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Intimate Labor and Affective Technologies

At the end of his 2003 book linking contemporary research on the brain and emotions to the philosophy of Spinoza, the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio describes a future in which emotions are regulated and moderated through sophisticated, individualized pharmaceutical treatments. It is a future he regards optimistically, showing little concern for how the ends of social control and the realities of social injustice might influence the development and use of such wonder drugs.

This paper aims to analyze the place of intimate labor in an era in which technologies for controlling and regulating affect abound. Examples of such technologies might include not only medications, but also techniques as diverse as advertising intended to create habitual and immediate bonds between consumers and brands, and genetic engineering as a proposed means of altering feelings as well as biological processes.

Therefore, the question I raise is how intimate labor, or caring labor (defined as the work of improving the capacities and potentials of the recipient), is shaped and altered by the appearance of technologies to control affect. Such technologies, often intended to create new consumers and markets, change the need for and experience of face-to-face contact and caring. I am not assuming such technologies make intimate labor impossible or corrupt, only that the regulation and management of affect happens through a number of channels and mechanisms, some of them potentially quite new.

In my previous research, a study of a multimillion dollar industry to train allied health care workers in New York City, I have argued (in a chapter in a new collection called *Affective Turnings*) the training industry illustrates the emergence of new forms of economic value. Such value is based neither on concrete services and products, nor even on the management of emotions, but on the production of affect. I use “affect” in the way Damasio (and Spinoza) does, to refer to the nonconscious or noncognitive basis of action, an idea which is gaining traction both in contemporary cultural studies (in the work of theorists such as Brian Massumi) but also in economic sociology, most notably in Randall Collins’ theory of “emotional energy.” This paper argues that an “affect economy” potentially changes intimate labor and our conceptualization of it.

Currently, I am completing work on my first book (based on my dissertation), to be published sometime in 2008 as part of the Cornell University Press series on the culture and politics of health care work, edited by Suzanne Gordon. In it, I argue that training is an inadequate response to problems facing the allied health care workforce (which in New York City is made up overwhelmingly of women of color), including their working conditions, the lack of recognition for the complexity of their labor, and the inequalities of the labor market.

This conference and the workshops would be invaluable in helping me effectively situate my work and future research at the juncture of caring labor, economic sociology, and cultural studies.