

## Making a Fur Coat: Women, the Labouring Body, and Working-Class History\*

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**SUMMARY:** This article historicizes the making of a fur coat in post-1940 Canada, exploring the social relationships and forms of labour that made the fur coat possible: skinning, sewing, and selling. Focusing especially on women's labour, the author examines the significance of Aboriginal women's work, often unwaged, and seldom recognized in many fur-trade sources, as well as the way in which racial constructions of Aboriginal women intersected with the appropriation of their labour. The wage labour of women in a manufacturing sector dominated by eastern European Jewish immigrants, and by a masculine hierarchy of skill, as well as working women's protests and unionization, are also examined, as is retail selling labour in large and small stores. An exploration of these forms of labour, with a focus on gender, provides insights into discussions about the body and working-class history. While many feminist works have emphasized the cultural and discursive in their explorations of fur, the author argues for a theoretical perspective that fuses a feminist critique of race and gender hierarchies with a materialist understanding of labour, class, and alienation. While embracing a feminist scepticism about the existence of a "natural" body, she argues for the need to avoid the dematerialized body of much postmodern theory in explorations of the body and working-class history.

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"To most women [...] whether they are queens or chambermaids", declared Canada's largest mass magazine in 1945, "fur coats are an emotion". Amidst wartime affluence, even factory war workers, it was claimed, were rushing to fur salons to purchase this timeless and classless symbol of feminine desire.<sup>1</sup> Although its evidence of working-class buying was rather thin, the article did indicate how the fur coat operated as a gendered symbol of luxury in popular culture. Feminist authors have recently explored such textual and visual meanings of fur, including fur as feminine fashion and as fetishism, often linking the cultural representation of fur to writing on the body. This discussion of the "symbolic value"<sup>2</sup> of

\* I want to thank Bryan Palmer and anonymous reviewers of the *IRSH* for their comments on this paper.

1. *Maclean's Magazine*, 15 March 1945, p. 11.

2. Julia Emberley, *The Cultural Politics of Fur* (Montreal, 1997), p. 4; see also Chantal Nadeau, *Fur Nation: From the Beaver to Brigitte Bardot* (London, 2001).

fur is especially important in Canadian scholarship, for fur has a central place in the early political economy of the nation, Aboriginal–settler relations, historical mythmaking, and cultural production.<sup>3</sup>

Feminist writing on fur as a gendered symbol for the nation, or as the feminine “skin of the body”<sup>4</sup> reflects the continuing influence of postmodern preoccupations with the discursive, representation, and sexual identities. While useful in their discussions of commodity fetishism, these works tend to neglect a topic critical for working-class history: fur as work. We also need to historicize the fur coat by examining the forms of labour, the productive and social relationships that made it possible. The “magic of [consumer] display”, as Gary Cross warns, should not lead us to assume that “commodities transcend political and economic relations”.<sup>5</sup> By tracing the making of a fur coat in mid-twentieth-century Canada, with a focus on women’s labour, I want to explore some paths not taken in feminist scholarship, examining bush production, manufacturing work, and retail labour: skinning, sewing, and selling. Although women’s bodily labour differed in each process, one connecting link was the incessant appetite of consumer capitalism for profit at the expense of Aboriginal and working-class bodies.

Since recent writing on fur is directly linked to feminist theorizing about the body, it is also useful to query if, and how, current trends in “body studies” might aid our understanding of labouring bodies. Previous conversations between feminist theory and labour studies have been intellectually invigorating, as debates concerning capitalism and patriarchy, class and gender, materialism and feminism stimulated productive dialogue, if also intense disagreement and dissension. After the 1980s, these debates waned, as Anglo-American feminist scholars shifted their attention to postmodern theories indebted to Foucault, psychoanalysis, and literary theory, approaches stressing contingency, fluidity, and fragmentation rather than the supposedly “old fashioned”<sup>6</sup> meta-narratives of Marxism. Connecting feminist debates with labour scholarship, however, remains critical, not only through discussions of abstract theory, but

3. To cite one example, the staples theory of Canadian economic development starts with fur: Harold Adams Innis, *The Fur Trade in Canada: An Introduction to Canadian Economic History* (Toronto, 1930).

4. Chantel Nadeau, “‘My Fur Ladies’: The Fabric of a Nation”, in Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (eds), *Thinking Through the Skin* (London, 2001), pp. 194–208.

5. Gary Cross, “Time, Money, and Labour History’s Encounter with Consumer Culture”, *International Journal of Labour and Working Class History* [hereafter *ILWCH*], 43 (1993), pp. 2–17, 4.

6. Peter Winn, “Introduction”, *ILWCH*, 63 (2003), pp. 1–8, 3. The term is used to describe Latin American labour historians, contrasted with American and American-educated ones who are more likely to integrate gender into their work. On earlier feminist-materialist debates, see Rosemary Hennessy and Chrys Ingraham (eds), *Materialist Feminism: A Reader in Class, Difference, and Women’s Lives* (New York, 1997).

especially by theorizing through empirically-based, specific studies of women's everyday labouring lives.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, "old" materialist approaches, integrated with a feminist critique of gendered power relations, may still have much to offer us.

My emphasis on *historicizing*, of course, tips my own theoretical hand: embedded in my investigation of women's bodily labour are theoretical proclivities, favouring feminist historical materialism,<sup>8</sup> an emphasis on class and gender formation as lived processes, and on the dynamic interplay of social structures, social practices, and human agency. The body and social life, as Simone de Beauvoir wrote many decades ago, are invariably implicated and intertwined.<sup>9</sup> Her dialectical adage remains a useful starting point as we analyse the labouring bodies that made the fur coat possible.

#### THE BODY IN FEMINIST THEORY AND LABOUR STUDIES

The body as "project" is a sign of our scholarly times. Body studies have proliferated in recent decades, partly as a consequence of feminist scholars' efforts to "gender" the female body, challenging its equation with biology and nature, reinserting "it within the realm of the social", though they are also aware of the more intensive embodiment of women than men in academic writing.<sup>10</sup> Differences in body studies abound, with sociologists in contention over whether to emphasize the Foucaudian or the phenomenological body, the "ordered, inscribed, structured or lived" body.<sup>11</sup> Similar questions inform historical research, particularly relating

7. Stevi Jackson, "Why a Materialist Feminism is (Still) Possible – and Necessary", *Women's Studies International Forum*, 24/3–4 (2001), pp. 283–293, 286; see also Dorothy Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic: A Feminist Sociology* (Toronto, 1987).

8. Materialist theories are not synonymous with Marxist theories, and there are significant distinctions between feminist materialism, materialist feminism, and feminist historical materialism which I can not delineate here. The former sometimes refers to the radical "French" materialism of Christine Delphy who sees the domestic sphere as a patriarchal mode of production; in the US, the latter includes some authors who try to integrate post-structuralist insights into a form of materialism. My understanding of the terms historicizing and feminist historical materialism is indebted to Rosemary Hennessy's writing, especially *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (New York, 2000), as well as Anna Pollert, "Gender and Class Revisited; Or, The Poverty of Patriarchy", *Sociology*, 30 (1996), pp. 639–659, and Kate Soper, *Troubled Pleasures: Writing on Politics, Gender and Hedonism* (London, 1990).

9. Toril Moi, *What is a Woman? And Other Essays* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 67–68, and Elaine Stavro, "Re-reading the Second Sex", *Feminist Theory*, 1/2 (2000), pp. 131–150.

10. This also meant that some feminists were wary of body studies, as they did not wish to be inserted into the social *only* through their bodies: Anne Witz, "Whose Body Matters? Feminist Sociology and the Corporeal Turn in Sociology and Feminism", *Body and Society*, 6/2 (2000), pp. 1–24, 2.

11. Chris Schilling, *The Body in Culture, Technology and Society* (London, 2005), p. 9. For other sociological views see Sue Scott and David Morgan (eds), *Body Matters: Essays on the Sociology of the Body* (London, 1993); M. Featherstone, M. Hepworth, and B. Turner (eds), *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory* (London, 1991).

to the body and sexuality as a site of power, regulation, and resistance.<sup>12</sup> A voluminous feminist literature probing the relation of the body to identity, sexuality, subjectivity, and society is also far from homogenous. Though feminist debates are too extensive to detail here, at a general level, some authors are more inclined towards materialist and social constructionist views, while others, influenced by poststructuralism, are wary of the notion of a “given” physical body, and, anxious to dispel all traces of essentialism, challenge the distinctions made between the body and culture, sex, and gender.<sup>13</sup> Michel Foucault’s discussions of the body as a site of bio-power, and its constitution within discursive fields, have been extremely influential across the disciplines, stimulating innovative and radical social constructionist thinking, though his critics have also challenged what they see as his “transhistorical discursive essentialism” in which the biological body all too easily “evaporates”.<sup>14</sup>

Social forces are also credited with bringing the body to scholarly light, including the new demographics and anxieties of aging bodies, and the shift in advanced capitalism from the “hard work in the sphere of production” to consumption and leisure.<sup>15</sup> The hard work of tourism and shopping, of course, is primarily the provenance of affluent groups, not the world’s poor. Perhaps this is one reason why, as one sociological expert concedes, academic “body studies have tended to neglect the subject of the wage labour in favour of consumption and culture”.<sup>16</sup> As Terry Eagleton has wryly quipped: “if the libidinal body is in, the labouring body is out”.<sup>17</sup> While feminist writing often pays homage to the diversity of bodies, edited collections completely neglect wage labour, leaving one wondering if bodies actually go to work any more to scrub floors, operate machinery, serve hamburgers, or care for other bodies.<sup>18</sup> This absence is

12. For discussions of the body in history, see Londa Schiebinger (ed.), *Feminism and the Body* (Oxford, 2000); Kathleen Canning, “The Body as Method?: Reflections on the Place of the Body in Gender History”, *Gender and History*, 11 (1999), pp. 499–513; Victoria Bynum, “Why all the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist’s Perspective”, *Critical Inquiry*, 22 (Autumn 1995). Historians approach the body in different ways: as a category of analysis, as a site of power relations, as a strategy for recovering gender in history, as a theme for exploration. This article tends to concentrate on the latter two.

13. Influential works include Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington, IN, 1994); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London, 1990); and *idem*, *Body Matters: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (London, 1993).

14. Chris Schilling, *The Body and Social Theory* (London, 1993), p. 80.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 35.

16. Schilling, *The Body in Culture, Technology and Society*, p. 73. Perhaps this is also a comment on the changing political proclivities of the intellectual left, as articulated by Alex Callinicos in *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (Cambridge, 1989).

17. Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford, 1996), p. 71.

18. A few examples: Miriam Fraser and Monica Greco (eds), *The Body: A Reader* (London, 2005); Kate Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury (eds), *Writing on the Body: Female*

not a mere thematic oversight. It also reflects the postmodernist shift in interest from lived experiences to textual renderings of them: there is a preoccupation with “individuation”, identity, and subjectivity, though largely detached from historical context and structured social relations.<sup>19</sup> The results, in Toril Moi’s critical words, are “fantastic levels of abstraction without delivering a concrete, situated and materialist understanding of the body”.<sup>20</sup>

Given the long-standing influence of feminist theory on the writing of social history, how have these debates affected working-class histories of the body? Body studies have helped to stimulate important new research on themes that have stretched the field from an institutional, workplace-based *labour* history to a more inclusive *working-class* history; in the process, they have also aided the integration of gender and race as key categories of analysis into working-class history. Historians, for example, have productively explored the symbolic meaning of the body through clothing, make up, gendered manners, and behaviour.<sup>21</sup> New attention has also centred on themes such as sexual harassment, disability, the legal regulation of the working-class body, working-class sexuality, and women’s sexualized work.<sup>22</sup>

Certainly, not all of this literature has engaged directly with body studies or with post-structuralist ideas; earlier works especially drew on social constructionist and materialist paradigms, though recently, there is more interest in post-structuralist ideas, such as Butleresque notions of

*Embodiment and Feminist Theory* (New York, 1997); *Women’s Studies* special issue 34/7 (2005).

19. On “individuation”, see Lisa Adkins, *Revisions: Gender and Sexuality in Late Modernity* (Buckingham, 2002), p. 22.

20. Moi, *What Is a Woman?*, p. 31.

21. A few examples include Kathy Peiss, *Hope in a Jar: The Making of American Beauty Culture* (New York, 1998); Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure: Working Women, Popular Culture and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Century* (New York, 1999); Eileen Boris, “You Wouldn’t Want One of Them Dancing With Your Wife: Racialized Bodies on the Job in World War II”, *American Quarterly*, 50 (1998), pp. 77–108.

22. Some examples are Mary Odem, *Delinquent Daughters: Protecting and Policing Adolescent Female Sexuality in the US, 1885–1920* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1995); Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla (eds), *Deviant Bodies: Critical Perspectives on Difference in Science and Popular Culture* (Bloomington, IN, 1995); Joan Sangster, *Regulating Girls and Women: Sexuality, Family and the Law in Ontario* (Toronto, 2001); Stephen Meyer, “Workplace Predators: Sex and Sexuality on the US Automotive Shop Floor, 1930–60”, *Labor: Studies in Working Class History of the Americas* [hereafter *Labor*], 1 (2004), pp. 77–93; Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeleine Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York, 1993); Daniel Bender, *Sweated Work, Weak Bodies: Anti-Sweatshop Campaigns and Languages of Labor* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2004); Lisa Adkins, *Gendered Work: Sexuality, Family and the Labour Market* (Buckingham, 1995); Sarah Rose, “Crippled Hands: Disability in Labor and Working Class History”, *Labor*, 2 (2005), pp. 27–54; Claudia Clark, *Radium Girls: Women and Industrial Health Reform, 1910–35* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1993). This literature does not necessarily emerge from body studies; some pieces represent efforts to offer a broader, more inclusive picture of working-class life.

“performance”.<sup>23</sup> More concerning is writing that concentrates on the body as cultural object or endows discourse and language with inordinate causal weight – thus mirroring tendencies in postmodern theory.<sup>24</sup> In our productive dialogue with feminist theory, we need to be wary of the persistent “dilution of the material”<sup>25</sup> within much postmodern theory; nor should we lose sight of the actual wage labour of bodies, a topic less *au courant* for feminism, but still central to working-class history.

Current academic writing, as David Harvey convincingly argues, reveals the danger of “body reductionalism”: while considered “foundational” to all politics, body studies are not grounded in an understanding of the “real temporal-spatial relations between material practices, representations, institutions, social relations, and the prevailing structures of political-economic power”.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, the danger of embracing feminist-Foucauldian proposals to thoroughly deconstruct the natural body is that the lived, suffering, and alienated body may fade from view. If bodies are recognized only within an abstract circle of discourse, will we not lose our connection to a politics of social transformation that understands that the oppression, maiming, and utilization of bodies is facilitated by particular set of social relations, economic structures, and forms of injustice?

How, then, might we historicize women’s labouring bodies, paying attention to their cultural construction, without becoming trapped in the mode of the discursive? Fusing a feminist intent to critically interrogate gender and “race” power relations in all aspects of society with a rich tradition of materialist writing in labour studies may provide a starting point. As Chris Schilling has argued, the body has been an “absent presence” in Marxist explorations of the “embodiment” of economic

23. Eileen Boris notes that “if gender is performative as Judith Butler argued, the body becomes constructed through its labor”, although the concept is not fully developed in her “From Gender to Racialized Gender: Laboring Bodies That Matter”, in *ILWCH*, 63 (2003), pp. 9–20, 11. Given extensive feminist critiques (and not just materialist-feminists) of Butler’s “evasion of the historical and social” (see, for example, Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency: Reconfiguring the Subject in Feminist and Social Theory* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 19), I would be wary of embracing her notions of performance.

24. For example, Jane Marcellus, “Moderns or Moms? Body Typing of Employed Women Between the Wars”, *Women’s Studies*, 34 (2005), pp. 551–574; Gregory Kaster, “Labor’s True Man: Organized Workingmen and the Language of Manliness in the USA, 1827–77”, *Gender and History*, 13 (2001), pp. 24–64; Rosemary Pringle, *Secretaries Talk: Sexuality, Power and Work* (London, 1989); Daniel Bender’s *Sweated Work* which draws very usefully on literature on the body, sometimes allows language and performance to become overbearing concepts, as in ch. 7.

25. Alexandra Howson, *Embodying Gender* (London, 2005), p. 72; Kathy Davis, “Embodying Theory: Beyond Modernist and Postmodernist Readings of the Body”, in *idem* (ed.), *Embodied Practices: Feminist Perspectives on the Body* (London, 1997), pp. 1–23, 15. For recent Marxist-feminist attempts to “rematerialize” studies of women’s oppression see *Science and Society*, special issues, 69/1 (2005).

26. David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley, CA, 2000), p. 130.

relationships, including Marx's own powerful description of alienation, whereby workers within capitalism are "estranged" from their bodies, from external nature, and from humanity itself.<sup>27</sup> It is also present in E.P. Thompson's recounting of work time and the disciplining of industrial bodies, and in Harry Braverman's insights into the subtle transformation of the human body into a "willing" machine for employers.<sup>28</sup>

This materialist tradition assumes that the body is a means and instrument of labour, though it is also constituted and reconstituted by, and through, human labour, social and cultural practices. Though workers' bodies are moulded by society and political economy, and inscribed with the effects of social and economic relationships, they are not "determined" objects; they still possess the subjective potential for critical reflection, agency, and rebellion. Materialist theories of social reproduction also suggest the mutual determination of the body and society. Bodies, in Pierre Bourdieu's terms, are located within a "habitus" that includes our acquired cultural histories, dispositions, and values; class and gender become embodied in the most mundane, minute, unrecognized social practices of daily life.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, materialist critiques of colonialism offer another necessary layer of questions, asking how racialized bodies, as well as class relations, mattered to the political, economic and cultural vitality of imperialism.<sup>30</sup>

Marxist, materialist, and social reproduction theories are, admittedly, quite divergent.<sup>31</sup> What they do share in common is a (modernist) acceptance of the "real" experienced body, "out there to be explored";<sup>32</sup>

27. The expenditure of bodily human labour is central to two of Marxism's key precepts: alienation and exploitation; Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (New York, 1964), p. 114.

28. Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (New York, 1974). His insights have been integrated into excellent feminist writing on the body: Pei-Chia Lan, "Working in a Neon Cage: Bodily Labour of Cosmetics Saleswomen in Taiwan", *Feminist Studies*, 29 (2003), pp. 21–45. Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (New York, 1979), pp. 141–149, also explores the disciplining of working bodies through space and time.

29. Pierre Bourdieu defined habitus as "embodied history" in *The Logic of Practice*, tr. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA, 1990), p. 57. For some feminist appreciations of Bourdieu, see Terry Lowell, "Thinking Feminism with and against Bourdieu", *Feminist Theory*, 1 (2000), pp. 11–32, and Moi, *What Is a Woman?*, pp. 204–299.

30. Katie Pickles and Myra Rutherdale, *Contact Zones: Aboriginal and Settler Women in Canada's Past* (Vancouver, 2005); Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton (eds), *Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Encounters in World History* (Durham, 2005).

31. Bourdieu, for example, was not a Marxist. He was less interested in capitalism and structural transformation than in forms of "capital" as power. See Alex Callinicos, "Social Theory Put to the Test of Politics: Pierre Bourdieu and Anthony Giddens", *New Left Review*, 236 (1999), p. 95; Craig Calhoun, "Habitus, Field, and Capital", in M. Postone, E. LiPuma and Craig Calhoun (eds), *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives* (Chicago, IL, 1993), pp. 61–88.

32. Pollert, "Gender and Class", p. 647, is referring to the notion of experience, but the same could be applied to the body.

the body is not simply a set of “material effects” in the realm of the cultural. While embracing a feminist scepticism about the existence of a pre-ordained, “natural” body, we need to avoid the dematerialized body of much postmodern theory – admittedly a hard balancing act. There may be “irresolvable tensions” in this endeavour, but as Kathy Davis argues, feminist writing stressing the body as metaphor runs the risk of obscuring the “systemic domination enacted through the female body”, and the materialist insight that bodies are “embedded in the immediacies of everyday life and lived experience”.<sup>33</sup> The social construction of women’s bodily labour as less skilled or unimportant, as racialized, feminized, or sexualized must be viewed in relation to “the objective, sensuous and suffering body”, shaped by material conditions, patterns of social and political power, as well as dominant and subterranean cultural values. A feminist and materialist approach also keeps the analytical door open to the possibility of the unfinished body, to intentionality, agency, and a notion of bodily resistance to the “maps” of cultural and social life. However worn down, regulated or constrained, the labouring body might also become an instrument to create new dispositions, cultural maps, or political dreams.<sup>34</sup>

### SKINNING

Feminist historical materialism, according to one scholar influenced by E.P. Thompson, is not a set, abstract “theory”, but is rather a critical excavation of social experience as it unfolds. “By its very nature” it involves the empirical interrogation of gender and class formation *as historical processes*, often fraught with contradiction and conflict.<sup>35</sup> Let us now turn to an empirical investigation of the social experience of extractive fur labour, performed in the sub-arctic and arctic north largely by Indigenous peoples.<sup>36</sup> Though fur was considered fairly marginal to Canada’s industrial economy by the mid-twentieth century, trapping was still the principle activity for 45 per cent of its land mass in 1950, occupying at least 57,00 Aboriginal peoples.<sup>37</sup> In the north, “bush production” of fur pelts, according to many economic studies, occupied the majority of male earners; these “breadwinners”, were responsible for all the trapping

33. Kathy Davis, “Embodiment Theory: Beyond Modernist and Postmodernist Readings of the Body”, in *idem*, *Embodied Practices*, pp. 1–23, 15.

34. Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, p. 182.

35. Pollert, “Gender and Class”, p. 640.

36. I use the terms both Indigenous and Aboriginal to refer to both Native and Inuit (First Nations) peoples. The Indigenous groups described here were diverse in language, culture, and social organization, though I have drawn some general conclusions across these differences.

37. *Canadian Business*, 23 February 1950, pp. 66–67.

“income” while women were responsible for “domestic affairs”, a rather vague term that carried less significance than “income”.<sup>38</sup>

Women’s work varied across Indigenous cultures in the sub-arctic and arctic north, but there is no doubt that such characterizations obscured women’s labouring bodies from view. Fur-trade studies, as feminist anthropologists argue, have sustained colonial and masculinist perspectives by ignoring women’s trapping labour.<sup>39</sup> Historical sources, to be sure, make the search for women difficult. In many arctic Hudson’s Bay Company (HBC) post journals, for example, women exist on the margins of the main story. The journals were written by white traders, anxious to justify *their* output of daily work for their employers, and they recorded information according to a masculinist mindset: marriage records listed only men’s names and occupations, while account books recorded trading by women “under their husband’s names”.<sup>40</sup> Constrained by Western notions of the dichotomized private and public spheres, even later anthropologists looking *for* women’s labour often used a grammar of belittlement: “women *aid* men in their work [...] [they] maintain the household [...] there seems to be no roles available for women *other than* those of wife and mother”.<sup>41</sup> As Hugh Brody concedes, his study of the “Indian economy” in the north was premised on his observations and those of male informants; women’s labour was harder to quantify, underestimated, and thus “concealed”.<sup>42</sup>

Yet, a closer examination of Hudson’s Bay post journals, Indigenous oral histories, ethnographic studies, sojourners’ accounts of the north, and visual archival evidence all reveal women’s labouring bodies participating in fur extraction. After listing all the furs deposited by an Inuit trapper, the HBC trader might add that local women were “put to work” washing and cleaning the furs and sewing them into bales.<sup>43</sup> This labour was crucial to the production of a high quality pelt for the market. In the 1950s, HBC

38. J.M. Kew, *Cumberland House in 1660*, Report #2, Economic and Social Survey of Northern Saskatchewan (Saskatoon, 1962), pp. 31, 90.

39. Jo-Anne Fiske and Susan Sleeper-Smith, “Introduction”, pp. 1–12; and Jo-Anne Fiske and Caroline Mufford, “Hard Times and Everything Like That: Carrier Women’s Tales of Life on the Traplins”, pp. 13–29, in Fiske and Sleeper-Smith (eds), *New Faces of the Fur Trade: Selected Papers of the North American Fur Trade Conference* (Lansing, MI, 1998). Writing on women’s role in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fur trade included discussion of women’s labour: Ron Bourgault, “Race, Class, Gender: Colonial Domination of Indian Women”, in Jesse Vorst (ed.), *Race, Class, Gender: Bonds and Barriers* (Winnipeg, 1989), pp. 87–116; Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women in Fur Trade Society, 1670–1870* (Winnipeg, 1980).

40. Toby Morantz, *The White Man’s Gonna Getcha: The Colonial Challenge to the Crees in Québec* (Montreal, 2002), p. 35.

41. My italics. Patricia Ann Rogers, “Aspirations and Acculturation of Cree Women at Great Whale River”, (MA, University of North Carolina, 1965), p. 5.

42. Hugh Brody, *Maps and Dreams* (Vancouver, 1981), p.196.

43. Provincial Archives of Manitoba (PAM), Hudson’s Bay Company Records (HBC), Arctic Bay Post Journal, B 381/1/1, March 1937.



Figure 1. Aboriginal unpaid labour was a crucial ingredient of fur extraction. Chipewyan woman using a sharp knife on caribou hide.

*The Beaver*, March 1948, p. 13. Photographer: Richard Harrington.

posts routinely paid women 2 to 5 cents for each muskrat they skinned, a small sum considering that these rats might fetch \$1.25 or more at a fur auction.<sup>44</sup> When the traders at the HBC Wolstonholme post were forced to wash the skins themselves, they quickly complained that it absorbed

44. Leonard Mason, *The Swampy Cree: A Study in Acculturation* (Ottawa, 1967), p. 49, and Kew, *Cumberland House in 1960*, p. 32.

their whole day; they could now see why the Inuit did not want to do the “washing and scraping” for the paltry sum offered, as it was “strenuous work”.<sup>45</sup>

Inuit women were also engaged by arctic posts as part of a “family package” of labour, supplying wood and water, drying fur, and travelling for mail.<sup>46</sup> Girls and women also commonly performed domestic labour for wages or credit, scrubbing floors, cleaning post houses, preparing food, making clothes, or sewing parkas for the post men.<sup>47</sup> Their wages were then assimilated into the family fur economy. Inuit women were not completely channelled into Euro-Canadian notions of an appropriate gendered division of labour: when “ship time” came at the arctic Payne Bay post, for instance, women were paid the same wages as men for unloading heavy cargo.<sup>48</sup> Inuit women’s bodies were described by white sojourners as more robust, closer to nature, and able to endure a measure of pain and physical labour that white women could not, a cultural construction that obscured the material and social basis of women’s work.<sup>49</sup> Inuit women’s bodies had long been constituted by arduous labour shared with men, and geared towards community survival; however, this work assumed a very different ideological cast within their own culture.

Oral histories of Aboriginal women also provide examples of female trapping labour that was not seen as unusual physical work, but rather as labour integral to individual and familial subsistence. Ellen Smallboy, a northern Labrador Cree woman, learned from an early age to trap small animals in order to keep her family from starving; later, she also trapped with her husband for furs to sell. Similarly, a Saskatchewan woman’s autobiographical story, “Encounters with Bears”, reveals a single woman trapper who engaged in traditional bush production as an “everyday occupation”.<sup>50</sup> For Cree women interviewed in the north of Saskatchewan, women’s work was shaped by a division of labour in which women primarily skinned animals, preparing furs for the market, processing hides, and manufacturing clothing.<sup>51</sup> Ironically, their technical “know how” was

45. PAM, Hudson’s Bay Company Records (HBC), Wolstonehome Post Journal, B 368/a/16, 23 May 1939.

46. PAM, HBC, RG 3/75A/-2, Annual Report, Padley Post, 29 June 1957.

47. PAM, HBC, RG 3/74A/2, Manager, Frobisher Bay to Manager, Ungava Section, 2 February 1950.

48. PAM, HBC, RG 3/74B, Payne Bay Post Report, 11 July 1943.

49. It was also believed Inuit women endured childbirth more easily: Patricia Jasen, “Race, Culture and the Colonization of Childbirth in Northern Canada”, in V. Strong-Boag, M. Gleason, A. Perry (eds), *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women’s History* (Toronto, 2002), pp. 353–366.

50. H.C. Wolfart, “Introduction”, to *Our Grandmothers Lives: As Told in Their Own Words* (Regina, 1998), pp. 7–38, 20.

51. Miriam McNab, “From the Bush to the Village to the City: Pinehouse Lake Aboriginal

similar to that of male manufacturing workers, who also had to assess skins, cut them, wet, and block them. Likewise, the intricate “freeze drying” method of preparing beaver skins used by James Bay Cree women to create unblemished<sup>52</sup> and thus more marketable skins was so complex that in any industrial setting, the work would have been described as artisanal and skilled.

Women’s labour in fur extraction was thus expended in three overlapping areas: women worked on the trap lines, they were primarily responsible for familial and social reproduction, and they were primarily responsible for preparing skins. In both arctic and sub-arctic areas, women travelled with trapping husbands, often leaving after freeze-up for a season of intensive trapping, though this altered as the state pressured families into permanent settlements. At trading time, as one northern post manager recorded, the Inuit arrived “with furs and families”, both being linked together in the extractive process.<sup>53</sup> Although men made the initial spending decisions, women were often by their side offering advice. Lamenting the decline of male authority in an area where women were few in number, one HBC employee employed the language of clothing and the body to underscore his dismay with this practice: “the wife wears the pants, and the poor husband has always to refer to his better half before he can buy anything”.<sup>54</sup>

The domestic affairs of women, referred to by the earlier observer, also amounted to social reproduction of key economic significance. Historicizing women’s part in bush production necessitates taking into account many forms of unpaid reproductive work, and in the case of Indigenous peoples, a recognition that these labours were also “deeply interwoven with one’s culture and cosmology”.<sup>55</sup> Women often combined familial labour with work for wages or trapping labour; sojourner narratives and visual archives repeatedly document women minding children while working on furs.<sup>56</sup> Indigenous peoples extracting furs also relied heavily on hunting for “country food” for survival. Northern Cree women’s contribution to hunting involved collecting wood (30 cubic feet per household per day); netting snow shoes; manufacturing tents, clothes, and

Women Adapt to Change”, in David De Brou and Aileen Moffat (eds), *Other Voices: Historical Essays on Saskatchewan Women* (Regina, 1995), pp.131–143.

52. Hugh Conn, “Careful Fur Preparation Brings Bigger Cash Returns”, *Indian News*, January 1956.

53. PAM, HBC, Cape Dorset Post Journal, B 387/a/8, 31 May 1939.

54. PAM, HBC, RG3/74B/1, Arctic Bay Post Annual Report, May 1943.

55. Fiske and Mufford, “Hard Times and Everything Like That”, pp. 16–17.

56. Even accounting for the fact that these pictures were taken by whites, perhaps fascinated by Inuit women’s working at skinning with children on their backs, the hundreds of visuals and many sojourner accounts detailing women’s work indicate this was common practice, not simply the image that fascinated whites. For a sojourner account see Elsie Gillis, *North Pole Boarding House*, (Toronto, 1951), ch. 15.



Figure 2. Women often combined familial labour with work for wages. Inuit women unloading flour from the HBC ship at Cape Dorset.

*The Beaver*, March 1943, p. 38.

ammunition pouches; repairing traps; preparing food; and of course, caring for children, husbands, and parents.<sup>57</sup>

This work did not simply save families funds; they could *not have existed without this unwaged labour*, given how low their fur incomes were. Widespread reliance on country food thus had a direct impact on families' involvement in the capitalist production of fur; arguably, it meant that Aboriginal workers were not paid the full cost of their social reproduction through wages (or skins traded), in effect aiding the creation of surplus value.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, the reciprocal obligations of gendered labour characteristic of Indigenous societies were transformed, indeed undermined, by the capitalist fur economy, as relations of trade and authority were cemented with Indigenous men, while women were sidelined as

57. Adrian Tanner, *Bringing Home Animals* (St John's, 1979), pp. 52, 60.

58. For this argument for cannery workers, see Alicja Muszynski, "Race and Gender: Structural Determinants in the Formation of BC's Salmon Cannery Labour Force", in Greg Kealey (ed.), *Class, Gender and Region: Essays in Canadian Historical Sociology* (St John's, 1988), pp. 103–120. Native peoples were certainly critical of this relationship: John Hongiman, "Incentives to Work in a Canadian Indian Community", *Human Organization*, 8:3 (Summer 1949), pp. 23–28, 26.

“helpmates”, or even possessions.<sup>59</sup> Euro-Canadian observers had long dichotomized “traditional” hunting for subsistence and “modern” work for wages; they did not see these interconnected patterns of women’s labour in fur extraction, nor appreciate its significance for the bodily survival of their families.<sup>60</sup>

Indigenous women’s bodies have recently been the focus of considerable scholarly attention as feminist historians have critiqued the sexualization and racialization of Aboriginal and Inuit women so intrinsic to Canada’s patterns of practices of internal colonialism.<sup>61</sup> Our analyses of the “embodiment” of colonial relations, often through representation, have generally been distinct from writing on labour, but the two themes are intimately intertwined.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, their mutual explication makes clear the need to situate our critiques of the culturally constructed body within the material and social relations that made this construction possible – if not probable.

Historically, there were some distinctions between colonialist images of Native “savagism” and Inuit “primitivism”, but there was still a common exoticization of all Indigenous women’s bodies. Popular images sometimes romanticized a pre-modern Aboriginal “Madonna”, or a suitably acquiescent Pochahontas; however, racist ideologies also reflected the association of Indigenous women with promiscuous, primitive, sexual mores.<sup>63</sup> Inuit women, it was presumed, were the product of premodern,

59. Bourgeault, “Race, Class, Gender”, pp. 98–99.

60. In the contemporary politics of Aboriginal women’s resistance, women have often drawn, ideologically, on the historical memory of their earlier, crucial integration into bush, and thus fur, production.

61. For a definition of internal colonialism, see James Frideres and René Gadaca, *Aboriginal Peoples in Canada: Contemporary Conflicts* (Toronto, 2005), pp 2–6. The term was out of favour in the US but it might be undergoing a renaissance. See Linda Gordon, “Internal Colonialism and Gender”, in Ann Laura Stoler (ed.), *Haunted By Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Durham, 2006), pp. 427–451.

62. For a review of writing on Canadian Aboriginal labour, see Steven High, “Native Wage Labour and Independent Commodity Production in the Age of ‘Irrelevance’”, *Labour/Le Travail*, 37 (1996), pp. 243–264. Other examples include Kay Saunder and Jackie Huggins (eds), *Labour History* [special issue] 65 (1994); Colleen O’Neill, *Working the Navajo Way: Labor and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Lawrence, KA, 2005). The intersection of labour and the cultural contours of colonialism is dealt with in Jo-Anne Fiske’s work: “Fishing is a Woman’s Business: Changing Economic Roles of Carrier Women and Men”, in Bruce Cox (ed.), *Native Peoples/Native Lands: Canadian Indians, Inuit and Metis* (Ottawa, 1988), pp. 186–197. See also Paige Raibmon, *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the late Nineteenth Century Northwest Coast* (Durham, 2005), ch. 4; Joan Sangster, “Domesticating Girls: The Sexual Regulation of Aboriginal and Working-Class Girls in Twentieth Century Canada”, in Pickles and Rutherford, *Contact Zones*, pp. 179–204.

63. There is a vast literature on images of Indigenous women. A few Canadian examples include: Gail Guthrie Valaskakis, *Indian Country: Essays on Contemporary Native Culture* (Waterloo, 2005), ch. 5; Kim Anderson, *A Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood* (Toronto, 2000); Sarah Carter, *Capturing Women: The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery in*

patriarchal cultures accustomed to licentious wife trading, while racist images of degenerate Aboriginal women, conditioned by alcohol, were still deeply embedded in Canadian society, justifying violence against them.

While we must acknowledge the importance of these destructive discourses of the exotic or promiscuous female Indigenous body, another key aspect of colonialism was the appropriation of women's labour *as well as* their sexual dignity. Perhaps most important, we must also consider how these processes were co-implicated, how the symbolic and material interacted in this specific historical context. Accounts of women's work were shaped by a process of signification that drew on discourses of race and gender, but the significance of the material body to the creation of profit and surplus value should not be slighted in the process of meaning making. In fact, the gendered racialization of Aboriginal women's bodies *allowed them* to become "invisible" labouring bodies in an economic and political context of both capitalist and colonial relations.

#### SEWING

The image of the bourgeois, fur-clad woman, a symbol of wealth and decadence, literally becoming the commodity she models, has long been utilized as a trope of class privilege, including in the labour press.<sup>64</sup> The role of *working-class* women in the making of the fur coat, however, has been hidden from historical view.<sup>65</sup> A reclamation of women's sewing labour reveals the way in which women's bodies, as factors of production, were seen as an expendable investment, even though some of the physical risks of fur work were similar for men and women. Their role in fur workers' unions, in contrast, underscores the need to theorize the relationship between subjectivity, agency, and the body, rather than

*Canada's Prairie West* (Montreal, 1997); Sarah Carter, "Categories and Terrains of Exclusion: Constructing the 'Indian' Woman in the Early Settlement Era of Western Canada", *Great Plains Quarterly*, 13 (1997), pp.147–161; Pickles and Rutherford, *Contact Zones*. Some comparative international discussion includes Anne Fausto-Sterling, "Gender, Race and Nation: The Comparative Anatomy of 'Hottentot' Women in Europe, 1815–17", and Tsiania Lomawaima, "Domesticity in the Federal Indian School: The Power of Authority of Mind Over Body", in Jennifer Terry and Jacqueline Urla (eds), *Deviant Bodies: Critical Perspectives on Difference in Science and Popular Culture* (Bloomington, IN, 1995), pp.19–48 and pp.197–218; Antoinette Burton (ed.), *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities* (London, 1999); Sharon Tiffany and Kathleen Adams, *The Wild Woman: An Inquiry into the Anthropology of an Idea* (Cambridge, MA, 1985); Ann Stoler, "Making Empire Respectable: the Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in Twentieth Century Colonial Cultures", *American Ethnologist* 16:4 (1989), pp. 634–659.

64. *UE News*, 1 February 1952: cartoon with bourgeois woman in fur speaking to a friend: "Why should people worry about unemployment. I've never worked a day in my life."

65. Philip Foner's classic, *The Fur and Leather Workers' Union: A Story of Dramatic Struggles and Achievements* (New York, 1950) deals little with women, and barely mentions Canadian workers.

concentrating predominantly on bodily “constraint” and containment, the latter more “predominant” in current feminist theory.<sup>66</sup>

In Canada, fur production was characterized by many small, competitive manufacturing and manufacturing-retailing firms doing seasonal work, dependent almost entirely on the women’s coat market. In 1949, a peak year of fur production, there were 642 manufacturers across the country, some with less than 10 employees, though most larger factories were concentrated in three cities: Winnipeg, Toronto, and Montreal. Fur work, as well as factory ownership, was dominated by eastern European Jewish immigrants; until the 1940s, some local union meetings were conducted in Yiddish, and membership lists in cities like Winnipeg indicated both geographical and social clustering of predominantly Jewish members,<sup>67</sup> though French Canadians also laboured in fur in Montreal, and in Toronto, the “Gentiles” were actually segregated in a separate union local in the 1930s.

The most important skills needed in the translation of raw furs into coats were the preserve almost entirely of men, apprenticed to learn the techniques of sorting, wetting and stretching, blocking, then cutting the skins. Both “skin on skin” and newer “drop” technique of fur preparation (used more after World War II) involved the cutter knowing how to select, cut and recut skins countless times, so that they could be sewn together to form an elongated, almost seamless coat. From the early twentieth century, women did work as operators on sewing machines that had blowing devices to keep the fur from being caught in the seams; they also sewed linings and did the finishing of the coat. In larger factories combining pelt preparation and garment construction, women might help with preparation of the raw skin, for example, as “greasers”, “unhairers”, and “fleshers”, jobs that still needed a degree of training, especially for fleshing machines, with razor-sharp blades designed to remove excess flesh from the fur skin. This “skin on skin” work was a far cry from the “sensual” experience of women wearing fur; it would be difficult to characterize it as the “many tender ties of skin, flesh and fur”, referred to by contemporary feminist scholars.<sup>68</sup>

Not only were women’s jobs considered less skilled, but after World War II their share of sewing machine operators’ jobs declined, and of course, their wage rates were always consistently lower than men’s,

66. Lois McNay, *Gender and Agency*, refers to this dominant approach as “negative subjectification”, p. 2.

67. Cornell University (CA), Kheel Centre for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives (Kheel), International Fur and Leather Workers’ Union Papers (IFLWU), Box 25, folder 29, Winnipeg Fur Workers’ Local 91 Membership List.

68. Nadeau, “My Fur Ladies”, p. 195. Ironically, the term “many tender ties” is appropriated from Sylvia Van Kirk’s book on fur-trade marriages which *does* discuss women’s labour in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

reflecting the assumption that they were temporary sojourners in the workforce. Union contracts before and after unionization in the late 1930s incorporated differential wages; even when women shared operating jobs with men, they made 25 to 33 per cent less.<sup>69</sup> Lacking the privilege and protection of skill, women's bodies were particularly vulnerable. Like the radium girls in the United States, they were seen as expendable factors of production, surely a vivid illustration of Marx's concept of labour power as a bodily commodity, purchased by employers, sold by workers with few choices in the market place of work.<sup>70</sup> They had little manoeuvre room to deal with the stresses of work and could be more easily fired, for there was little time invested in their bodies. With small amounts of capital needed for start-up, a fringe of small, struggling firms always existed; these firms tried to keep labour costs low, but did not want to risk losing skilled male cutters. This undervaluation of women's labour was clearly apparent in the records of the Ontario Department of Labour, as Toronto firms were chastized regularly by the Minimum Wage Board for paying far below the minimum, or using loopholes in the law, which were not hard to find. "Yours is one of the worst wage sheets we have ever seen", commented the Board to one fur firm, seldom moved to such moral indignation.<sup>71</sup>

Women's bodies were also susceptible to the physical stresses of fur work. In the 1930s women laboured in factories up to sixty hours a week, with peak production times requiring overtime that workers could not refuse and still keep their jobs. This pace was tempered substantially in the 1940s by unionization and some state-legislated industrial standards,<sup>72</sup> but workers had no sooner won the forty-four-hour week, when the industry went into the doldrums in the later 1950s, leading to forced overtime and wage reductions. Nor could a forty-four hour week address some of the physiological hazards in the industry. Workplaces were notoriously damp, and the high levels of fur in the air, particularly cheap, loose furs like rabbit, created breathing problems for workers. Indeed, fur workers were known to have high levels of tuberculosis. During the organizing drives of the thirties, communist organizers claimed that "unsanitary conditions"

69. Differentials varied by city and year. This average was secured by taking a snapshot of four years and comparing male and female operators' rates; Ernst Strauss, *The Canadian Fur Manufacturing Industry*, (MA, McGill University, 1967), p.287.

70. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1 (New York, 1971), p. 271: "Labour power is that which the worker is compelled to offer for sale [...] and only exists in his living body".

71. NAC, Joseph Cohen Papers, vol. 2, file 1145, letter from Minimum Wage Board, 19 May 1932 to Hallman and Sable Fur Company. Cohen (known for his communist sympathies) was acting for the company in this case.

72. In tripartite negotiations over industry regulation employers wanted recognition of the higher "stress" and "wear and tear on the nerves" in larger, more specialized fur firms. See Archives of Ontario (AO), Factory Inspection Branch, RG 7-71-0-59. No records of individual factory inspections remain.

faced all fur workers, from the fumes in the drying cellars to lingering “terrible odours” of the skins after chemical treatment. Women’s work was not exempt from bodily danger. They routinely laboured where “the brushing and combing from hair flies from the skin all over the place”, and some “girls were forced to climb up on ladders” to hang the skins in drying departments “with all windows shut”.<sup>73</sup>

Fur-laden air, recounts one furrier, had to be accepted as part of the job, though he did admit “he often had a cold” in these conditions.<sup>74</sup> Occupational hazards were thus naturalized as a bodily inevitability, and they were integrated into patterns of humour and initiation, as older (male) fur workers teased younger ones with made-up stories of workers having “fur balls” removed from their throats. Bravado and humour were understandable coping mechanisms for those with limited choices about occupational hazards; although fur work was not the “rough and tough”<sup>75</sup> labour often associated with the masculine body, mechanisms for coping with the physical risks of work might still take on gendered forms. These hazards also illustrate that class was not simply displayed on the body; rather, it is embodied on a daily basis, a destructive process described in other studies of women’s occupational health, poverty and disease. Robert Connell’s claims for the gendered body apply equally to class: it is not simply that bodies are defined or constructed differently, but that *different experiences* and practices literally transform the body, altering it physically.<sup>76</sup>

In the fur-industry journal, businesses were photographed as scientific workplaces, where white-coated men in clean factories exercised their craftsmen-like expertise and skill. The industry also stressed workers’ responsibility in preventing accident and health problems by caring for their own bodies.<sup>77</sup> Yet the same journal carried information warning about health hazards emanating from “squalor, poor ventilation, dust, poisonous fumes, poor lighting” that plagued the fur industry. The results were common respiratory ailments, such as bronchitis, asthma, and coughing, as well as skin eruptions caused either by metallic dyes or chemicals like Ursol D. There were also rare but lethal risks cited, including blood poisoning from lead, arsenic, or mercury used in fur glossing, and a disease from rabbit skins which caused finger nails to fall off.<sup>78</sup> Male fur workers in dressing and dying had more direct contact with chemicals but

73. *The Worker*, 9 September 1933.

74. Interview with BC, 1 December 2005.

75. Ava Baron, “Masculinity, the Embodied Male Worker, and the Historian’s Gaze”, *ILWCH*, 69 (Spring 2006), pp. 143–160, 146.

76. Robert Connell, *Gender and Power* (Stanford, CA, 1987), p. 87.

77. Jesse Mercer Gehman, “Your Health: A Practical Programme for the Furrier”, *The Canadian Furrier* [hereafter *CF*], (Fall 1942), p. 14.

78. *Ibid.*, p. 18. There was no distinction made between the risks to male and female health in this literature, as noted by Daniel Bender in *Sweated Work*. This may well have been a theme, but without factory reports, it is difficult to judge.

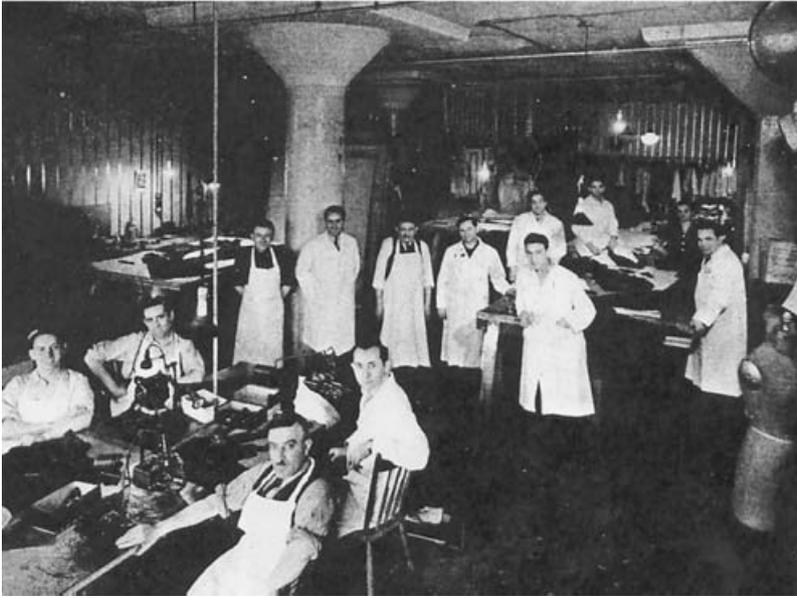


Figure 3. In the fur industry journal, businesses were photographed as scientific workplaces, where white-coated men in clean factories exercised their craftsmen-like skill. *The Canadian Furrier*, Fall 1942, p. 25.

similar problems emerged in factories where many women laboured making small leather goods.

When one Toronto woman, disabled with “substantial injuries” from benzol poisoning in a leather factory, tried to sue her employer for damages her case was dismissed by the court, with the company hiding behind the claim that there were no warning labels on the benzol containers.<sup>79</sup> The health protections offered to women’s bodies by the state, in other words, were small indeed. Unionization offered more protection, but by the 1950s, women’s position within the industry was contracting, in part because of the “glutting” of the labour market with furriers admitted from war-torn Europe, with single men targeted first and foremost.<sup>80</sup>

Fur work in major urban centres tied women to machines in damp and dusty surroundings; fur organizing placed them in the precarious midst of a polarized, contentious, and sometimes violent union milieu. The battles within Canadian fur unions could fill a book. Torn apart internally by social democratic versus communist politics in the 1920s and early 1930s (with dual unions emerging in the late 1930s), the International Fur and Leather Workers’ Union (IFLWU) was occasionally unified through

79. Canada, *Dominion Law Reports*. vol. 1, 1946, Siebel v Vereshack, pp. 225–241.

80. NAC, RG 27 Dept. of Labour, vol. 279, file 1–26–5–2, “Fur Workers”; AO, MU 9011, Interview with Al Hershkovitz.

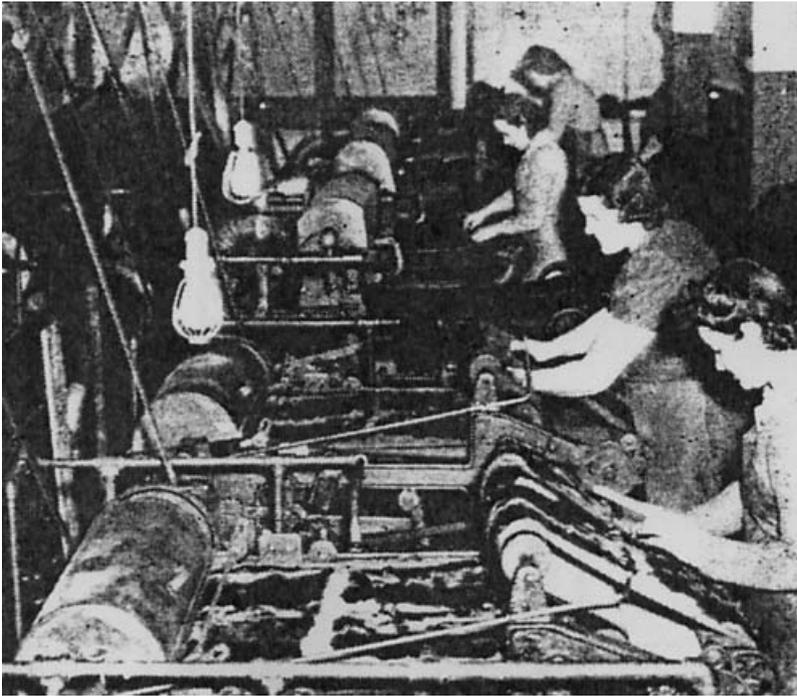


Figure 4. Women fur workers in Lapining Department.  
*The Canadian Furrier*, Fall 1942, p. 26.

struggles for recognition against small employers ready to use any tactic, from injunctions to yellow dog contracts, to avoid unions. In these struggles, women workers' bodies came under direct assault.

Union and Communist Party activist, Pearl Wedro, was taken to hospital with gash in her head needing stitches after being assaulted by a scab during a 1931 Winnipeg strike, while another communist fur worker, Freda Coodin, led fellow picketers on a march to the comfortable home of the factory owner, an affront to middle-class domestic privacy that led to her being jailed. Not even 5 feet tall, she was later convicted of assaulting a scab during a strike at the adamantly anti-union Hurtig Furs. She spent a year in prison, where the fur workers disease, tuberculosis, claimed her life. A martyr for the communist left, her gravestone carried the words "a victim of the Hurtig strike" until they were scratched out by angry opponents.<sup>81</sup>

81. Ros Usiskin, "Winnipeg's Jewish Women on the Left", in Daniel Stone (ed.), *Jewish Radicalism in Winnipeg, 1905–60* (Winnipeg, 1980), pp. 106–122, 119; Joan Sangster, *Dreams of Equality: Women on the Canadian Left, 1920–50* (Toronto, 1989), p. 78. "Freda Coodin" as a pseudonym has recently been resurrected by radicals writing from within the labour movement: Freda Coodin, "The CAW Turn Bargaining Versus Building", *Canadian Dimension*, 39:6 (November–December 2005), p. 36.

Despite Coodin's designation as a political martyr, it is important to recognize that women might also engage in violence, attacking scabs and opponents to defend their jobs or their political loyalties. During one Toronto strike, female strikers were arrested for blocking scabs physically with their bodies and for throwing rocks at a car carrying strikebreakers, shattering a windshield. A chorus of three women were accused of intimidating another female worker and her father with threats of bodily harm, as well as teaching neighbourhood children how to throw stones at cars carrying scabs, an interesting twist on women's traditional child rearing role. These radical women were not "fainting away"<sup>82</sup> from bodily contact and violence in the heat of struggle, quite the contrary. Their willingness to put their bodies on the line probably had much to do with their youth and political commitment, though it was also likely shaped by their socialization in the rough culture of working-class immigrant streets. Class experiences thus marked the body invisibly, shaping women's willingness to use their bodies in physically confrontational ways.

At their most intense in the late 1930s and early 1940s, union battles also took on a decidedly macho tone, as men chased each other up and down Toronto's Spadina Avenue with baseball bats, trashed cars, and even hired local gangsters to beat up rivals. The conflict finally ended during the Cold War when the left-wing ILFWU, under attack by the state and anti-communist unions, amalgamated with the AFL-chartered Fur Workers' Union and the Amalgamated Meat Cutters' and Butcher Workmen union in 1955. All of the communist fur leadership, whether appointed or elected, and including Pearl Wedro, were removed from office by the victorious social democrats (who had been earlier found cooking the books), ready to use any political methods to purge the union of supposed communist influence.<sup>83</sup> Wedro had been denounced publicly by her rival social democrats as a "Stalinist fish wife",<sup>84</sup> an anti-communist designation also meant to elicit a physical image of an overbearing, ugly, nagging old woman – like other women on the left, she was stereotyped by sexuality and body more than men. Wedro remained completely loyal to her communist politics, though privately she bemoaned the fact that she had been looked down on in the union, denied the same opportunities and respect as male organizers.<sup>85</sup>

82. Daniel Bender, *Sweated Work*, pp. 177–178. Bender describes women fainting in meetings, offering a "gendered performance" that "signalled the removal – the fainting away – of women from factionalism", the latter associated with the men in the union. The women may simply have been acting ideologically, using their bodies as a conscious political tactic of disruption.

83. On these illegal actions see AO, Multicultural History Society of Ontario (MHSO), MU 9021, Muni Taub papers, file 8428, and MU 9001, Federman papers; NAC, Cohen papers, vol. 13, file 2701.

84. AO, MHSO, MU 9001, Federman papers.

85. AO, Abella Oral History Collection, interview with Pearl Wedro, n.d.

In an industry built on the bonds of masculine skill, fur unions had difficulty effectively addressing questions of gender equality on a sustained basis, though the ILFWU made some valiant efforts in the US before it was destroyed by the Cold War.<sup>86</sup> The US union attempted to mobilize women workers and workers' wives in combined women's committees, but the smaller Canadian union was only able to create homemakers' auxiliaries, dedicated primarily to "helping our men fight for better working conditions and better lives for our families".<sup>87</sup> Once the merger with the Butcher Workman was achieved in 1955, women's issues all but disappeared into the resolutely masculinist title of the union. In fur production, woman's body as labouring body seemed to increasingly fade from public, political, and even trade-union view.

#### SELLING FUR

After the union merger in 1955, the former IFLWU vice-president wrote a column on women in the Amalgamated Meat Cutters' paper, *The Butcher Workman*, without ever mentioning women *workers*. Breaking from a long tradition of fur-worker militance, he urged "cooperation" with employers in order to stabilize a faltering industry, and revival of a nineteenth-century labour strategy to boost consumption, the union label. A fund created by business and labour might then seek out a new market: the suburban housewife. She had to be convinced that fur was both practical and stylish, though he added as an afterthought that a return to cheaper furs (such as rabbit) might also reach the "wives and daughters of workers" too.<sup>88</sup>

If women workers' bodies were the locus of exploitation in the production process, they became the focus of an imagined consumer in the selling process. However, if we concentrate only on the consumer, more visible in historical sources, we would miss another form of bodily labour: workers in the retail sector. Both women and men worked as fur sellers, though a hierarchy typical of retail work existed; it was usually men (who might be master furriers) who took on managerial positions in both large and small stores. Whatever the gender of the retail worker, the work of selling reveals much about the required posture of class distinction, deference and service that were literally embodied within the work process. These insights on the nature of service work have been made by feminist labour historians

86. In part, gender issues were trumped by race concerns in the US, though dealing with Cold War attacks by the state and other unions also took up immense union energies. My reading of gender politics is taken from the IFLWU papers, convention reports, and *The Fur and Leather Worker*, though these contained little Canadian news.

87. NAC, RCMP Papers, RG 18, vol. 3526, pamphlets, The Toronto Furriers Newsletter, June 1954; CA Kheel, IFLWU Papers, vol. 25, folder 20.

88. *The Butcher Workman*, August 1955, pp. 8–10.

## The Fur Industry Label Is Needed



Figure 5. Abe Fineglass's column recommended the union label and selling more coats to suburban women as a means of revitalizing the fur business. *The Butcher Workman*, August 1955, p. 8.

for some time, even if the body was more of an “absent presence” in earlier writing.<sup>89</sup> Feminist sociologists interested in class relations, though not necessarily in Marxism, have recently turned to Bourdieu as a means of understanding the embodiment of class and gender in the microprocesses of daily life, and his writing on social reproduction does help to understand the encounter between consumer and worker in the fur salon.<sup>90</sup>

In the popular media, fur extraction was associated with skill, bravery and the outdoors (the male body), and fur consumption with frivolity, fashion and emotion (the female body). In an article on the genealogy of fur, a reporter for Canada's largest magazine began with a trapper, “Big

89. Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Saleswomen, Managers and Customers in American Department Stores, 1890–1940* (Urbana, IL, 1988). For recent writing on service labour, including its sexualization, see Dorothy Sue Cobble, “A Spontaneous Loss of Enthusiasm: the Workplace, Feminism and the Transformation of Service Jobs in the 1970s”, *ILWCH*, 56 (October 1999), pp. 23–44; Gail Reekie, *Temptations; Sex, Selling and the Department Store* (Sydney, 1993); Adkins, *Gendered Work*, ch. 4; Donica Belisle, “A Labour Force for the Consumer Century: Commodification of Canada's Largest Department Store, 1890–1940”, *Labour/le Travail*, 58 (2006), pp. 107–144.

90. Beverly Skeggs and Lisa Adkins (eds), *Feminism After Bourdieu* (Oxford, 2004). Feminist debates concerning Bourdieu's usefulness are now extensive. For one discussion of the weight he gives to social reproduction see Deborah Reed-Danahay, *Locating Bourdieu* (Bloomington, IN, 2005), p. 64.

Louis”, a “sturdy individual”, with “leathery coppertone” skin and “halting English” (probably meant to signify Métis) whose solitary winter work denoted a determined, muscular, and courageous male body. The story of fur ended with the woman consumer seeking the emotion and romance of fur: “when you show them an ermine wrap”, reported a store manager, “they all go slightly crazy”.<sup>91</sup>

Fur industry journals in the 1940s and 1950s generally imagined two types of female consumer. Some designs suggested practical wear, comfort, and respectability: these popular, lower-priced coats were marketed for the suburban housewife, the middle-class consumer. A contrasting image became more visible by the late 1940s: the sensual, sexy, sultry movie star model, wearing makeup, high heels, and jewellery, adorned in fox or mink. Montreal fur photographer June Sauer used images of Venus and Botticelli, naked women with seductive and inviting pouts on their faces,<sup>92</sup> to suggest the connection between fur, sexuality, and luxury. These latter images did reveal a trend in postwar fur consumption: more luxury furs such as mink were being purchased, at the expense of cheaper furs, previously disguised with fabricated names.<sup>93</sup> By 1961, the overall production of fur was declining in Canada, as the industry was hurt by the introduction of fake fur, high excise taxes, and consumers spending on other durables. Faced with hard times, fur workers begged the government to reduce its tax on luxury consumer goods, an ironic plea for working-class Canadians.<sup>94</sup>

Media discussions of selling also assumed that women demanded fur, though men bought it, evidenced in countless articles advising men that the most successful gift to secure (or buy back) affection was a mink for “the wife”.<sup>95</sup> Women supposedly desired fur as a form of cultural capital to be displayed for others. Fur was thus a marker of class distinction in Bourdieu’s terms, and as a gift, it was laden with notions of gendered power.<sup>96</sup> Because image and style, not warmth and comfort, were seen to be key to selling, advice to salespersons included tips on how to have the woman buyer re-imagine her body. “Wear furs and look younger”, and “Show off that

91. *Maclean's Magazine*, 15 March 1945, p. 11. Scholarship on gender and consumption points to the association of women consumers with emotion and desire, even irrational acts.

92. Nadeau, *Fur Nation*, ch. 3.

93. After dyeing, manufacturers had previously added exotic labels – e.g. the transformation of skunk into Alaskan sable; Leonard Knott, “Furs, a Bigger Business than Ever”, *Canadian Business*, February 1950, p. 26.

94. “Mock Mink Man-Made”, *Life*, 5 December 1955, pp. 72–76 and NAC, Cooperative Commonwealth Papers MG 28 IV I, vol. 491, Fur Industry 1952 file, Brief for the Minister of Finance by the IFLWU. Aboriginal trappers also protested royalty taxes: see NAC, RG 10, Dept. of Mines and Resources, [Indian Affairs], C 8093 v. 6732, f 420–1–5–3 “Royalties on furs,” 1945.

95. *The Financial Post*, 13 December 1958; *Canadian Business*, February 1950, pp. 24–27.

96. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, tr. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA, 1984), pp. 201–202.

schoolgirl complexion with a dainty fur”, were suggested as selling pitches.<sup>97</sup> The workers expected to offer these lines – emotional acting being part of the work process – had to walk a fine line between deference and authority. The customer generally had “no idea what she wants and [...] because of this she is more readily influenced by the salesperson who manifests a greater knowledge than her”, advised *The Canadian Furrier*.<sup>98</sup> “Adopting an authoritative manner”, was important, but so was “sensing the woman’s mood” and psychology. As a less than knowledgeable luxury seeker, the female consumer could be won over if the retail seller could make her feel physically distinctive and stylish – at worst, women consumers were presented as simply vain and susceptible to flattery.

Clerks had to be well dressed and coiffed, knowledgeable, but also assume a posture of class courtesy to the customer. Of course, fur selling varied according to the venue. Holt Renfrew’s elite carriage trade provided a different challenge than the array of customers and price tags in the Eatons’ (department store) fur salon (the very name meant to denote bourgeois style), which differed again from small establishments where manufacturing and retailing were combined. Whatever the venue, many sellers felt they should offer enhanced personal service to fur buyers: they might memorize regular customer names or take on extra work, mediating with the accounts or delivery offices to speed up the transaction.

The retail fur seller, therefore, had to offer a certain bodily performance. This emphasis on the worker’s presentation of self underlines the way in which the body is both a source of labour and also something that retail workers had to *labour upon* to make it presentable and appealing. The overlap between this “official” and “cultural” body work, as Schilling points out, is often characteristic of service labour.<sup>99</sup> Class distinctions are subtly ingrained through the repeated gestures, inflections, and self presentation necessary for the seller’s job: the body thus becomes a “constant reminder of socio-sexual power relations”<sup>100</sup> in the workplace. Performance may thus help to constitute the labouring body, but there are important differences between Bourdieu’s concept of performance as part of habitus, with his emphasis on the conditioning power of social norms and institutions, and postmodernist conceptions of performance as the linguistic reiteration of discursive norms – the latter offering less consideration of the social, structural circumstances circumscribing women’s choices.<sup>101</sup>

97. M.D. Gellman, “Get Ready for Christmas”, *CF*, (Fall 1942), p. 10.

98. E.C. Tarler, “How a Sales Person Should Sell Furs”, *CF*, (Fall 1941), p. 11. On emotional labour, see Arlie Hochschild, *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (Berkeley, CA, 1983).

99. Schilling, *The Body in Culture*, p. 72.

100. Moi, “What Is a Woman?”, p. 283.

101. Lovell, “Thinking Feminism with and against Bourdieu”, pp. 11–32, 15. For a materialist-

In large department stores, more female clerks were involved as they moved into the fur salon from other areas of selling. A quota of sales was sometimes required, then commission paid as further incentive. In one large Montreal department store, the fur manager described his ideal fur saleswoman as someone who was extremely polite and careful with customers. He complained bitterly about one of his female workers whose posture was less than deferential; she is “impossible [...] how many clients have we lost to her bad behaviour? I had to intercede in one case and save a client” who [the seller] was arguing with over whether she should buy “black or brown fur”.<sup>102</sup> Customers from this store also complained with great umbrage if they sensed bad treatment in the fur salon; clearly, they expected *superlative* attention from these retail workers.

There were limited avenues for resistance for the retail worker; giving a fussy customer a frank opinion on black or brown fur might have been one means of talking back, though there was undoubtedly other behind the scenes complaints as well.<sup>103</sup> As well as demanding customers, workers in this fur salon had to cope with the regular physical stresses of department store work: long hours in certain seasons, layoffs in others, standing on the job, surveillance by critical managers, and sometimes moderating contentious relations with competing salespeople or those working on renovating and mending coats. One former seller noted that the only negative aspect of work was “boredom” since crowds did not swarm the fur salon.<sup>104</sup> But the necessity and stress of making a sale once a customer came in was surely all the more critical.

Customer service was thus the essence of the labour process for fur sellers, and as Lan argues in a contemporary context, retail labour selling the promise of female beauty often requires a mirroring body (the stylish salesperson), a disciplined body (deferential gestures), and a communicating body (offering knowledge).<sup>105</sup> The last two were key for fur sellers, who had to convince the customer that she would be transformed with fur. Not surprisingly, interviews with sellers suggest they saw their work in terms of the skills needed. One seller pointed to the expertise needed to quickly assess a woman’s body type and match this to the right style.<sup>106</sup> Another stressed the importance of selling one’s specialized knowledge as well as courtesy and attentiveness – “treat every customer as you would want to be treated”. Good service did not mean being overly personal; “never talk about religion or politics” to a customer was a mantra in their

feminist critique of performance see Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure*, pp. 115–120.

102. Université de Montréal, Écoles des Hautes Commerciales Archives (HEC), Dupuis Frères Papers, box 21656, employee file 2221.

103. Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures*.

104. Interview with BC, 1 December 2005.

105. Pei-Chia Lan, “Working in a Neon Cage”.

106. Interview with BC, 1 December 2005.

store.<sup>107</sup> Sellers recall that helping a woman visualize her future with the coat – “how long it would be a benefit, how heads would turn” – could be the key to a sale. Moreover, they had to quickly assess who was actually paying the bill; for example, parents sometimes bought their daughters fur coats as part of a trousseau, so selling to more than one person required a delicate verbal approach.<sup>108</sup>

The female fur-wearing body took centre stage in popular discourse, and these images were undeniably important in conveying an image of sexualized and economically dependent femininity. Feminist scholarship has effectively highlighted the sexualization of women’s bodies, particularly in relation to consumption, but this should not avert our attention from the related labour of selling femininity to women. If the fur coat denoted a certain cultural capital to the buyer, it was also, quite literally, a means of making a living for the seller. These very different relations of women’s bodies to fur remind us all too well that class conditions our experience of the body in a fundamentally crucial manner. In the work of retail selling, women’s bodies served both as instruments of labour power as well as the conduit for symbols of sensual and dependent femininity. Although the socially constructed feminine desire for fur may have crossed class lines, the ability to fulfil that desire did not.

## CONCLUSION

There are deep ironies behind the production of the fur coat in mid-twentieth century Canada. Post-World-War-II affluence was presumed to offer women access to the consumer item that adorned icons like Marilyn Monroe. Yet, this industry was contracting by the 1950s, with negative consequences for Indigenous and working-class women labouring to produce the skins and the coat. Moreover, the idealized female body may have been a sensuous one adorned with fur, but this cultural image stood in contrast to the real, living, and exploited bodies of working-class and Indigenous women. By historicizing the fur coat, we can uncover the labour and social relations that made the coat possible, and in the process, ask what these social relations reveal about women’s labouring bodies.

Aboriginal women’s skinning labour and their role in bush production were obscured for some time by masculinist ideologies and by the patterns of accumulation tied to capitalist enterprises and colonial institutions. Colonizers often categorized Indigenous women’s bodies as primitive, unusually strong, and close to nature. Although arduous work did shape their physical, bodily existence, this labour was not seen by Indigenous women as unusual but as a necessary part of kin and community

107. Interview with GL, 13 January 2006.

108. Interview with BC, 1 December 2005.

subsistence, interwoven too with cultural endurance. Prevailing colonialist images, whether the sexualized “squaw”, or the idealized “Eskimo” mother with papoose, must therefore be seen as two-sided, as a racialized distortion of women’s bodies *and* as an erasure of their labouring bodies. These derisive representations of the Indigenous woman can not be analysed only within the realms of culture and discourse, nor considered their materialized effects, for the colonialist marking of the body was closely intertwined with processes of exploitation and the extraction of surplus value. To comprehend women’s embodiment, in other words, we need to connect the discursive construction of sexual and racial difference with actual social practices and experiences of women’s lives in specific historical contexts.

The labour of women sewing fur coats has also been obscured, in part because of their marginalization as temporary and unskilled workers in workplaces shaped profoundly by gendered power relations. Women’s secondary status in the industry meant they were seen as a fleeting, expendable investment for capital, even though they faced many of the same bodily hazards of fur work as the more skilled artisans. After unionization in the late 1930s and early 1940s, fur workers secured improved conditions, often through another form of bodily exertion: protest, sometimes vigorously and physically asserted by politicized women workers. But it was difficult to sustain this activity or to address gender inequities in the workplace when an influx of immigrants, political repression, the Cold War, and industrial contraction characterized the industry. Retail workers selling fur have also been sidelined by the inordinate attention focussed on the imagined female body consuming the fur coat. The work of selling fur, nonetheless, reveals the embodiment of class in the requisite gestures and practices of service work, as well as very different experiences shaping the body of the woman worker and the consumer of luxury products.

Ironically, contemporary feminist writing has tended to reproduce the erasure of the labouring body in fur, with its disinterest in women’s wage labour and its fascination with the body as discursive construct or performance. Challenging this “idealist turn”<sup>109</sup> in feminist scholarship, and reasserting the importance of the “material” for our studies of the working-class body have been two intertwined intentions of this article. Certainly, body studies have encouraged research that has stretched our focus beyond the workplace and pressed us to consider how the gendered and raced working-class body and social life intersected; moreover, some recent feminist writing has declared an interest in “recuperating the material” in body studies, a promising salvo.<sup>110</sup>

109. Harvey, *Spaces*, p. 130.

110. Momin Rahman and Anne Witz, “What Really Matters? The Elusive Quality of the Material in Feminist Thought”, *Feminist Theory*, 4:3 (2003), pp. 243–261, 245.

However, scholars both inside and outside working-class history see “old-fashioned” approaches emanating from historical materialism as too deterministic or economic for this recuperation project. I would suggest the contrary. First, there is a “kernel” of materialist insight worth preserving, as Rosemary Hennessy argues, in the concept of surplus value: in the last resort, this inevitable expropriation of labour from workers’ bodies is a driving force of capitalism.<sup>111</sup> Women’s bodies, of course, were not only a means to surplus value; they also assumed a symbolic value related to their sexualized and racialized representation. Understanding the gendered dimensions of bodily labour thus necessitates close attention to the dialectical relationship of a sexed body to social life so crucial to Simone de Beauvoir’s writing, and elaborated on later by materialist-feminist theorists.

Second, feminist historical materialism has much to recommend as a method of unravelling class and gender formation as lived historical processes. This excavation does not simply rest upon an analysis of the macro contours of capitalist accumulation (though that should not be discounted) but involves a recognition that the material permeates all aspects of class, gender and race power relations. It also requires continual (re)theorizing “from the bottom up”, as we examine the productive and reproductive labour, the everyday practices, interactions, and understandings of women’s lives. These goals of historical recovery have been challenged by some poststructuralist writing, particularly those authors stressing the irretrievable cultural and linguistic construction of experience. However, if we connect feminist historical materialism to a persistent, critical reflexivity towards our sources and assumptions, I do not believe we will rush inexorably down the slippery slope to a naive essentialism and a biological reductionism about the body.

Third, a feminist political economy of embodiment recognizes the need to examine critically the social and historical contexts in which bodies live, work, and create personal and social lives, with acute attention to questions of power, inequality, and resistance. The labouring body, as “real, living, sensuous, objective being” always exists in social relation to other bodies and the “exercise of the powers that constitute social life”.<sup>112</sup> Those powers encompass the fault lines of gender and race as well as class; women’s experience of fur work was shaped by patterns of masculine and colonial power as well as capitalism, and by women’s everyday negotiation of these interconnected relationships. The structural and systemic conditions of colonialism and capitalism were important to workers’ experience of their bodies, but so too were their subjective understanding of them. Fur-laden air, for instance, was considered an inevitable factor of

111. Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure*, p. 15.

112. Harvey, quoting from Marx, *Spaces*, p. 120.

production; it infiltrated, indeed violated the fur worker's body, irretrievably altering one's physical being. At the same time, we need to understand workers' subjective negotiation of these hazards – their bravado and jokes, as well as their rebellion and resistance – though these too were shaped by workers' constrained choices in a gender-segregated capitalist market place.

However constrained by the necessity and conditions of their labour, women's bodies cannot be reduced in our analysis to the disciplined and docile. Capturing the related processes of capitalist accumulation and social reproduction on one hand, and intentionality and agency on the other hand, requires a delicate balance of the objective and subjective in our search for historical bodies, one that embraces neither "body reductionism" or "liberal illusions" of individualist, heroic self.<sup>113</sup> If bodies were shaped by alienation, they sometimes also became a conduit for resistance, a means of expressing alternative ideologies or cultural practices: workers maintained the ability to reflect on, and alter their working lives. In the fur business, women's bodies were implicated within and constituted by three social processes, of capital accumulation, consumption, and colonialism, yet they could also become sites of contestation for the very forces that created and shaped them.

113. *Ibid.*, p. 119.