



## The Corporeal Costs of Doing What You Love

Hemangini Gupta

To cite this article: Hemangini Gupta (2019): The Corporeal Costs of Doing What You Love, Feminist Media Studies, DOI: [10.1080/14680777.2019.1573530](https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1573530)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1573530>



Published online: 31 Jan 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

---

COMMENTARY



## The Corporeal Costs of Doing What You Love

Hemangini Gupta

National Institute of Advanced Studies

When I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in the high-technology world of startup capitalism in Bangalore, India, the air was full of possibility. This is India's "Start Up City," a vision for the future that is promised by state governments, driven by entrepreneurs and funders, and crafted by local media. In full page advertisements and dedicated supplements, media discourses about a new generation of workers who "do what they love" proliferate. These mediatized expressions of work and affect as interconnected align with global media proclamations about the rise of passionate entrepreneurs (Walter Isaacson 2011). Yet these mediatized affective realms obscure the material conditions under which such "loving innovations" are produced transnationally. Far from the homes of Silicon Valley multimillionaires are the proliferating spaces (manufacturing factories, startups, offshore offices) and actors (jobbers, workers, entrepreneurs) in the Global South who transform Do What You Love discourses into concrete products and services.

In feminist analysis, narratives of love in the workplace conceal exploitative relations (Miya Tokumitsu 2014, 2015; Kathi Weeks 2017) and we endure in our attachments to compromised conditions of possibility in corrosive and toxic work environments (Lauren Berlant 2006, 2011). Yet, there is less attention paid to the corporeal costs and somatic conditions of "Do What You Love" ideologies. How do subjects feel their way into such desires?

As an ethnographer-at-large in an ambitious travel company, I worked alongside women in their twenties and early thirties. The founder ran his company as one in which he would wish to work himself; this is after all the entrepreneurial age in which everyone is expected to "be an entrepreneur" and create value out of nothing (Imre Szeman 2015). Employees were to innovate with work processes; be happy and motivated at office; flexible in their approach to projects but also in the food they ate, and the leisure activities they participated in, dedicated to the company as a whole (Sareeta Amrute 2016; Carla Freeman 2014).

Our office was largely composed of young women, many of them a first-generation of professionals in their families, and I watched as they struggled to align their bodies and lives with the reigning affect of work. One night some of us waited by the office exit for the torrential monsoon rain to let up so we could take our buses home. As evening changed to night and phones rang with calls from anxious fathers, some women angrily claimed that they would demand nightly taxi drops. But their anger was soon tempered by sympathy—one worker suggested that this was not the time to "stress out" the CEO. Sales had been low recently; "the boss" had seemed under pressure. Gradually the anger dissipated; we rolled up the bottoms of our pants and silently waded out into the rain-

washed street. Labor demands are direct appeals to the entrepreneur–CEO, and their withdrawal too is for his personal protection, marking a privatization of affect.

This dedication to the company and its founder via the imperative to “love work” manifested in lasting and ultimately untenable physical ailments—the corporeal costing of neoliberal work. On my small team, two colleagues developed debilitating illnesses. One was temporarily paralyzed by a bad back. “I had forced bed rest,” she explained to me. This was at the same time that the company was expanding into a new market; as a small company there were only a few employees, all of them key players. “I couldn’t write,” she continued, “so I sat up like this in bed,” (she showed me) “and I called out the text to my friend on the phone and she typed it for me.” After several years of working on different skills, training and retraining herself for this flexible neoliberal market (Bonnie Urciuoli 2008), my colleague ultimately left her job. For years she directed her body to align with the resonances of entrepreneurial work—treat the company as her own, work late hours, become completely immersed in the job—but finally there was a disaggregation of love and work as her body collapsed. The cost of aligning work and affect was corporeal, borne by her spinal cord. Another colleague severely wounded her wrist from continuously (re) making company websites, yet she soldiered on. Her juniors whispered to me that she was headed for a breakdown of some sort. Her wrist was in a cast and she turned to robotics to compensate for her handicap—becoming a cyborg worker (Donna J. Haraway 1996) a worker for whom neoliberalism was “lived on the skin” (Noelle J. Molé 2011).

My research found high attrition rates across levels in the startup work environments where I conducted fieldwork. As work becomes feminized, the corporeal costs of loving work can detail which bodies are rendered the most vulnerable. In Bangalore, migrant and young workers are the most susceptible entrants into the affective lifeworlds of startup sector work. A focus on how bodies and “vital energies” (Kalindi Vora 2015) intercept media and corporate narratives will allow us to unfold a biopolitics of corporeal costing: the body as truth-telling device (Molé 2011). Even while media generate narratives of love as work, and work as love via books, websites, and biographies, the focus on enterprising and passionate innovators obscures the less glamorous conditions of embodied and gendered labor through which startup capitalism is sustained. To focus on corporeality then is to turn attention to questions of scale: at one level to understand how the ideological apparatus of “Do What You Love” discourses travel transnationally to disempower entry-level workers, and at another to attend to the material specificities under which feminized work is encountered, embodied, and negotiated.

## References

- Amrute, Sareeta. 2016. *Encoding Race, Encoding Class: Indian IT Workers in Berlin*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Berlant, Lauren. 2006. “Cruel Optimism.” *Differences* 17 (3): 20–36. doi:10.1215/10407391-2006-009.
- Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Freeman, Carla. 2014. *Entrepreneurial Selves: Neoliberal Respectability and the Making of a Caribbean Middle Class*. Durham: Duke University Press Books.
- Haraway, Donna J. 1996. *Simians Cyborgs and Women*. London: Free Association Books.
- Isaacson, Walter. 2011. *Steve Jobs*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

- Molé, Noelle J. 2011. *Labor Disorders in Neoliberal Italy: Mobbing, Well-Being, and the Workplace*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Szeman, Imre. 2015. "Entrepreneurship as the New Common Sense." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 114 (3): 471–490. doi:10.1215/00382876-3130701.
- Tokumitsu, Miya. 2014. "In the Name of Love." *Jacobin*, September 30. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2014/01/in-the-name-of-love/>
- Tokumitsu, Miya. 2015. *Do What You Love: And Other Lies about Success and Happiness*. New York: Regan Arts.
- Urciuoli, Bonnie. 2008. "Skills and Selves in the New Workplace." *American Ethnologist* 35 (2): 211–228. doi:10.1111/j.1548-1425.2008.00031.x.
- Vora, Kalindi. 2015. *Life Support: Biocapital and the New History of Outsourced Labor*. 1st ed. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Weeks, Kathi. 2017. "Down with Love: Feminist Critique and the New Ideologies of Work." *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 45 (3): 37–58. doi:10.1353/wsq.2017.0043.