PART I Introduction
Introduction

“IF THEY COULD PUT YOU IN THE STORE AS A MANNEQUIN, THEY WOULD”

If they could put you in the store as a mannequin, they would; I’m pretty sure they would.
—Kathleen (Black, a boutique)

They’re very dressed like mannequins, so we’re mannequins, and we are very much aware of that.
—Angela (white, Old Navy)

[We’d] just be like walking mannequins.
—Gabe (white, American Eagle)

I’m like a walking mannequin.
—Rachel (multiracial, American Eagle)

If you’re wearing something that looks like one of the mannequins, then you’re good.
—Tia (Black, Forever 21)

At teen-oriented clothing stores like Abercrombie & Fitch and Forever 21, workers do more than fold jeans and work the cash register; their work parallels the mannequins on display. These workers need to have the right “look” to model the merchandise, and managers ask these employees to wear the store’s latest styles and embody its brand through their hairstyles,
cosmetics, and body size. None of this is lost on retail clothing workers, who recognize their role as models. Indeed, at some stores, the workers’ title actually is “model” rather than “sales associate,” allowing managers to hire based on appearance. As we conducted interviews with these workers, we were surprised by how many repeatedly told us their jobs involved becoming “walking mannequins.”

These workers, especially those visible on the sales floor, are mostly young, white, and light-skinned people of color, considered eye-catching but replaceable by their managers. As they arrange, watch, and sell merchandise, representing the store and its brand, we see the unfolding of a labor paradox quintessential to capitalist systems. On the one hand, clothing retailers value workers’ looks and expect them to embody the store brand. On the other, corporate managers devalue these workers through labor practices that combine cost cutting and intense surveillance. Rather than hiring workers with customer service skills, they focus on workers’ youthful looks, enforcing beauty norms that generally valorize whiteness. As models who mirror the display mannequins, workers are supposed to fit standard sizes sold by the store, have attractive faces and bodies that reflect and promote the store’s “look,” and be both passive and malleable. Yet human workers clearly differ from plastic mannequins; they require wages, respond to dehumanizing labor practices (by compliance, resistance, or a combination of both strategies), attempt to find meaning and social connection, and endeavor to ensure their dignity in their workplaces.

As employers deploy workers’ beauty, imbued with racial, gender, class, and sexual meanings, to signal the store’s “look” and attract consumers, retail workers struggle with their employers’ emphasis on appearance. They vacillate between appreciating the validation of their beauty and criticizing their employers’ superficial ideals. They sense that their loyalty is undervalued, particularly in terms of pay, scheduling, and work hours. They identify multiple challenges to purchasing their own “uniforms” from their employers and maintaining the narrow aesthetic—so key to their employment—that prizes white, middle-class, and binary gender norms of attractiveness. To some extent, these workers expect surveillance of and control over their bodies because clothing retail is part of the beauty industry. But they also experience it as onerous and morally suspect. The emphasis on looks and what we refer to as racialized beauty hierarchies
stands at odds with common individualist ideals of rewarding workers based on job performance, illuminating how companies construct “merit” based on social categories rather than specific skills or qualifications. Ideas about race, gender, and social hierarchies are embedded in the very organization of retail clothing, as prominently displayed as the outfits on the workers helping customers on the shop floor and on the mannequins in the store windows.

This retail organization shortchanges both workers and customers. Corporate-determined sales goals and constant surveillance of store “metrics,” also known as data, by corporate managers lead to scripted forms of interaction and high-pressure sales tactics. Workers draw attention to how these practices, attempts to appeal to a small segment of the retail market, undermine customer service and may ultimately repel shoppers. Fashion retail employees also vehemently criticize the high-pressure sales pitches for branded credit cards with high finance charges that they are exhorted to push onto unsuspecting consumers. These workers, most of whom are between eighteen and twenty-three years old, frequently find themselves facing moral quandaries at work, even as they are underpaid and undervalued.

How can retail employers require so much while offering so little in return? Although retail workers may identify with the brand and value...
its status and the employee discount, discounts alone do not fully explain these jobs’ persistence.\textsuperscript{1} We focus on teenage and twenty-something clothing retail workers to understand how employers—store-level managers and more senior corporate managers—organize the labor process and regulate how workers must look and act to evoke the brand that they represent. Drawing on interviews with fifty-five current and recent clothing retail workers who vary by race and gender, we point out that working conditions lead to constant turnover, as workers recognize the mismatch between their employers’ stated values (prioritizing “cool” and “hot” status above effort and customer service) and the limited rewards for doing a good job and maintaining the look prized by managers. We analyze how workers, customers, corporate managers, and store managers interact in these workplaces, consistently calling attention to how race and gender shape these interactions.

Brand-oriented clothing retail work is organized to emphasize workers’ bodies while undermining their humanity. How do workers experience racial, gender, and class inequalities in retail clothing stores, which the focus on \textit{aesthetic labor} exacerbates? Originally conceptualized by sociologists Chris Warhurst, Dennis Nickson, and their colleagues as the “embodied capacities and attributes possessed by workers” at hiring, aesthetic labor has been further specified to include “a worker’s deportment, style, accent, voice, and attractiveness.”\textsuperscript{2} Workers’ bodies are not abstractions; they reflect racial, gender, sexual, and class identities, ideologies, and material realities. We analyze the organization of labor dynamics within retail clothing and how this labor process reinforces and even justifies inequalities.

\textbf{Retail Labor, Surveillance, and the Organization of Work}

This book speaks to several important ongoing conversations about work and labor. Researchers studying work in the twenty-first century emphasize the polarization between good and bad jobs.\textsuperscript{3} Retail exemplifies the latter: workers receive low pay and status, varying and limited hours of work, and minimal benefits, and they respond with high turnover. Yet
retail is the largest industry in the United States and a key driver of the world economy. Clothing and accessory stores are among the largest retail employers; although they pay their nearly one million US workers less than employees in other retail sectors. Thus, studying retail clothing work provides a lens through which to understand how corporations organize low-wage work at the nexus of beauty and consumption. Focusing on this case allows us to examine how retailers organize low-wage work to compete within a branded market, including how managers treat their workers, how workers respond, and what these interactions reveal about workplace inequality. We thus address some unanswered questions about how these jobs are changing in the twenty-first century, with a new focus on technology and surveillance, and how racial and gender inequalities are reinforced in these increasingly diverse workplaces.

We build on the service work literature to show how relationships between customers, workers, and multiple levels of managers play out given new forms of data collection and surveillance. We did not originally expect to focus on surveillance and related technology, but these themes cropped up regularly in our interviews, leading us to consider how each is changing twenty-first-century workplaces in significant ways. In previous decades, corporate managers tracked stores through weekly or monthly sales data, phone calls, and visits; today, software systems allow near-constant communication between store- and corporate-level management. Corporate can peer into each store in real time, identifying how many customers come in and out, how much they buy in each transaction, and how effectively cashiers have convinced customers to apply for store credit cards or upsold them with “add-ons” at the point of sale.

Corporate managers can use these data to direct frontline managers’ decisions—even though the metrics don’t capture the full scope of the situation. For example, corporate counts “footfalls” of people coming into and leaving the store; children running in and out of the store as they play artificially increase footfalls but not purchases, counting against worker productivity. Customer surveys, which are disproportionately filled out by unhappy customers, may differ from frontline managers’ direct observations, yet play an outsized role in corporate’s evaluations of workers. That is to say, new technologies and greater surveillance have lowered autonomy among frontline workers and managers, centralizing
decision-making in corporate managers. This range of surveillance technologies shapes how store-level managers train and supervise workers and expect them to perform their tasks, while ironically failing to improve (and often undercutting) the quality of customer service. Managerial technologies used in these workplaces produce worse jobs, higher turnover, and lower customer service: a virtual trifecta of failure in the name of market rationality.

Previous scholarship has established that in service work, there is not a simple binary relationship between worker and manager, but instead a more unstable worker-manager-customer triangle. Sociologist Robin Leidner argues that this service triangle complicates the workplace, as workers and managers try to appeal to the customers to win concessions. With the introduction of new technology allowing for greater corporate surveillance, however, we theorize that this triangle has become a service quadrangle, with realignments of power between corporate managers (who have gained control) and frontline managers (who have lost autonomy), workers (who face increased constraints as well as new opportunities for resistance), and customers (who have gained greater voice).

Within this four-pointed arrangement exists what we theorize as the service panopticon. Theorist Michel Foucault posits that modern society involves ubiquitous surveillance, forming a panopticon or a structure in which people can always be observed, but do not know when they are being observed, which leads them to regulate their own behavior in case they are being watched. Building on labor process theory, we argue that workers and frontline managers operate within a broader set of corporate control mechanisms that are distinguishing features of the twenty-first-century retail workplace. Through a range of technologies—including video cameras, computer software, motion sensors, secret shoppers, customer surveys, and corporate visits—corporate management maintains a watchful eye on each of its stores. Management exerts control by making workers constantly visible. Workers recognize that managers frequently observe them, but they also self-surveil, disciplining themselves. For example, although not every customer is a secret shopper, workers may act as if they all might be, not only to provide good customer service but also to be witnessed providing corporate-approved customer service.
The *service quadrangle* and the *service panopticon* are power-imbued processes. At each point in the service quadrangle, race and gender shape the interactions between workers, customers, frontline managers, and corporate managers. The service panopticon is also used to differentially surveil workers and customers, such as when Black workers are asked to follow customers suspected of shoplifting simply because they are Black. Thus, the organization of retail work in the twenty-first century entails both changes in technology and increased surveillance as well as racialized and gendered organizational processes.

Researchers increasingly recognize the significance of how class, gender, sexuality, and race intersect, especially in workplaces and service jobs. Examining how companies organize retail work around these social locations provides insights into the specific mechanisms of brand-oriented service work that maintain inequalities. We draw on clothing retail workers’ experiences of these jobs to argue that the labor process involves multiple levels of management to enforce labor-savings strategies and develops workplaces that alienate many workers of color who do not “fit” the store brand.

Organizational scholar Joan Acker emphasizes that organizational practices tend to reinforce social inequalities, which are “baked into” the structure of workplaces. Workplace practices may appear neutral, but they reflect the “ideal workers” or “appropriate labor” management has in mind. Sociologists Adia Harvey Wingfield and Renée Skeete elaborate on how these processes occur at ideological, interactional, and physical levels. At the ideological level, the organizational culture reflects ideas about race, class, and gender; for example, store advertisements may primarily display men and women who appear attractive according to white, middle-class norms. At the interactional level, workers may need to present and contort themselves to avoid disrupting white, middle-class workers’ dominance in the workplace, such as when Black women must wear their hair in ways that mimic white-associated hairstyles. At the physical level, workers may perform tasks or be spatially organized in ways that reinforce hierarchy, such as when workers in the stockroom are more often Black and Latino men and workers on the retail floor are more often white women and lighter-skinned women of color. These racial, gendered, and classed tasks may be invisible to workers and managers, even
as they reinforce inequality. Racial tasks are thus “embedded in the every-
day interactions, development of organizational culture, and physical con-
struction and maintenance of worksites is the labor that minority workers
do to maintain the normalization of whiteness and to obscure or hide
the ways they are assumed to be different from the white mainstream,”
as Wingfield and Skeete argue. White women compose the majority of
the clothing retail workforce; their racial-gender advantages are organiza-
tionally repurposed to fit the employers’ needs.

Conflicts are inherent in capitalism, as managers seek to extract
capital—or value and resources that produce value—from workers. Capital
takes several forms that are central to the retail workplaces we study.
Each form stems from social relationships and arrangements. Thus,
these forms of capital should be understood as social constructs, not as
naturally occurring phenomena. First, economic capital refers to financial
resources, namely in the form of money, such as wages. Second, symbolic
capital encompasses the meaning that individuals, groups, organizations,
and institutions attribute to more abstract social entities, such as beauty,
that have material consequences. Third, cultural capital refers to differ-
ent types of socially meaningful status markers, such as consumer tastes,
leisure activities, fashion sense, speech, and so on. Fourth, social capital
reflects relationships and networks that can affect a worker’s opportunities,
such as friends who recruit one another on behalf of their manager. All
four types of capital remain interlocked within the retail sector, subject to
negotiation and evaluation within the labor process.

In retail, management is multilayered and made up of at least two dis-
tinct groups: corporate and store (or “frontline”). Each group tries to mini-
mize company losses and maximize revenue (forms of economic capital),
but they perform these jobs differently given their relative positions in the
service quadrangle and the embedded panopticon, as well as their differ-
ing relationships with workers. Race and gender further influence these
dynamics, such as when white managers develop closer relationships (social
capital) with white workers and then give them more shifts, leaving workers
of color with even fewer hours, or when women of color recount the most
unpleasant customer interactions but recall fewer instances of support from
coworkers in dealing with unruly customers. Both corporate and frontline
managers judge workers based on their perceived beauty (symbolic capital),
trying to create a certain status associated with the brand (cultural capital). Even as these companies publicly project racially and gender-progressive identities, their practices reinforce societal inequalities.

Surveillance operates in complex ways. We argue that the clothing retail sector creates a matrix of multidirectional controls to cultivate the company’s value both monetarily and symbolically. Workers watch customers to prevent theft while following corporate rules for how to dress. Customers surveil workers’ performance through shopper surveys or “secret shoppers.” Frontline managers style workers’ bodies before a shift and inspect their bags to ensure that they haven’t stolen merchandise after they clock out. Corporate managers monitor frontline managers, workers’ bodies, and sales-related metrics in each store. Across these interplays, retail work routines appear neutral, but they tend to perpetuate racialized and gendered scripts for workers, customers, and both sets of managers. The service panopticon creates such extreme circumstances that some workers quit their jobs. Others regularly resist certain desired practices (like scripted interactions and upselling shoppers). Gendered and racialized surveillance within the retail workplace is both a tool of domination and a catalyst for resistance.

Managers aim to routinize work so that they can assert control over the timing, staffing, and quality of work. At the same time, they deskill that work, decreasing worker power to determine wages, hours, and working conditions. Labor scholar Harry Braverman asserts that routinization robs workers of their autonomy and ability to derive a deeper sense of satisfaction from their labor. Routinized interactive service work may further alienate workers by restricting their emotions, making them feel increasingly inauthentic. Coining the concept “emotional labor,” sociologist Arlie Hochschild analyzes how employers expect workers to manage their emotions as they interact with customers, produce an emotional state in customers, and allow employers to control their feelings. Just as companies sell clothing sewn by factory workers, they sell feelings performed by retail workers. This interactive work, assumed to be low skill, requires substantial skill if it is to be done well. Such work reinforces certain racialized and gendered ideals; indeed, white men are most vehement in their objections to doing emotional labor, perhaps because they are less accustomed to “acting” in these ways.
Routinization in interactive service work has other potential dangers for laborers. Robin Leidner argues that “rigid routines strictly enforced can actually prevent workers from doing an adequate job, harming both customer satisfaction and employee morale.” As managers script workers to do ineffective things, workers feel increasingly alienated. We heard many stories of workers frustrated by following stiff scripts that impede connecting with customers. In her ethnographic study of fast-food workers, for instance, Leidner theorizes how workers may come to make sense of, resist, and even use routinization, actively negotiating rather than passively accepting managers’ attempts to control their work. Workers consistently endeavor to reshape their workplaces and find dignity in their jobs. They also attempt to find or create solidarity with coworkers, and sometimes succeed. However, these opportunities for solidarity differ among workers; for example, workers of color develop fewer relationships when they work in stores primarily staffed by white workers.

Since the work products of emotional and aesthetic labor are less recognized, contestations between managers and workers can be somewhat murky. Labor scholars Cameron Macdonald and Carmen Sirianni argue that conflicts between managers and workers are less clear when they focus on the self-presentation of the worker, as opposed to, for example, how many widgets they make an hour. Class, racial, and gender inequalities similarly “hide in plain sight,” as workers, for example, are asked to adopt white middle-class, cisgender styles, with no recognition of how these expectations disadvantage minoritized workers. We explore how twenty-first-century retail clothing workers negotiate, resist, and experience work, attentive to how race and gender shape these processes.

Another aim of this book is to understand the specific labor practices that stem from the ever-expanding branded service economy. In an economy predicated on unnecessary consumption, businesses are compelled to constantly create the impetus to buy more. Brands play this role, producing value simply by virtue of their signifiers and encouraging customers to buy things they do not need. Workers are key to convincing customers to buy for the sake of remaining in style; they use their bodies to model new fashions and their emotional labor to encourage consumption, making the consumption and production of the service deeply interconnected.