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Youthfulness and Immaterial Labour in the New Economy

The focus of this paper is youth and youthfulness in the contemporary economy. Drawing on theories of immaterial labour, the paper moves beyond an existing focus on ‘young people’ as capital accumulating subjects to theorise the production of youthfulness as a quality that circulates through immaterial economies and that is mobilised to confer a particular form of value on consumer goods, service interactions, and labouring subjectivities. The production of youthfulness is made possible through relations between the micro-level production and consumption that takes place within youth cultures and modes of sociality, the production practices and marketing activities of firms, and young people whose capacities for embodiment, sociability and youthful consumption cultivated both within and outside of paid employment contribute to their constitution as labouring subjects. Within this network of relations, youthfulness is mobilised to distribute playful affects, offer the possibility of hedonistic leisure/pleasure, and confer symbolic distinctions of cutting edge style. These economies of youthfulness constitute a specific means by which production, consumption, labour and leisure intersect in the labouring subjectivities immaterial products of the contemporary service economy, and contributes to formation of valorised and devalorised youth subjectivities in relation to the new economy.

Introduction

In recent years, shifts in the social organization and practice of labour incorporated in terms such as post-Fordism have necessitated new perspectives on the relationship between labour, subjectivity and economic production. Part of the motivation for this re-examination has been the emergence of what has been described as a ‘new economy’ in which immaterial products such as interactions, experiences, signs and affects constitute the product of the work, and in which the personal qualities of a worker are critical to attributions of value. One of the key developments in this area has been the suggestion that immaterial products are produced and valorized within networks of social and economic relations that position the formation and enactment of subjectivities as critical to the labour involved (Adkins, 2005), and that the contemporary labour entails the attribution of qualities both to subjectivities and to the outcomes of their work. In this context, qualities and personal capacities are produced and distributed through networks of heterogeneous actors, all of whom contribute to the production, distribution and valorization of qualities and capacities, as well as the attribution of these valorized qualities to labouring subjectivities. Amongst other terms, this relationship between subjectivity and the practice and products of labour has been described as the emergence of an ‘economy of qualities’ (Callon et al, 2002).

In this context, this paper develops the concept of youthfulness as a quality that circulates in new economy to attribute a particular kind of value to immaterial products and to labouring subjectivities themselves. In this, the paper draws together and responds to a number of trends and concerns within the literature on post-Fordist work, especially the suggestion that notions of youthfulness are increasingly implicated in the cultural politics of the post-Fordist economy. Lauren Berlant (2011) has suggested that in post-Fordism, youthful subjects are increasingly represented as repositories of desire for symbols of the ‘good life’, and, with a gendered

inflection, McRobbie (2011) argues that young women are now positioned as symbols of the value and self-actualisation said to be offered within flexible labour markets and the expansion of aestheticized consumption. In a similar vein, Ruddick (2003) traces the increasing centrality of youthfulness within the cultural politics of desire as it applies to contemporary consumption and labour, suggesting that notions of “youth, youthful bodies, youthful energy and creativity” (p 353) have come to signify desirable attributes of workers, consumers and products themselves, and that this is amplified within the networks of consumption, production and labour that characterize consumer capitalism. As well as this, young labour is critical to the contemporary service sector, especially the retail, hospitality and interactive service sectors where young labour is valued for the flexibility that young workers are said to possess and for the low wages that employers in countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia may pay to young employees (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2008). In this context, youth and youthfulness is becoming deeply intertwined with the labouring subjectivities, practices and products of the new economy.

Developing these observations, this paper draws on theories of immaterial or affective labour (Lazzarato, 1996; Negri, 1999; Hardt and Negri, 2004) to theorise youth and youthfulness as qualities and affects produced in the context of contemporary post-Fordist labour. The paper locates youthfulness as a quality and an affect produced through complex relations between the micro-level production and consumption that takes place within youth cultures and modes of sociality, the production practices and marketing activities of firms, and young people whose capacities for embodiment, sociability and youthful consumption cultivated both within and outside of paid employment contribute to their constitution as labouring subjects. In the new economy, the quality of youthfulness is mobilized to distribute playful affects, offer the possibility of hedonistic leisure/pleasure, and confer symbolic distinctions of cutting edge style. In this, youth and youthfulness are qualities that contribute to the attribution of value, including valorisation and devalorisation of labour. The production and circulation of youthfulness thereby constitutes one specific means by which production, consumption, labour and leisure intersect in the labouring subjectivities, brand/consumer identities, and immaterial products valued within the contemporary service economy. My point of departure will be an interrogation of what I will suggest is the approach to youth that is currently hegemonic in both social policy interventions and in sociological literature, which is the notion of youth as the accumulation of capitals that are possessed by young people and sold on the labour market in exchange for a wage.

Youth as Capital Accumulation

The formation of young people as labouring subjects is a key preoccupation of sociological research as well as governmental interventions into the labour market. Contemporary social policy regimes targeted at youth and work are focused on the need to govern young people’s accumulation of ‘human capital’, a term which originates in neo-classical economics and is now deployed in order to understand the skills and personal capacities possessed by a worker that can create value for an employer, and that thereby can be exchanged for employment on the labour market (Sukarieh and Tannock, 2008). Whilst the notion of human capital is not specific to youth, in governmental approaches to youth it is intertwined with notions of youth development originating in developmental psychology and neuroscience (Wyn and White, 1997), and

essentialised as a quasi-natural, developmental process in which youth itself becomes the development of the possession of the capacity to labour, and of personal capitals that are valued within the labour market (see e.g., World Bank, 2007 for a clear articulation of this intertwining of developmental and human capital concepts).

Sociological attention to youth and work has been critical of the individualistic, under-socialised assumptions of the neo-classical approach (Ball et al, 2000), and critiques of the individualism and biological reductionism of developmental psychology are also well established in the sociology of youth (Wyn and White, 1997). Sociologists have interrogated the impact of neoliberal employment policies on young people, who are over-represented in casualised, precarious and poorly paid employment (Furlong and Kelly, 2005) such as that to be found in retail, hospitality and other interactive service labour. A key concern has been the impact of class inequalities on labour market outcomes within neoliberal policy regimes that stress individual striving as the basis for labour market engagement (e.g., MacDonald and Marsh, 2005). Rather than the individual accumulation of human capital to be sold on a free market as in the neo-liberal imagining, sociological approaches to youth transitions have focused on demonstrating how classed and gendered distributions of resources shape young people's capacity to engage with a labour market that is itself organised around systemic structural inequalities (Roberts, Clarke and Wallace, 1994; Johnston, MacDonald, Shildrick, Webster and Simpson, 2005). The key implication here is that youth develop capitals in ways that are socially organised within inequalities that are manifested on the level of young people's biographies and experiences of work.

Whilst sociological research has provided a critical lens on the social differentiation of labour market experiences according to structural inequalities, the key difference between governmental and sociological approaches to youth has been the individualistic focus of the former, and the emphasis on social differentiation of the latter. Social policies aim to govern a homogeneous developmental process, whereas sociologists have emphasised the social differentiation of young people's relationship with work and the production of divisions within the labour force. However, sociological critiques have remained within the framework of capital accumulation. In this sense, the sociological literature has remained within what Adkins (2005) describes as the 'social contract' view of labour, in which the possession of capital that can be exchanged on a market in return for a wage is the defining feature of a worker's capacity to create value. However, as the transitions concept has developed and been institutionalized into social policy regimes and academic critiques, the concept of the self-possession of capitals as the basis for the formation of labouring subjectivities has been called into question by shifts in relationship between production, subjectivity and labour. These shifts, I will suggest, imply the need for a fundamental revision of the meaning of youth in its relationship to work. To properly situate these critiques, the next section of this paper provides an overview of theories of post-Fordism from the perspective of immaterial labour. Inspired in particular by the work of Adkins (2005a; 2005b) and others, my use of these theories will suggest that rather than the accumulation of capitals, youth should be understood as an immaterial quality that is produced through labour and circulates in order to confer value upon products and labouring subjectivities in the contemporary economy.

From Capital Accumulation to Immaterial Labour

The concept of immaterial labour has gained prominence in the context of shifts in the social organization of employment and production associated with the movement to post-Fordism, and shares concerns with a range of theories (e.g. Castells, 2009) that describe shifts in the social organization of work from the static hierarchies of industrial modernity to flexible production networks and precarious employment conditions that now exist across the class hierarchy of contemporary capitalist societies. These changes are also driven by economic globalization facilitated by instantaneous digital communication, and the resulting emergence of economic networks distributed across time and space in new ways. However, more than a shift in the social organization of employment, one of the key driving forces behind this conceptual proliferation is the economic centrality of service, knowledge and cultural economies in post-Fordist societies. For theorists such as Lazzarato (1996) and Hardt and Negri (2004), the economic centrality of these sectors mean that post-Fordist economies are best understood in terms of the performance of immaterial labour, or labour that produces information, signs, symbols, affects, relationships, and modes of cultural representation. Immaterial labour, these theorists suggest, is critical to understanding contemporary subjectivities in their relation to economic activity.

Immaterial labour implies a new relationship between labour and the production of subjectivity. In particular, theories of immaterial labour suggest that activities that contribute to the production of value are not restricted to paid employment. Whilst this has long been recognised (for example in feminist critiques of Marxism (McRobbie, 2011)), immaterial labour suggests that the dissolution between what is and is not labour, between production and consumption, and between the time of work and the time outside work, constitutes a key characteristic of post-Fordist economies. Since immaterial labour encompasses activities not recognised as work (including leisure activities and consumption practices), the entirety of life itself – including consumption, leisure, and day to day sociality – becomes a form of labour. Terranova (2000) describes this in terms of ‘free labour’, in which leisure practices or hobbies motivated by the personal desire for relationality, consumption and enjoyment take place within social arrangements that make these practices into inputs for the production of economic value. Examples of this process include online chat room moderators in services run by large internet service providers, coders of the free ‘open source’ software movement whose work becomes the basis for licensed software, or the online bloggers and restaurant critics whose amateur reviews have become critical to the contemporary hospitality industry (Kuehn and Corrigan, 2013). In all of these instances, the capacity for both production and consumption are part of broader modes of sociality that are made into critical sources of creativity and value for capital. Immaterial labour creates value from the production of subjectivity as such throughout the entire social world, and constitutes ‘a desire of labour immanent to late capitalism’ (Terranova, 2000, p 51).

Immaterial labour also constitutes an intensification of the call to ‘become subjects’ through work, in the context of new demands on workers to invest and produce their subjectivities through labour. One way in which this can be understood is through the concept of affective labour (Hardt and Negri, 2004), which describes modes of labour which involve the production of interactions, relationships, modes of embodiment, sensations, and affects, and which are in

this sense constitutive of human subjectivities. The notion of affective labour as I use it here draws on the concept of affect based on the work of Deleuze and Guattari (2007) and Massumi (2002), in which affect describes the insertion of bodies into relations that resonate as trans-personal embodied sensations. One key example of affective labour is interactive service work, in which face to face interactions and the sensations that these interactions entail constitute the main product of the labour. Workers' basic capacities for relationality or empathy and modes of corporeal and aesthetic embodiment are directly implicated in the practice of affective labour, making this kind of work a significant site for subject formation in post-Fordist societies. In this sense, labour becomes synonymous with the production of subjectivity in general, and becomes biopolitical in ways that encompass the vitality of social life as a whole.

In operating as a site for the production of subjectivity in general, immaterial labour makes the notion of the capital accumulating subject inadequate for understanding the formation of workers. This is because, as explained in detail by Adkins (2005a; 2005b) immaterial economies undermine the social contract model of labour, in which the capacity for labour is accumulated by a worker outside of the labour force, and then sold to an employer in the labour relation. Whilst the social contract view of labour was always established via the exclusion of certain subjects (ie, women, and here we could include children and young people as well) from the capacity for self-possession, Adkins argues that immaterial economies operate in such a way as to entirely rework the relationship between labour, subjectivity and value. On the one hand, immaterial economies create value from desires for relationality and enjoyment that are basic to human subjectivity, rather than reflecting the accumulation of discrete capitals. This makes the notion of capitals that are accumulated outside of work and then exchanged on the labour market difficult to sustain, since the relationship between what is inside, and what is outside of work is more difficult to discern. Moreover, Adkins suggests that in the production of signs, affects and relations, the value of immaterial labour is not merely a reflection of the characteristics of a worker, but rather emerges within a contingent ensemble of relations and practices that are critical to constituting the value and profitability of a given practice. Value in immaterial economies is an 'investment of desire' (Negri, 1999, p 87) – that is, established in relational practices taking place within instances of sociality that may be either within or outside of paid employment. The capacity for both labour and consumption is therefore not self-possessed of contemporary immaterial workers, but is a property of the 'multitude' (Hardt and Negri, 2004), or an aspect of the biopolitics of subject formation in the contemporary economy.

Immaterial Youthfulness

What does this mean for the notion of youth in its relationship to labour? In response to this question I want to suggest that rather than a process of capital accumulation, youth may be usefully understood in terms of the production and attribution of the *quality of youthfulness* as a dimension of the labouring subjectivities, practices, symbols, sensations and affects that are enacted in the operation of immaterial economies. Rather than the undefinable virtuality attributed to youth in original articulations of immaterial labour (Lazzarato, 1996, p 135), I argue that youthfulness is produced as a specific and highly valorized quality that is attributed to workers and to their immaterial products as part of the social organization of this economic

activity. Youthfulness therefore operates not in terms of the self-possession of capitals, but rather as a heterogeneous quality produced within forms of sociality that are enacted both within and outside of the formal labour relation, and that is infused with meaning and intensity through the process of immaterial labour. In particular, youthfulness is produced as the affective capacity for playful enjoyment, cutting edge taste-making, savvy consumption, and desirable embodiment. These qualities – and youthfulness as such – emerge in relation to other factors such as branding practices, employment practices, and the overall search for new avenues of profitability on the part of capital. In the process, youthfulness may also be understood as an affect that is produced in a relation between workers, employers, brands and products and is offered for consumption in the immaterial economy. It is in this way that economic value is conferred onto youth and onto the products of young labour, and it is in this way that the quality of youthfulness takes its place as a key input into the creation of value and profit in certain sectors of the economy.

However, whilst they are becoming increasingly influential, theories of immaterial or affective labour have not been without their critics, and my argument below also addresses some of these critiques. In an important and wide-ranging review of affective labour, Gill and Pratt (2008) raise the relationship between affect and difference as a problem for theories of affective labour. In particular, Gill and Pratt suggest that in attempting to encompass work in a variety of sectors (including highly paid knowledge workers, and interactive service workers in retail), theories of affective labour conflate very different forms of labour located in very different parts of the labour force. Moreover, and following this critique, Gill and Pratt (2008) also raise the political significance of affect itself, emphasising the importance of interrogating the relationship between affective flows and normative or disciplinary relations at work that may be rendered invisible by homogeneous notions of the affective worker. In developing the quality of youthfulness as an affect produced through immaterial labour, my argument below also addresses these critiques. In particular, I show how the quality of youthfulness is made heterogeneous by the social relations of production involved in different kinds of affective labour. This includes the way that normative and disciplinary relations are enacted through the requirement to contribute valorisable, pleasurable youthfulness to the products and interactions offered to consumers. In this vein, my discussion shows how normative heterosexual femininity is imbricated in the production of valorized youthfulness, how the capacity to produce playful affects contributes to classed inequalities within the youth labour force, and thereby how the circulation and valorisation of youthfulness contributes to classed and gendered differentiations within the youth labour force.

My method is not to begin with a pre-existing focus on a particular sector, or even necessarily with sectors in which young workers are especially concentrated (such as retail and hospitality). Instead, my method is inspired by precepts of actor-network theory (Latour, 2005), which encourages analysis to follow the ‘thing itself’ through the relations that make its existence possible. With this in mind, I will follow what I approach here as flows of youthfulness that circulate through the social relations of labour in different parts of the immaterial economy. My argument thus necessarily draws on work conducted in a variety of sub-disciplinary and theoretical perspectives, and draws in particular on literature on youth subcultures, leisure and identity practices, digital social networking practices, the role of notions of youthfulness retail

sector, and the role of young labour in interactive service labour. Following the thread of youthfulness has led me to economically significant practices both within and outside of paid employment, as well to sectors (such as culture industries and interactive services) that constitute existing focal points for theoretical debates about contemporary labour. In this context, I have tried to be faithful to the original context of other scholars' work, whilst extending the implications of the existing evidence to trace the networks of economic relations that give youthfulness its content and affective qualities.

The Circulation of Valorised Youthfulness in the New Economy

Since the emergence of mass consumption following the second world war, hedonistic consumption and a high level of popular cultural awareness have been positioned as important characteristics of youth. This is evidenced by the critical role of marketing in the invention of 'the teenager' (Bennett, 1999; cf Abrams, 1959), and the importance of youth consumption for the metropolitan night time economy (Hollands, 2002) and popular culture more generally (Redhead, 1990), in which young people's consumption plays a critical role in defining what counts as fashionable and cool. This role as drivers of cultural production is recognised in a by-now vast literature that analyses youth in terms of the production or consumption of popular culture (e.g. Miles, 2000; Malbon, 1999; Bennett, 1999; Bennett, 2000; Redhead, 1990). While the association of youth with consumption has in the past been critiqued as leading to a sociological neglect of young people as workers (Tannock, 2001) here I want to suggest that it is precisely the connection between youth and consumption that makes youthfulness a valorized product of immaterial economies.

Contemporary youth cultures are modes of sociality that take place through both the production and consumption of cultural goods such as music and fashion. They are contexts in which genres of aesthetic expression are established, tastes are cultivated, and cultural goods are produced, exchanged and consumed. The modes of sociality that underpin youth cultures are deeply connected with the structure of economic production, and have shifted with the movement to post-Fordism. Foundational theories in this area (Hall and Jefferson, 1976; Hebdidge, 1987) positioned youth subcultures as modes of classed resistance to contradictions in the structure of post-war capitalism, including the beginnings of the fragmentation of working class communities that eventually formed the basis of social theories of individualization (Beck, 1992). With the shift to post-Fordism, youth cultures are now characterized by increasing fluidity and flexibility in their membership and modes of cultural expression. In youth cultural research, the language of 'subculture' has been challenged by terms such as 'neo-tribes' (Bennett, 1999), which describes fluid, networked modes of sociality organised around specific, but nevertheless shifting and heterogeneous practices of cultural production and hedonistic consumption. Whilst recent years have seen both an explosion in the diversity and visibility of youth cultures (Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003), their concentration in urban centers and connection with modes of middle class consumption have been described in terms of the circulation of 'metrocentric economies of cool' (Farrugia, 2014), in which the resources for the adoption of youthful subjectivities have become deeply intertwined with the operation of urban service, leisure and cultural economies of the global north (Farrugia, 2016).

Whilst the hedonistic consumption and modes of collective identity offered by youth cultures have been described as an alternative to neoliberal models of possessive individualism (Riley, Morrey and Griffin, 2010), they nevertheless operate as critical sources of value for immaterial economies, especially those in which a feeling of cultural ‘cool’ and edgy taste-making contribute to the value of the product. Participants of ‘underground’ youth cultures are both producers, consumers, and taste-makers, involved in both the creative production of cultural products and the designation of aesthetic distinctions and categories of taste within a scene (Smith and Maughan, 1998). Whilst participants in underground youth cultures position themselves outside of the mainstream ‘creative industries’, connections exist between youth cultural practices and the work of branding agencies, marketing companies and mainstream actors in the cultural industries, who deliberately cultivate relationships with leading members of youth cultures in order to incorporate developments in aesthetic style originating in these scenes. For example, Arvidsson (2007) describes the emergence of event marketing industries in which influential figures in local electronic music cultures are provided with resources to throw free, relatively autonomous parties which are sponsored by large corporations. These parties form part of larger events connected with the marketing of new products that are (the organisers hope) imbued with a feeling of contemporariness and youthfulness created by the youth cultural activity taking place within the event. The aesthetic creativity and taste-making that takes place within these scenes therefore constitutes what Arvidsson describes as form of free labour for the association of a brand with youthful creativity and contemporary style (Arvidsson, 2007, p 10).

The importance of youth subcultures for the new economy can be seen in the critical input they provide into the aesthetic trends of the fashion industry. In her work on British fashion, McRobbie (2003) charts the relationship between young fashion designers and broader trends in fashion design, arguing that it is the labour of young workers situated within youth subcultures that provides the driving force of the British fashion industry. McRobbie’s young participants become interested in fashion through their engagement with local youth taste cultures, and this capacity for cultural production is capitalized upon by different actors within the fashion industry. In the (often unpaid) labour of young British fashion graduates, McRobbie finds the creative origins of a micro-economy in which new styles emerge from the ‘experimental ‘funhouse’ of the British youth culture and club culture scene’ (p 183). These subcultures form a social and aesthetic resource for the creative labour of young British fashion designers, whose ideas are often stolen and reproduced by large firms in the course of unpaid or poorly paid internships and jobs. Youthfulness is explicitly invoked in this industry as the basis for creative energy and talent, and is understood not in terms of capital accumulation, but is essentialized as a capacity for cutting edge taste-making:

‘[fashion magazines] construct style and fashion as insider knowledge, possessed by young, urban taste makers whose seemingly innate sense of ‘what’s going on’ sets them apart from the masses and puts them in the lead’ (p 154)

The mobilization of youthfulness and its attribution to the products of the fashion industry is therefore a form of labour which transcends distinctions between the inside and the outside of employment, taking places through an assemblage of relations between the sociality of youth cultures and marketing and brand differentiation strategies, as well as directly co-opted into the aesthetic products of firms. These industries explicitly mobilise youthfulness as a playful, creative energy driving a capacity for aesthetically discerning consumption and production, a sense of cutting-edge or contemporary style, and a mode of hedonistic pleasure-seeking. Here I want to suggest that youthfulness is turned into a quality that is meant to convey a particular kind of affect – youthfulness here is mobilized as an affective flow that attributes value to aesthetic products and that circulates within this form of immaterial labour to confer a distinct and highly desirable form of cultural value.

Youthfulness and the Value of Young Labour

The drive to valorize youthfulness also both exploits and confers value on young labour, and the capacity to produce valorized youthfulness emerges within specific labouring practices and relations with employers. The value of a youthful ‘feeling’ is recognised in research in the field of business and marketing, which advises that brands cultivate particular ‘atmospheres’ in stores in line with the dispositions of their consumers, and which describes ‘youthful’ brands as those that have fun, high energy, and contemporary feel (Aaker, 1997). The cultivation of the appropriate ‘atmosphere’ within a service venue or retail outlet is described as a means by which to increase market share (Babin and Attaway, 2000) and create stronger consumer attachments to particular brands (Orth, Limon and Rose, 2010), and the attribution of youthfulness to products is considered a means by which to facilitate modes of hedonistic consumption amongst consumers (Orth et al, 2000).

More than merely the atmosphere of a retail outlet, these strategies also shape the labouring practices required of young bodies. This can be most clearly seen in the role of youthfulness in interactive service labour such as retail and hospitality, sectors which rely on young labour (Lucas, 1997; Warhurt and Nickson, 2007) and require embodied performances and interactions with clients or customers as a means to confer value upon products or upon the interactions themselves. In retail and hospitality, young labouring bodies gain their value through the mobilization of young workers’ tastes and consumer practices and that intersect in significant ways with brand differentiation strategies. The work of Pettinger (2004; 2005) shows how young women working in fashion retail stores are expected to embody the aesthetic and symbolic image of the brand in the course of their labour, dressing in clothes parallel to the style of their stores and modelling the image of the brand. Fashion retail outlets also recruit young workers from their own customer base, offering young workers with the right look and youthful style employment while they are themselves shopping in an outlet (Williams and Connell, 2010). This practice interpolates young people as savvy *consumers of the brand*, rather than workers or employees, and in the act of selling and customer service, young workers in Williams and Connell (2010) positioned themselves as consumers of the brand in their interactions with customers.

Critically, workers' association with particularly fashionable brands also acted as symbolic markers of 'cool' in social interactions with other young people with similar tastes, and young workers in the work of Williams and Connell (2010) described their work as a means by which to cultivate a closer relationship with cool brands. In this, the circulation of fashionable youthfulness comes full circle within the consumption/production nexus of immaterial labour, flowing back into young people's day to day socialities to attribute value to young subjectivities. The performance of branded subjectivities and modes of branded cool thereby also takes place outside of formal employment, in practices that are enmeshed within young people's own social networks and relationships. This is exemplified by the incorporation of digital 'selfies' and online social networking into the attribution of value and cultural style to particular brands and consumer goods, which is described by Abidin (2016) as a kind of 'subversive frivolity' that confers value upon young heterosexual femininity online. Abidin's work describes young women who use selfies to model branded consumer goods online, drawing their digital networks into contact with brands and conferring value on themselves and their social networks. These models and their friends attend events hosted by brands, sharing selfies as a way to demonstrate that they are 'in-scene' (Abidin, 2016a, p 4). Abidin (2016b) emphasises the backstage feminine body work practices that these Instagram selfies require, including knowledge of makeup and fashion, as well as practiced modes of bodily comportment (an inclined head that emphasises the cheekbones, body positioned to emphasise hips and waist, and particular facial expressions) that are required to create an attractive selfie that will receive positive attention online. Here, the playful cultivation and skilful performance of heterosexual feminine embodiment confers value both upon brands and upon the digital presence of young women's bodies.

The Heterogeneity of Youthfulness and the Normativity of Affective Labour

As the example just given suggests, the mobilisation of youthfulness within networks of immaterial labour is a key mechanism by which young bodies are valorised and devalorised in relation to the requirements of the contemporary economy. In this vein, here I want to suggest that this is critical to the relationship between affective labour, social differentiation within the labour force, and the normative or disciplinary dimensions of work as raised by Gill and Pratt (2008). In her exploration of the emergence and economic centrality of the service sector, Linda McDowell describes the emergence of new classed and gendered divisions that are enacted through the work practices and public visibility of labouring bodies. McDowell argues that 'the body is...the key site where strategies of control are felt and enforced' (McDowell, 2009, p 225). In this context, I suggest that the mobilisation of particular forms of valorised youthfulness operates as a disciplinary requirement through which young bodies are valorised or devalorised in relation to the requirements of the new economy. Young people's capacities to contribute to the production of particular valorised (or valorisable) modes of youthfulness is critical to their constitution as post-Fordist subjects of value, and demonstrates the way that youthfulness – as a quality and mode of embodied labouring subjectivity – is made heterogeneous through the normative and disciplinary requirements placed upon young workers.

Youthfulness is a key aspect of the production of classed and gendered normativities as they are enacted on the level of embodied labouring subjectivities. As observed by McDowell (2009) in a discussion of embodiment in interactive service labour, the quality of youthfulness is part of a constellation of embodied characteristics that are positioned as either valuable or abject to modes of valorized youthfulness:

‘...ugly, fat, non-white, elderly bodies are inadmissible in societies that valorise an idealised white, slim, young, unwrinkled, typically heterosexualised body, and so such bodies are out of place in the interactive sales/advice-giving industries and occupations that increasingly dominate in advanced industrial societies.’ (p 63)

Young women in particular are called upon to cultivate and mobilise the right kind of corporeal and aesthetic embodiment, and these practices may be understood as forms of immaterial labour that contribute to the value of the products and interactions that they are selling. In this, the production of youthfulness reflects shifts in gendered subjectivities in relation to post-Fordist labour, especially the repositioning of young women as subjects of symbolic value in aesthetic or affective modes of labour across the class spectrum, and the positioning of aestheticized femininity as a signifier for entrepreneurial success (McRobbie, 2011). Here I want to suggest that the production of youthfulness is critical to what Angela McRobbie has described as the post-Feminist sexual contract, in which young women in post-Fordist economies are compelled to ‘prioritise consumption for the sake of sexual intelligibility and in the name of heterosexual desire’ (2009, p 90) in order to become subjects in the realms of both consumption and labour. As the boundaries between these realms are blurred, young women are invited to confer what McRobbie calls feminine luminosities, or pleasing, appropriately heterosexualised embodied performances upon the products that they model, sell, and use in their day to day lives. Understood as immaterial labour, the practices that produce these feminine luminosities confer value onto products and interactions by disciplining young women’s bodies within the normative requirements of heterosexual desire. Moreover, the production of normative heterosexual femininity also intertwines with the cultural politics of ‘race’ in the new economy, and operates to confer a particular value onto whiteness. Images of young white women are the preferred vehicles for the marketing of a range of consumer goods, whilst those outside of a narrow white spectrum are deployed in racialized ways in order to meld images of cultural cool with feelings of exoticness (Wissinger, 2012). Whilst youthful feminine whiteness is perhaps most visible in fields such as fashion modelling (Wissinger, 2007), the compulsion to enact normative heterosexualised femininity in order to confer value upon products or interactions is common throughout the interactive service sector (MacDowell, 2009). In this sense, the cultivation of the modes of youthfulness that correspond to the needs of employers constitutes a disciplinary requirement made upon young workers, and is thereby one of the key means by which gendered and racialized subjectivities come to be embodied at work.

At the same time, the compulsion to produce a particular mode of youthfulness in the service economy has contributed to the devalorisation of other forms of embodied subjectivity, including

for example older modes of working class young masculinity. In the widely cited work of Willis (1977), the emblematic young worker of Fordist capitalism was the working class ‘lad’ who emphasised masculine qualities suited to the physical demands of industrial manufacturing labour, and for whom an interest in popular culture, a cultivated appearance, or an overly servile manner was rejected as feminine or effete, a threat to masculine self-respect. This mode of masculinity is the antithesis of contemporary youthful labour, and working class young men experience high levels of unemployment (Andres and Wyn, 2010). Nixon (2009) documents the rejection of service labour by working class young men, suggesting that this constitutes ‘a defensive reaction to the increasingly aesthetic consumerized service economy that brands these men and their embodied skills and dispositions as redundant and deficient’ (Nixon, 2009, p 319). In an attempt to create subjects useful to a post-Fordist immaterial economy, welfare interventions now instruct unemployed young men in the modes of dress, bodily comportment and face to face interaction required in the service sector (Nickson, Warhurst, Cullen and Watt, 2013). The compulsion for immaterial production in this sense creates the necessity to engage with aesthetic trends and cultivate new modes of embodiment, which are regarded as key aspects of ‘employability’ (see for example Friedli and Stearn, 2015, for an example of such welfare interventions in the United Kingdom). As explained by Friedli and Stearn (2015), the compulsion to produce positive affect is a new mode of coercive welfare policy now targeted at the unemployed that aims to create employees whose affective and embodied subjectivities match the needs of the new economy. The inability or refusal to produce the appropriate affect at work (or at training programs mandated by state welfare interventions) therefore constitutes a new experience of unemployment. Failing or refusing to produce appropriately valorisable youthfulness positions young people outside of the networks of immaterial labour that – I am suggesting – now constitute one of the key means by which youthfulness as such is created and attributed with value.

The production of appropriate or valorisable forms of youthfulness is a disciplinary requirement that contributes to the formation of bodies in line with both heterosexualised femininity and the aesthetic ideals of contemporary brands, and which thereby contributes to the production of differences and divisions within the contemporary labour force. Valorised youthfulness is unevenly socially distributed – not merely inherent in ‘youth’, but rather a mode of embodied subjectivity that emerges in relation to the demands of work. The circulation of youthfulness as an affective quality in the new economy interacts with – and contributes to – the embodiment of classed, gendered and racialized differences in the youth labour force. The valorisation and devalorisation of young subjectivities takes place in terms of the potential for the creation of value that young bodies offer to the immaterial economy – potential that emerges not just as the accumulation of discrete capitals, but rather incorporates, mobilises and reshapes the capacity for consumption and embodiment into the formation of young people as labouring subjects. As well as valorizing and devalorising subjectivities and modes of embodiment, the production of youthful affects in relation to embodied differences amongst young people also produces youthfulness as a heterogeneous quality that is made ‘luminous’ in different ways and to different degrees. In this sense, the economies of youthfulness that I am describing here operate

as a key site for production and differentiation of youth itself, and constitute a new relationship between youth, labour and employment in the post-Fordist economy.

Conclusion

The operation of immaterial economies is one way in which youthfulness exceeds and escapes the bodies of 'young people' and becomes an affective flow that resonates throughout the social world. It is only in this way that youthfulness may be offered to those who fall outside the (fluid and increasingly flexible) category called 'young people'. Youthfulness is an intensity that proliferates through shopping spaces, clothing, fashion magazines, advertisements online and in public space, grooming products, and pleasing interactions with young workers throughout the service economy. Through the valorisation of a particular mode of youthful affect, post-Fordist economies offer feelings of hedonistic pleasure and trouble-free enjoyment, as well as the promise of consuming the best and most contemporary styles that consumer capitalism has to offer. In this context, the production and circulation of youthfulness positions youth as a desirable mode of affectivity that is ostensibly available for purchase and embodiment through consumption. However, this is an ambivalent and complex process in the context of consumer capitalism. The constant re-production and valorisation of different modes of youthfulness produces a desire for youthful attributes within a horizon that is constantly shifting with the production of new forms of style. Youthfulness is offered to incited desires that are made impossible to fulfil by the very nature of consumer capitalism (Bauman, 2007), and youthfulness circulates out of reach even of many young people whose modes of classed and gendered embodiment do not contribute to the qualities of valorised youthfulness.

Youthfulness does not come for free. The absence of the resources or dispositions required to cultivate and perform the labour of youthfulness creates devalorised subjectivities who are abject to the normative requirements of both labour and consumption in the new economy. In this sense, the production and consumption of youthfulness becomes a normative requirement for both workers and consumers, as the valorisation and devalorisation of youthful affects shapes labouring practices, social relationships and experiences of unemployment differently in different parts of the labour market. Moreover, since it is offered as an aspect of a wide range of products to a wide range of consumers, valorised youthfulness is also an affect that intertwines with the politics of erotic desire in general (Ruddick, 2003), and becomes a key means by which consumer capitalism valorises and devalorises embodied subjectivities both within and outside of work. The circulation and valorisation of youthfulness is critically imbricated with the creation of normative heterosexuality, and intersects in important ways with the aesthetics and cultural politics of gender and class in the new economy. Regardless of age, post-Fordist economies encourage the mobilisation of the affective qualities associated with valorised youthfulness through an increasingly compulsory engagement with the disciplinary technologies and immaterial products of the new economy.

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