attention to the intertwining of production and reproduction that has marked all of her later research,[4] she notes that the constraints of the workplace left insufficient time or energy for exercise, proper food, or enough sleep, a brilliant exposition of the mutual determination of what Wolkowitz and Warhurst[5] term the productive and reproductive body. Although the women workers did go on strike while she worked there, overall the embodied constraints involved in working and reproducing

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the self in the little time off work provided almost no opportunity for creative political imaginings.

One continuity between Glucksmann's account of the ways that the female body was "assumed, used and created" in her factory and more recent studies of gendered bodies in global production is the tension been employers' attempts to control workers' bodies and worker resistance. While Glucksmann now notes that it would certainly be possible to reexamine her experience in accordance with Foucault's emphasis on the micropolitics of the work process, she also stresses that the women workers were not turned into docile, passive bodies. Not only did the women go on strike; without a relentless eye for spotting bullies and rate-busters, and the active search for any opportunity to stop work for a few minutes, it would have been impossible to maintain the speed of the line the rest of the time.

Much more sympathetic to Foucauldian thinking are later ethnographies, like Pun Ngai's[6] account of women factory workers in a Chinese assembly plant. But Pun Ngai's commentary parallels Glucksmann's emphasis on the tension between the assembly line's tendency to turn workers into "mindless bodies"—and the inevitable impossibility of doing so. Pun Ngai's Foucauldian framework highlights not only the ways in which employers attempt to stereotype, address, constrain, and reward workers' bodily movements, comportment, day-to-day reproduction, dress, speech, and so on, but also the extent to which their defiance and resistance are coopted by the employers. She and other ethnographers, especially Salzinger,[7] also go further than Glucksmann's original book in arguing that workers are actively gendered by different factory regimes, so much so that we can recognize the production—and not just the cooption—of (often novel) workplace-specific femininities and masculinities that interpellate sexed bodies in diverse ways. But this may be partly because their workers are more homogenous than Glucksmann's coworkers and more likely to be living in a dormitory regime.

At the same time, Pun Ngai, like Glucksmann before her, shows us that the employers' attempts to remold the workers are never entirely successful. For instance, despite the discursive, spatial, and institutional controls on the women workers, the "production machine could not find itself secure and certain in its techniques of power."[8] Indeed the individuality of the workers (and their bodily needs for rest, sleep, food, and relaxation) meant that factory discipline could never achieve its ideal.

While recent books on women in assembly production parallel and build on Glucksmann's classic work, however, we are just beginning to explore how embodiment plays out in service sector work. As Lan[9] observes in her study of cosmetics saleswomen, when workers' bodies cannot be shaped around a technical process, like the assembly line, employers must adopt new strategies to try to bring the labor process under their control. These may involve the construction of new intersections of production and reproduction, for instance requiring workers to do much more job-related work on their own bodies. This includes the aesthetic labor that many service sector workers are required

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to provide (literally through achieving and maintaining the right bodily shape) through learning to regulate their manner, appearance, and voice in their dealings with customers.

In addition, services in today's workplaces, especially in health care and personal services, also include the much expanded marketization of intimacy, and this frequently requires workers' intimate touch. Haptic experiences and knowledges—the experiences and knowledges that come through tactile sensation—are therefore important not only in factory production, or computer science and technological design, where the term is most frequently used, but also in medicine, nursing, and other kinds of "body work"[10] in which bodies work on others' bodies. Nowadays in advanced capitalist societies in particular far more women work in jobs that involve body work than work in factories. While the proportion of employed women in the United Kingdom working as process, plant, and machine operators is less than three percent (with another 1.8 percent in skilled trades),[11] according to Cohen the proportion of the labor force engaged in body work is more like ten percent, of whom, with the exception of mortuary and protective services officers and occupations, the vast majority are likely to be women.[12]

Haptic experience is very much present in *Women on the Line*, firstly in terms of Glucksmann's account of the feel of the equipment, processes, and output, which involve what Paterson would call the haptic apparatus, a person's embodied "feeling of doing."[13] Haptic experience means not simply the sensations of the skin, but also the felt sensations of interaction between internally felt and outwardly oriented senses. Glucksmann also recounts the bodily feelings of intersubjective interaction, and rather more so perhaps than we might expect in assembly work. For instance, she notes not only that she was more outgoing than previously, but that her relations with the other women workers were mediated through touch. She was sometimes surprised to find that she "touched the others as much as they touched me, without feeling awkward—it became quite natural to take someone's arm if you were walking in the same direction,"[14] an indication of the warm, unaffected way the women had with each other, Glucksmann says, and perhaps part of the embodied gendered culture of the factory and of its various ethnicities.

In some kinds of health, social care, and personal services, however, the intersubjective knowledge and communication that takes place through touch is central to work tasks. Amongst these most have been written about nursing, where, for instance, Theodosius distinguishes between instrumental and affective touch.[15] Nurses deploy instrumental touch—necessary touch—when washing, cleaning, undertaking medical actions, taking someone's temperature. Affective touch includes the pats of reassurance, or the hugs, that cross into the realm of emotion, relationship, intimacy, age, and well-being. Unless modified and contextualized through conversation, jokes, and affective touch, instrumental touch is experienced by both workers and recipients as objectifying and dehumanizing.

We should recognize, therefore, that the embodied experience of many workers, especially women, is now embroiled in a politics of touch in the

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workplace, with touch between people—and attempts to control it—now central to labor processes in the much-expanded provision of commodified care. While the labor process theory that took shape in the 1970s and influenced Glucksmann's writing has always been interested in the ways that the body is put to work, its focus on the bodily, including bodily interactions, has recently become more explicit.[16]

The tactile interactions required of many workers are obviously extremely varied. For some, for instance as part of their professional expertise, as in complementary and alternative medical practice, or as part of the upscale pampering experience spa and beauty workers are required to offer clients, touch communicates professional expertise, deference, or other aspects of the social relationship. For instance, Black suggests that beauty therapists deploy "a compliant touch" to put customers at ease, and Kang suggests that in upscale nail salons workers' pampering touch confirms the client's higher status.[17] Indeed, one could argue that the presence of what I term a "subjectifying touch" is one of the defining characteristics of the new body work occupations, as compared to the historically more instrumentally defined requirements of medicine or nursing. However, this is not easily captured, except through participant observation or in writing by labor scholars with experience in these jobs.

On the other hand, in understaffed social care services, for-profit or otherwise, financial and timetabling constraints may require workers not only to push themselves exhaustedly through their set tasks, as did Glucksmann and her comrades, but also to rush care recipients through their daily routines. These workers may lack time not just for affective touch, but even to follow health and safety guidelines or to allow clients to do things for themselves at the slow pace they require.[18] However, touch goes both ways, and the male care recipient who insists on rubbing the carer's arm or hand may be indulging in a form of sexual harassment, exercising power rather more than affection. In either case we must recognize the intensification and commodification of some aspects of embodied touch that we need to consider as part of many women's embodied experience of work.

NOTES

1. Miriam Glucksmann, *Women on the Line* (London, 2009).
2. Ibid., 75.
3. Miriam Glucksmann, *Women Assemble: Women Workers and the New Industries in Inter-war Britain* (London, 1990).
4. Ibid. See also, for instance, Miriam Glucksmann's *Cotton and Casuals: The Gendered Organization of Labour in Time and Space* (Durham, UK, 2000) and "Why Work?: Gender and the Total Social Organization of Labour," *Gender, Work and Organization* 2 (1995):63–75.
5. Carol Wolkowitz and Chris Warhurst, "Embodying Labour" in *Working Life: Renewing Labour Process Analysis*, ed. Paul Thompson and Chris Smith (Basingstoke, UK, 2010).
6. Pun Ngai, *Made in China: Women Factory Workers in a Global Workplace* (Durham, NC, 2005).
7. Leslie Salzinger, *Genders in Production: Making Workers in Mexico's Global Factories* (Berkeley, 2003).
8. Pun Ngai, *Made in China*, 105.

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9. P.-C. Lan, "The Body as a Contested Terrain for Labor Control: Cosmetics Retailers in Department Stores and Direct Selling" in *The Critical Study of Work*, ed. R. Baldoz, C. Koeber, and P. Kraft (Philadelphia, 2001).

10. Carol Wolkowitz, *Bodies at Work* (London, 2006); Julia Twigg, Carol Wolkowitz, Rachel Cohen, and Sarah Nettleton, "Conceptualising Body Work in Health and Social Care," *Sociology of Health and Illness* 33 (2011).

11. Katherine Kent, "Employment Changes over 30 Years," *Economic and Labour Market Review* 3 (2009): 34.

12. Rachel Cohen, "Time, Space and Touch: Body Work and the Labour Process" *Sociology of Health and Illness* 33 (2011): 193.

13. Mark Paterson, "Haptic Geographies," *Progress in Human Geography* 33 (2009).

14. Glucksmann, *Women on the Line*, 55.

15. Catherine Theodosius, *The Unmanaged Heart of Emotional Labour in Health Care* (London, 2008).

16. Wolkowitz and Warhurst, "Embodying Labour."

17. Paula Black, *The Beauty Industry* (Abingdon, OX, UK 2004) and Miliann Kang, *The Managed Hand: Race, Gender and the Body in the Beauty Service Industry* (Berkeley, 2010).

18. Tim Diamond, *Making Gray Gold: Narratives of Nursing Home Care* (Chicago, 1992); Steven Lopez, "Culture Change Management in Long-term Care" *Politics and Society* 34 (2006).

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