

“No One Ever Showed Me Nothing”: Skill and Self-Making among Trinidadian Garment Workers

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This article examines the relationship between skill acquisition and the constitution of economic selfhood in Trinidad. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork among garment workers in a context of industrial decline, I show how their formal, informal, and illicit means of acquiring sewing skills are inextricably linked to the fragmented and unstable economic opportunities available to them. Learning to sew means learning to be a flexible economic actor, which helps workers survive but disadvantages them in waged labor relationships. By investigating the role of pleasure in self-training, I emphasize the neglected importance of emotion for understanding livelihood strategies. [Trinidad, neoliberal subjectivities, responsabilization, skill, selfhood]

Early one morning in the Signature Fashions¹ factory, while Antoinette was serging the sleeves onto a set of blouses, she whispered to me, “I go thief a pattern for this shirt.” She pointed to the sample blouse, hanging from a plastic coat hanger above the desk of Cissy, the production manager. Across the stitching section, bundles of indigo linen were piled high on metal horses positioned next to each sewing machine, and workers throughout the area were diligently stitching the fabric into blouses. Antoinette said, “I thieving my little t’ing.”

“How?” I asked, and she pointed to a small stack of newspapers she had laid on her horse. She told me she would take each constituent piece of the blouse and create a pattern from them by tracing their shapes onto newspaper. As she said this, her eyes followed Cissy’s movements around the room, and her hands smoothed a piece of newspaper on her lap. She placed an unstitched sleeve on the paper, sliding a couple of pins through the cloth to hold her “pattern” in place. Using a pen, Antoinette traced the sleeve’s outline. When Cissy came near, Antoinette scrunched up the newspaper and wedged it onto the little shelf under her machine.

Antoinette told me quietly, “You could lose your work over it,” using the common phrase, “lose your work,” which workers used to refer to getting fired.

I whispered, “Are you hiding from Cissy or Brenda?”

Antoinette said, “Cissy. Brenda [the stitching section supervisor] would allow it. She could make little things at home [too], y’understand?” As Antoinette continued tracing, I watched Cissy’s movements: standing at the front of the stitching section, entering the cutting room, then out of the cutting room to the back stairs. It occurred to me that this simple act of watching was something that only I could do without being scolded. Working on the shop floor as an unpaid employee as part of my research on the local garment industry, I could as often be found peering around the room and making jottings in my notebook as folding t-shirts or sewing buttons. Had Cissy noticed any other worker tracking her movements, she would have snapped at her to get back to work. Antoinette had wisely enlisted me as her lookout.

After copying the back piece, Antoinette said, “Now I need the yoke.” She called out quietly to stitchers nearby, asking what parts of the garment were contained in their bundles. The other workers surreptitiously handed them over. Antoinette scribbled on a

corner of newspaper, "Serge back and top stitch center seam." She called out to Shirley, "What size you on?" When Shirley mumbled that the blouses she was stitching were "large," Antoinette said, "I looking for medium." Over the course of the morning, Antoinette was able to copy each element that made up the blouse onto her newspaper, which she folded and stuffed into her apron-front when she was finished. Antoinette said with a smile, "Have to keep up with style if you sew for people."

This article examines the relationship between knowledge practices, skill acquisition, and the constitution of economic selfhood in Trinidad. Drawing on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork (2003–2004), including nine months of participant observation on the shop floor of a local garment factory, I examine the economic activities of Trinidadian women who describe themselves as "into the sewing" (i.e., who make a living from the production of clothing), with emphasis on the formal, informal, and illicit means through which they accumulate skills. In a context where secure, full-time employment can be difficult to find, garment workers often "improvise livelihoods" (Gregory 2007) by combining factory work with cash-in-hand projects for private clients. At lunch that day, Antoinette told me that she was making five white shirts for a woman in her neighborhood, each in a different design. The woman had recently taken a job in one of the Port of Spain hotels and needed clothing to wear, "all white shirts, but she still want *style*." Antoinette said that she would be paid TT\$200 (US\$33) for the five garments, a sum of money representing more than half a week's factory wages. More importantly, if the woman was happy with Antoinette's work, she might commission more clothing and encourage others to visit her. This client was herself referred to Antoinette by a mutual friend.

I will describe how Trinidadian garment workers gain expertise in sewing and show how these skills relate to their capacities to forge livelihoods in an unstable and demanding industry. After the liberalization of the garment sector in the 1990s, local firms that were once protected by high tariffs and import-licensing regimes have found themselves struggling to compete with the price and quality of foreign (mostly Asian) goods now arriving in Trinidad and throughout the region (Werner and Bair 2009). The few factories that have survived global free trade well into the 2000s have adopted tactics of "flexible" production: intensifying and casualizing labor, paying below minimum wage in sweatshop conditions, or investing in new technologies to reduce labor needs (Jayasinghe 2001). Trinidadian women who are devoted to making a living through sewing have therefore faced a formal sector of shrinking job opportunities and declining working conditions. To make ends meet they increasingly rely on "off the books" enterprises, such as stitching school uniforms in August for cash-in-hand payment, sewing Carnival costumes on a part-time basis, or working days in the factory while dressmaking for private clients at home in the evenings. These jobs supply diverse sources of income while blurring the distinction between formal and informal industrial sectors; multiple types of work—some regulated, some unregulated, some taxed, some untaxed—take place in and around the same physical sites of production (cf. De Neve 2005; Mollona 2005). Women "into the sewing" similarly accumulate skills from both "formal" and "informal" educational sources while according little significance to any classificatory distinction between them.

Anthropological accounts of Caribbean life emphasize the pervasiveness of "flexible" economic activities, such as managing multiple income-generating pursuits at once (Carnegie 1987; Harrison 1998; Mintz 1989; Trouillot 1992). The Caribbean practice of "occupational multiplicity" was famously defined by Lambros Comitas as a livelihood strategy whereby a person is "systematically engaged in a number of gainful activities, which for him form an integrated economic complex" (Comitas 1973[1964]:157). Occupational multiplicity can be considered historically continuous with the fact that during slavery, planters encouraged slaves to grow and even sell the products of their kitchen gardens

(Yelvington 1995:2). What became a highly developed trade in agricultural produce provided an early opportunity for slaves to experiment with being independent market actors. Engaging in market trade created an experience of freedom conditioned by capitalist imperatives and facilitated the development of a new economic habitus shaped by the values of competitiveness, flexibility, and the ability to make a deal (Mintz 1989).

Although recognized as an adaptation to hardship, Caribbeanist scholars have recently noted that this opportunistic economic habitus articulates almost seamlessly with the ethos of entrepreneurialism that neoliberalism now enshrines as a foremost value (Freeman 2007). Writing about female inter-island market traders in Jamaica, Gina Ulysse describes how the women have confronted each restriction on their trade—such as stricter customs policies—as a challenge to overcome. As one informant proclaimed: “There isn’t a foundation that don’t have a crack in it . . . We will find it and we will go right through it” (Ulysse 2007:1). Jeffrey Mantz points to similar resourcefulness among female agricultural traders (“hucksters”) in Dominica, arguing that their “entrepreneurial savvy” reflects a cultural disposition toward economic flexibility that renders Caribbean people particularly able, confident, and uncomplaining in their encounters with neoliberal globalization (Mantz 2007).

Economic flexibility is therefore not a new phenomenon in the Caribbean; it is deeply rooted in the efforts of formerly enslaved people to act as creative agents, exploiting whatever opportunities were in reach (Mintz and Price 1992). Yet despite recognizing its prevalence and cultural significance, anthropologists have paid little attention to how this flexible economic disposition becomes reproduced through everyday practices—in short, how it is *learned*. We know from ethnographies of apprenticeship that learning skills is at the same time an education in cultural values (Argenti 2002; Dilley 1999; Simpson 2006). Pierre Bourdieu and Michael Herzfeld emphasize the tacit dimensions of this learning: how social hierarchies, gender ideologies, and other subtle “structures” become inculcated through the process of skill acquisition and are reproduced in the body of the skilled agent (Bourdieu 1977; Herzfeld 2004; Prentice 2008). My research builds on this scholarship to show the relationship between forms of learning and the kinds of economic actors they produce. Learning to sew provides Trinidadian women with the technical skills to make a living, either in the waged labor force or through petty production for private clients. I argue that because acquiring these skills requires self-motivation and even cunning, Trinidadian women “into the sewing” simultaneously learn to adopt an economic disposition of self-reliance, adaptability, and resourcefulness that has become essential to their ability to construct livelihoods in the contemporary garment sector.

Analyzing the experiences of Trinidadian workers reveals the role of emotion, rather than just economic necessity, that draws women into and out of the garment industry. The motivation to learn how to sew is driven not by bare economic calculation or necessarily in pursuit of social mobility, but instead can be located in individual projects of self-making. By exploring the role of pleasure in training and performing sewing skills, this article emphasizes the neglected importance of affect, emotion, and selfhood to understanding economic activity. Drawing on Nikolas Rose’s concept of the “responsibilization” of the self, I show how the enjoyment that workers derive from learning, sewing, and becoming economic actors is an intimate source of exploitation in the context of waged labor (Rose 1999).

I examine these processes mostly from the vantage of Signature Fashions, a Trinidadian company that produces contemporary, brand-name clothing for the high-end regional market. With an average age of 39 years old, many of the stitchers at Signature Fashions have worked in garment production for more than twenty years in careers punctuated by lay offs, childbirth, and interludes spent sewing at home. Unlike the young women in Asia

and Latin America who since the 1960s have been newly recruited into export-oriented garment production along a “global assembly line” (Elson and Pearson 1981), Trinidadian garment workers have long histories of waged labor in both formal and informal sectors of the economy. The Signature Fashions factory, which employs 50 Trinidadian women, is considered by many women “into the sewing” to be a good place to work not only because it is air conditioned, pays the legal minimum wage, and is a high-status brand, but also because it provides day-to-day exposure to current fashion trends. The fact that Antoinette was able to “take” knowledge of the latest styles to be reworked at home for a private client reveals the attitude of opportunism that many workers carry with them and activate in the factory.

Garment Work in Trinidad: Antecedents and Opportunities

Making garments requires two types of skilled practice that in Trinidad are glossed as “cutting” and “stitching.” Cutting refers to drafting patterns and executing them on cloth, activities that include visualizing, measuring, designing, drawing, plotting, and cutting fabric with scissors. Stitching entails assembling the constituent pieces of a garment together, either by hand (with a needle and thread) or on a sewing machine. A woman who is skilled at both cutting and stitching may refer to herself as a dressmaker, a seamstress, or simply a person who is “into the sewing.” Describing oneself as being “into the sewing” not only evokes the aesthetic and tactile pleasures of manipulating fabric as a knowledgeable agent, it also portrays sewing as a source of personal satisfaction and identity. The phrase is therefore less an occupational descriptor than an assertion of cherished expertise.

Sewing has long presented a means for Trinidadian women to struggle for lives of economic independence. After the full abolition of slavery in the British Caribbean in 1838, dressmaking facilitated the self-transformation of many formerly enslaved workers into independent, petty producers (Buckridge 2004:41; Osirim 1997:48–49). Seamstresses—much like the female “hucksters” who traded in the vegetable market—left the plantations and populated the burgeoning Caribbean cities in astonishing numbers. By the late 19th century, Trinidadian women outnumbered men in Port of Spain by a ratio of 100 to 74, with seamstressing second only to domestic service in occupying urban women (Reddock 1993:249). Independent seamstresses usually worked from their own homes, visiting clients to take measurements and conduct fittings; the value of their skills conferred respectability upon their work despite its “outside” nature, and many Afro-Trinidadian seamstresses came to occupy the lower middle classes. Yet the informal economy of seamstressing, like that of huckstering, domestic service, and prostitution, was notoriously volatile, and women working in those sectors would have been particularly susceptible to economic hardship.

During the first three decades of the 20th century, the small-scale, independent production of garments in Trinidad increasingly gave way to mechanization and mass production in newly developed factories. Industrial manufacturing separates and routinizes cutting and stitching as specialist domains of activity, creating an occupational niche for “stitchers” who can operate a sewing machine but do not perceive themselves as being able to sew. As one factory stitcher, Veronica, said to me, “I don’t even say that I know how to *sew* because I couldn’t really *cut* [patterns].” The industrialization of Trinidad’s garment trade began in the 1920s with a system of “putting out.” Merchants distributed precut fabric to stitchers who completed the garments at home for piece-rate payment (Reddock 1984:11). By the 1960s, Trinidad’s garment industry was primarily based in vertically integrated firms where cutting and stitching were accomplished on site. With national independence in 1962, the government enacted economic policies of import substitution—

such as tariff restrictions on foreign goods—alongside initiatives to promote export-led growth by spurring investment (Osirim 1997:50; Yelvington 1995:58).

Gavin Smith reminds us that local landscapes of garment production are often remarkably heterogeneous due to the low barriers to entry of new producers and firms, and the recent proliferation of horizontal subcontracting networks under global post-Fordism (Smith 1999). In Trinidad, although mass production grew during the 20th century, small-scale producers endure, including within their ranks independent seamstresses and tailors working from their own homes. With the collapse of the formal garment industry after the 1980s recession, trade liberalization in the 1990s, and the subsequent loss of preferential access to U.S. markets, this informal sector continues to provide livelihoods for women “into the sewing” against the otherwise devastating currents of globalization. National development initiatives now attempt to harness the economic power of this sector by providing administrative and monetary assistance to seamstresses and tailors as part of an agenda to reduce poverty through microenterprise (ILO 1997; Karides 2005).

Despite the increasing availability of ready-made garments from abroad, neighborhood seamstresses and tailors still play a significant role in Trinidadian life. For social events like graduations, weddings, and religious and national festivals, Trinidadians across the economic spectrum will often visit a seamstress or tailor (Miller 1994a:77). By having an outfit made to order, a client not only ensures the uniqueness of her clothing, she can also participate in creating a “look” in collaboration with the seamstress. Imagining, designing, and making clothing becomes an integral part of the excited anticipation of a social event. Clients select and purchase their own cloth in one of the many local fabric stores and discuss with the seamstress what they want made. As the client describes how she wants the garment to “hang” and “fit,” negotiations over cut and design usually involve handling the purchased cloth and sketching ideas on paper. A seamstress’ status in the community derives from her ability to interpret and execute her clients’ wishes within the limits of her own expertise.

Skill Acquisition and the Making of the Seamstress Self

In the Anglophone Caribbean, for much of the 20th century, learning how to sew was considered not only a life skill but also leverage for a young woman’s claim on respectability due to its associations with domestic competence. Jamaica Kincaid’s celebrated poem, “Girl,” makes the link between sewing and a gendered ethic of respectability explicit: “this is how to sew on a button/this is how to make a buttonhole for the button you have just sewed on/this is how to hem a dress when you see the hem coming down and prevent yourself from looking like the slut you are so bent on becoming” (Kincaid 1983). Although these values appear to defer to European standards of social hierarchy, Daniel Miller’s reappraisal of the Trinidadian domestic sphere suggests that women’s household labors advanced values of dignity, stability, and self-determination that were in fact vital to anticolonial struggle (Miller 1994b).

Working-class families have long perceived garment production to be a suitable and achievable occupation for their daughters. Although it is low paid, garment work represents a desirable alternative to the agricultural labor traditionally performed by Indo-Trinidadians or employment in other types of factories (e.g., food processing) that might be perceived as an option for urban, working-class Afro-Trinidadians. Young women who demonstrate a talent for designing and drafting patterns might sew for clients or establish their own shops. Those who learn how to sew proficiently but do not excel at cutting could find employment as factory stitchers. Yet the categories “seamstress” and “stitcher” are neither absolute nor mutually exclusive. Women who sew for private clients

may occasionally seek employment in a factory to make ends meet or for a change of pace, while factory workers may sew at home for pleasure or extra income.

Trinidadian women who make careers in the garment sector usually describe an early exposure to seamstressing by a mother, aunt, sister, or being sent “by a lady who sews” in the neighborhood to learn how to cut and stitch garments to size (Reddock 1984). Although secondary schools have offered vocational training since the 1970s, garment workers rarely describe formal education as the source of their sewing skills because garment production has been taught as a general rather than specialist subject, equipping students with broad knowledge but few practical competencies (Campbell 1997). A number of local charities offer training in garment design and construction to improve the life chances of those born into poverty; I knew several women “into the sewing” who learned to sew in such programs after failing their secondary school entrance exams in the 1980s and 1990s.

In addition to training with a neighborhood seamstress, kin, or on a dressmaking course, a commonplace means of acquiring sewing skills is by “thieving” them: carefully and cunningly watching a seamstress at work and later attempting the techniques oneself. Crystal, a 41-year-old independent seamstress in Port of Spain, described learning to sew as a child when her older sister was taking lessons. Crystal’s mother’s boyfriend paid for classes for her sister, but Crystal was deemed too young to attend. So she would hang around the front room of their home and watch her sister sewing:

No one ever showed me *nothing*. I watch everything my sister did do, and them didn’t know it! Like this: while she sewing, I watch how she thread the machine, I watch how she put the shuttle in. I’m watching all of this and she doesn’t know that I’m watching her . . . Now, I didn’t know how to cut, or how to sew. So I wait ‘til my sister gone. And hear this, as the end of she foot leave the house – I watching she – as the *end* of the foot leave the house, and I can’t see her no more, I dive on that machine! [October 23, 2004]

We should not be surprised by idioms of theft in narratives of skill acquisition. Anthropologists have long recognized that positioning oneself (both physically and socially) in the most advantageous position to “steal” the master’s skills can be an important if unspoken dimension of apprenticeship (Marchand 2008:252). Writing about Italian seamstresses between the two World Wars, Vanessa Maher explains that “stealing with the eye” was imperative for novices because the apprenticeship system was structured to prevent them from “acquiring the whole trade” (Maher 1987:143). In the many contexts where expert knowledge is jealously guarded, the “crafty” apprentice must feign indifference while surreptitiously absorbing the master’s know-how (Herzfeld 2004). In Trinidad, sneakily stealing skills is one of a wide array of covert practices locally referred to as “thieving a chance”—taking a small opportunity for personal gain when a fleeting prospect arises (Prentice 2009).

In an environment where schooling does not provide relevant skills and educational charities are limited in the number of young people they can serve, working-class families may invest in private training for some of their children but not all of them. Crystal’s story captures the imperative to live in the wake of another person’s opportunity. Learning how to do so equips a young woman with the self-reliance and confidence that are vital to making a living as an independent seamstress. Even those women “into the sewing” who received formal training say that thieving skills is sometimes necessary. When Crystal describes “watch[ing] everything my sister did do, and them didn’t know it!” she delights in the audacity of her younger self. Given the cultural valorization of the enterprising individual in the Caribbean (Browne 2004; Freeman 2007), the fact that Crystal thieved these skills enhances rather than diminishes her accomplishments.

Becoming a Factory Stitcher

Most stitchers are first exposed to sewing by kin, at school, or by a seamstress in the neighborhood. Yet the skills needed for industrial production, such as operating a heavy-duty machine and working at speed under constant supervision, can only be acquired inside a factory. There are several pathways to accessing these environments. Government initiatives like the World Bank-funded Youth Training and Employment Partnership Programme (YTEPP) and local charities like SERVOL offer short work placements so learners can gain exposure to the pace of factory work before facing the pressure to earn a wage. I also knew many stitchers who could only operate a domestic sewing machine and falsely claimed to have experience with an industry-grade machine to get their first factory jobs; others accepted nonstitching positions and self-trained by “thieving a chance” on a machine whenever the boss’s back was turned.

During the economic boom of the 1970s and early 1980s, new employees would often be trained on the job. Yet, given the abundance of experienced stitchers in Trinidad and a shrinking industry, most factory bosses now refuse to train workers who cannot do work as assigned. Even at Signature Fashions, a design-driven company that relies on the expertise and adaptability of its labor force to meet the flexible demands of production, one of the co-owners worried that if she formally trained workers they would get “snatched by other factories offering more money.” By refusing to train, employers have cast skill acquisition as an employee’s responsibility rather than the employer’s obligation. It is workers, as independent, self-motivated agents, who must procure the skills to participate in waged employment, even though the industry depends on such skills. This situation was described with surprising frankness by the owner of a notorious local sweatshop:

Most of [my employees] would have been people who couldn’t really sew, but they would have eased their way into it. Sometimes you would have given them little chores to do around, and they would have wanted to learn to do something. So every time that they had a slight moment, they would jump on a machine and ask somebody how to operate it. Because they would have want to be stitchers. Once they get the first break, they would eventually hurdle that dilemma. [August 3, 2004]

Although it was rare to find a boss who spoke of it, self-training by “thieving a chance” on a machine is ubiquitous in the garment industry. Success requires the help of coworkers to gain access to the machine. These situations often contain a dramatic moment of discovery by the employer. A stitcher named Shirley recalled her first factory job:

I is a friendly person, so you know I talk to everybody, and everybody say “Alright.” So I say, “Let me try out that machine,” and they say, “Come, nah, come, come!” And then you know, from there, you learn and [my supervisor] catch me one day, “Oh yeah yuh buggah, you want to sew? Now I put yuh on machine.” So it’s these kind of t’ing that happen. [March 23, 2004]

Like Crystal’s description of learning to sew by secretly watching her sister at home, workers like Shirley revel in acts of duplicity for the adventurous, resilient self at their center. Given that Shirley’s first job was in the early 1980s (when the industry’s expansion meant that formal training in factories was widespread), her account shows how “thieving a chance” on the shop floor is an enduring rather than new phenomenon. The experience of neoliberal globalization in Trinidad has not radically transformed local work processes and ideologies but rather has built on and extended capitalist foundations that were already there (Robotham 1998:308).

A growing body of literature on neoliberal subjectivities suggests that self-training and self-management have become imperative in a post-Fordist era of flexible production (Bourdieu 1998; Freeman 2007; Martin 1994; Mole 2010; Urciuoli 2008). In a context of high

sectoral unemployment, Trinidadian factory owners have successfully individualized and informalized skill acquisition by framing it as the worker's responsibility because it enhances her vocational advantage. When they "thief a chance," Trinidadian garment workers ratify this managerial vision of the factory as an institution of opportunity rather than one of entitlements. Workers therefore enact what Nikolas Rose describes as the "responsibilization" of the self: a mode of self-governance grounded in an internalized sense of authorship and culpability over one's own destiny (Rose 1999). Management has externalized the cost of retraining workers by consigning skill acquisition to the home, the neighborhood, and the interstices of factory production. This move has been concealed by the fact that Trinidadian women "into the sewing" have been so willing to capture these precious skills covertly for the material advantages they provide.

Improvising Skills and Livelihoods

Sewing skills are never gained once and for all. Because fashion is constantly changing, because practice improves proficiency, and because a garment worker can always expand her repertoire, sewing expertise can be accumulated, revised, and perfected over time. While Antoinette's thieving the pattern for a shirt at Signature Fashions indicates that the factory may serve as a site for gathering fashion knowledge, another worker named Kavita describes factory work as a source of practical know-how:

Sewing in the garment industry, you get a lot of ideas, o.k., how a pocket's supposed to shape, you would do that then. When I went out to work in the garment factory a supervisor might say this is how you put on a collar, this is how you slow the cloth. You will have the ideas, getting a lot of ideas and knowledge from that, how to put together a garment and these kinds of things. [April 7, 2004]

Factories are considered to be places of discipline and speed where one learns to do complicated tasks with extreme efficiency. Fast-paced, repetitive factory work helps workers accumulate "knowledge in the hands" (Merleau-Ponty 1962:144), which they describe as "setting your hand" to a task that will subsequently "come like second nature" to the learner.

Acquiring skills during factory employment does not only prepare a worker for future industrial waged work, it also helps her form a skill base that can be drawn upon when sewing for oneself and clients at home. Signature Fashions workers described learning a number of technical "tricks" from the factory, such as how to do a zipper fly with one, rather than two, pieces of cloth (which is quicker than how seamstresses teach it, though clients cannot tell the difference) or how to stitch a collar with a pointed (rather than rounded) peak.

Applying knowledge from the factory to domestic production defies widespread perceptions of industrial factories as sites of deskilling. According to Harry Braverman, the fragmentation of the labor process—in which individuals are assigned a single operation to perform in making a complex product—means that factory workers learn a limited repertoire of skills, which cannot be transferred in any meaningful way to livelihoods outside of capitalist waged labor (Braverman 1974:170–171). Yet, this depiction of inevitable deskilling fails to account for workers' interpretation of their expertise and neglects how skills may be accumulated over the lifespan.

Analyzing the career biography of one garment worker, an Afro-Trinidadian woman named Josephine, shows the inseparability of skill acquisition from work practices and how both are greeted with alacrity by the enterprising seamstress. My aim is to draw attention to the agency and intentionality of workers "into the sewing" as they acquire skills while also revealing the emotions of pleasure, excitement, and satisfaction that

animate these endeavors.² When I first met Josephine she was 36 years old and had been working in the garment industry for 20 years. She lived in Port of Spain with two of her eight brothers, a sister-in-law, and their children in the small wooden house in which she had grown up. Josephine was raising her 8-year-old daughter, Gabby, with neither the financial nor emotional support of Gabby's father, who had returned home to Jamaica around the time of her birth. As the following passage shows, Josephine interprets skill as a field of struggle and a source of everyday pleasure. As she describes a career pursued in garment factories, on the street, and at home, Josephine demonstrates her creative capacity to "improvise a livelihood" by undertaking both waged employment and own-account work (Gregory 2007:30) while also gaining precious know-how from each of these domains:

When I left school, I was 13 years old, I went by a neighbor and take some sewing [lessons]. That only last for about 6 months. I [also] did a sewing course for two years. I did bridal, bath suits, and panties. My mom was really a cook, she didn't like much sewing. She loved to cook. That was nice for her, but I like to sew, because I like to wear clothes, *nice* clothes. I started sewing for myself first, then, after the information reach out that Josephine does sew, people come. Friends and family come, and they still coming!

I did pressing in my first factory. I was 16 years old, I was home at the time, sewing for people. And I wanted to explore, so I start to look for work. I get through with a pressing job in San Juan, at Top Style Manufacturing. I start off there as an ironer, and I last for six months. And they put me to use the machines. They start me off gradually, using different machines in the factory. They trained me in the button-hole, the button-tack, and the straight stitch, putting a collar, a pocket, or a hem.

They come to receivership, and close down for good. I was unemployed for a while, being home, doing my own thing. After that I went to Tru-Fit Garments, in San Juan again. I spent about four months, working straight stitch, and after that I went to House of Menswear, in San Juan again. At House of Menswear, now, I went in as a serger. I serge for a while, and then I went on the button-hole. I used to do button-hole and straight stitch. I used to do the button-hole on the collar. The peak of the collar, like how it has a button-down? I used to do that. But there, they don't always have work for the year. You work a six months, and work slow down so they send you home and tell you they'll call you back when they need you, so that's when I stop working there, and I end up at this Signature Fashions.

[Right now] I'm still training for anything! Anything and everything. I train to cook, I train to tie-dye. I take [cake] icing courses. I train. That's what always make me want to sign up [for free government courses] and train and hang my certificate up. People could come by me, so I could get money. I love that. One of my plans for the future: I get a serger now [sent from a brother in New York], and I want to get some cloth, and I want to come out into the streets and sell to everybody. On the street, on the weekends. I have plans.

[Having] my daughter make that more [important], because you know the father don't support her like he should. So I have to make the move, do things, do things to help her. I enjoy what I'm doing, because I could have *real* money. Because if you could make a garment, you could make that and charge people a price. Some people would pay and some people wouldn't *like* to pay, but sometimes it's a hundred dollars, I could get a hundred dollars in my hand. I tell them it's \$150, or \$200. Some give me piece-piece, and some give me the money [all at once]. My friends and all come, and I make them something. I still take chances with them, and I love it. [I make the most money] at Christmas and Easter, and Carnival time. And school clothes.

Well, at Signature Fashions I work as a machine operator, sewing as I said, but they say I too slow, or I'm not neat, so they put me in the back to make button-holes. And that's when I start off making button-holes. I pin pockets, I trim, I tack buttons, I mark, I hem . . . This year make it ten years [at] Signature Fashions . . . I like my salary. Piece rate is too killing. [March 17, 2004]

Josephine's narrative reveals the instability of employment in the local garment industry: her account is peppered with factory closures and lay offs: "they come to receivership," "close down for good," "you work a six months," "they'll call you back when they

need you." She chooses not to linger on moments of hardship but instead represents them as the structural conditions that she must navigate in order to "make the move, do things" and "have real money."

Josephine accords little significance to distinctions between formal and informal modes of learning, just as her career trajectory has intermittently embraced both "formal" and "informal" sources of income ranging from a taxed hourly wage to off-the-books cash payment. Trinidadian women "into the sewing" often maintain a living by cobbling together multiple opportunities; where formal-sector employment offers few compensations (such as benefits, insurance, or even a steady wage), there is little incentive to classify waged employment as distinct from informal or even illicit work. Keith Hart lends support to this view in suggesting that the very notion of an "informal" economy relies in the first instance on a reliable formal economy, without which the distinction becomes meaningless (Hart 2010).

One of the most important contributions of feminist scholarship to debates on skill is the recognition that women's labor becomes cheapened in the marketplace by "naturalizing" it (Chapkis and Enloe 1983; Elson 1983). Sewing is undercompensated either as an intrinsically feminine ability or as a capacity learned at home rather than in the public sphere of capitalist production (Harrington 2000:10; Collins 2003:173). Josephine's biography shows the undervaluation of sewing skills to be less a product of where these skills are acquired than the extent to which the training process is visible and publically validated.

Skill as Pleasure, Skill as Self

Moving through a range of economic opportunities, Josephine presents a vision of skill as a cumulative project located in her own body. The factory, a sewing school, home: all are potential arenas for encountering and attaining new expertise. Even a repetitive activity like stitching pockets or buttonholes becomes an emblem of a well-practiced competence. Josephine proudly lists her former factory tasks—"I used to do the button-hole on the collar"—as evidence of the many skills she has, quite literally, at her fingertips. Expertise acquired in the factory can later become a source of "real money" from clients. In careers that span several decades, women like Josephine attempt to wrest valuable skills even from the most basic, repetitive jobs. In so doing, they bring an attitude of resourcefulness to skill acquisition that is culturally Caribbean but refashioned for the economic imperatives of the neoliberal era.

Although accumulating expertise makes sound economic sense in an unstable and economically challenging environment, Trinidadian garment workers do not simply pursue new skills out of rational calculation. Josephine's narrative reveals her desire to do work that allowed her to "explore" the outside world, and her delight in work and learning: "I like to sew," "I'm still training for anything!" "I enjoy what I'm doing," "I still take chances with them, and I love it." Josephine shows that skill is not a technical set of capacities but an embodied project of self-making through the acquisition and performance of expertise.

This view resonates with Charles Carnegie's contention that Caribbean individuals have a duty to discover the work that essentially suits them, which makes an occupation pleasurable and worthwhile. He writes:

People were said to be born with particular skills or technical aptitudes that might lie dormant for years if not awakened by appropriate stimuli. With such innate talents, one might not even need specialized training: one knows what to do, although this knowledge may be subject to refinement over time. The reverse was also said to hold: if one does not begin with the aptitude, then no amount of training can properly develop one's skills. Thus, it was considered quite acceptable for

a youth to give up an apprenticeship after only a few weeks on the grounds that he simply did not like the trade or "did not have the mind for it." In such a case, there was no reason for the youth to continue. It is permissible, then, to be in flux for a long time before discovering one's special talents, which must then be developed relentlessly. [Carnegie 2002:107]

Caribbean notions of the person recognize each as possessing inalienable talents. Learning skills is not just conceptualized instrumentally (as capacities in preparation for employment) but also entails an embodied project of excavating the essential self and then enjoying the practice of this integrated body-self at work. Carnegie's scholarship offers an important corrective to the time-worn axiom that Caribbean people do not establish core identities through the work they do by revealing that work in its highest ideal is a means of personal expression.

Trinidadian models of learning emphasize "awakening" a learner's innermost talents, which must be assiduously developed. Skill is recognized to be not an impersonal faculty but instead a convergence of innate ability and cultivated flair. Curiosity and desire have a role to play in this process. When Antoinette once described to me how she illicitly taught herself to operate a serger at her first factory job, she said, "I used to thief chance and go on the machine, the serger, because I was just, this machine fascinated me when I saw it, nah." Her propulsion toward the sewing machine was not generated by a calculated career strategy but instead through the medium of the sensuous, desiring body.

Conclusions

Trinidadian garment workers often describe learning to sew as a practice of agency, using a language of self-reliance, freedom, and pleasure: skills mean being able to "do something for yourself" as a "way of independence," to "have ideas where you could help yourself," which allows the seamstress to "make the move, do things" and "have real money." These attitudes reflect a valorization of the ability of the individual actor to forge a livelihood under difficult circumstances through self-reliance, bravery, and cunning (Browne 2004). Recent scholarship describes how this treasured Caribbean economic disposition represents an approach to economic life that is well adapted to managing the complex imperatives of neoliberal globalization (Freeman 2007; Gregory 2007; Mantz 2007; Ulysse 2007). In the case of Trinidadian women "into the sewing," their relentless pursuit of skill, acceptance of economic competition and disappointment, and moral legitimization of illicit acts of "thieving" prepare them for the flexible demands of contemporary garment work.

However, Trinidadian garment workers' attitudes toward skill and work do not simply represent a felicitous convergence of a Caribbean ethos of economic flexibility and the entrepreneurial spirit of neoliberalism. We must consider as well how the willingness of women "into the sewing" to embrace opportunity and change are exploited in contexts of waged employment. Because skills are required for participating in the labor force, garment workers see capturing them as an individual ambition. Yet despite the subterfuge involved in "thieving" skills behind the boss's back, such acts actually serve management's goals by externalizing the costs of retraining workers—relegating skill acquisition to an informal sector of activity and divesting employers of an obligation to train—at a time when other entitlements like sick leave, vacation leave, and health checks in the factory have also unraveled under the pressures of global competition.

Neoliberal economic actors are made, not born. My ethnography points to the insufficiency of formal education as a means of readying Trinidadian women for the global capitalist economy. Instead, I show that although acquiring technical skills has helped women "into the sewing" sustain livelihoods in the garment sector, the modes through which they learn have been equally important to their success. By eagerly embracing

skilling opportunities with an enterprising spirit, Trinidadian garment workers consistently conform to the changing demands of a neoliberal economic environment in which workers must be opportunistic, flexible, and self-reliant. Their educational pathways prepare them for fragmented livelihoods that will see them seizing opportunities, withstanding economic uncertainties, and finding pleasure in what otherwise could be grinding and tedious work.

Trinidadian garment workers may exemplify the “responsibilization” of the self under neoliberal capitalism, but they also importantly show how emotions like desire animate this process of self-governing. The mutual acceptance by worker and employer of skill as not only the workers’ responsibility but also their pleasure is deeply embedded in Caribbean ideas of personhood, skill, and the obligation to make one’s own luck. In pursuing their livelihoods, women “into the sewing” have fashioned subjectivities that harmonize dominant economic practices with valued Caribbean ways of being in the world. This heightens the uneven stakes of employment in which garment workers find themselves because relations of power are concealed not only behind a discourse of free choice but also an ethic of pleasure.

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Notes

Acknowledgments. This research has been supported by the Wenner Gren Foundation and the ESRC (PTA-026-27-2343). I am grateful to Anna Portisch and Peggy Froerer for inviting me to present an earlier version of this article at their workshop, “Learning, Livelihoods and Social Mobility: Anthropological Perspectives on Formal and Informal Education” at Brunel University in May 2009, and to Sue Jones for inviting me to present this work at the “Material Matters” workshop at Goldsmiths, University of London in October 2011. I also thank the two anonymous reviewers of the manuscript, as well as Michael Blom, Jamie Cross, Sophie Day, Geert De Neve, James Fairhead, Trevor Marchand, Daniel Miller, Dinah Rajak, Rhoda Reddock, Marion Werner, and Ann Whitehead for useful discussions at various stages of research and writing.

1. The names of all factories, workers, and managers are pseudonyms.

2. Although I already knew many details of her working life at the time of the interview, Josephine obligingly recounted her story for the tape recorder. For the sake of clarity, I have edited my various interjections out of the conversation.

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