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Caitrin Lynch. *Retirement on the Line: Age, Work, and Value in an American Factory*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012. 240 pp. ISBN 978-0-8014-5026-6.

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Caitrin Lynch's book *Retirement on the Line: Age, Work, and Value in an American Factory* explores the meanings of work for employees of Vita Needle, a family-owned stainless steel needle factory on the outskirts of Boston, Massachusetts. The book is based on intensive ethnographic research undertaken by the author during 2006–2011. Working on Vita's shop floor, side by side with factory employees, enabled the author to produce a rich, nuanced, and insightful piece of anthropological writing that not only explores "what work means for people ... of conventional retirement age" (3), but also touches upon broader social issues such as aging, productivity, and work ethic in the contemporary United States. The book also includes a discussion of the place of anthropologists in the field that is extensively covered by the media — Vita Needle has been of interest to multiple journalists—and their role in producing and reproducing knowledge.

The book is divided into two parts. The first section, "Up the Stairs," consists of three chapters and gives an account of social relations on the Vita Needle shop floor. These chapters consistently discuss the ways in which "eldersourcing"—employing people of retirement age on flexible contracts, without social benefits, and at low wages—is interpreted and managed by the Vita community. The second part of the book, "In the Press," focuses on the image of Vita's factory as it is (re)produced by various media outlets, as well as on workers' agency in influencing media accounts.

Retirement on the Line begins with the chapter "Making Money for Fred: Productivity, People, and Purpose," the core theme of which is the complex nexus of productivity, profit, and social value present in the Vita needle factory. In this chapter, Lynch takes a close look at the factory's everyday life and analyzes its various aspects: the phrases commonly used by employees and their meanings, efficiency games on the shop floor, and reciprocal practices of oversight by workers. Lynch concludes that it is the sense of joint contribution and shared feeling of being productive among the workers that allow the work system in Vita to function. Workers and Vita's owner depend on one another: by employing elderly people, the factory management benefits from cheap labor but in return grants its employees an opportunity to feel engaged and productive.

In the second chapter, "Antique Machinery and Antique People: The Vita Needle Family," Lynch explores in depth the social relations among Vita's elderly employees and their managers and raises important questions about the managerial techniques used at Vita and their reception by workers. The author focuses on the tension be-

tween work and family life, as well as on the process via which the feeling of “sameness” is produced among employees. Lynch discovers that shared generational memory, commonality of age, and economic and medical experiences related to aging in the United States help to diminish class differences in the white, predominantly male community of Vita workers. In the same chapter, the author also analyzes the enactment of expected gender roles by Vita workers, the significance of jokes and humor in establishing shop floor relations, and the “family” image of the work place. Lynch sketches a palette of emotions and relations (trust, care, belonging, hominess, love, and support) that Vita employees associate with their workplace. The author describes how such affects are sustained by managers and workers themselves through, for instance, certain expressions (such as “old folk”), jokes about aging, and a gendered division in the workspace (such as the “men’s lunch corner”).

The last chapter of the first section, “No Chains on the Seats: Freedom and Flexibility,” is fully devoted to the persistent questions of agency and dignity. Lynch provides an in-depth account of the tensions that arise between the workplace as a site of meaningful sociality and as a potential instrument of exploitation of elders’ labor. By showing that workers have a great variety of motivations for working at Vita Needle and that these are not confined to material gain, Lynch demonstrates that work can be not only about economic profit but also about one’s feelings of usefulness and belonging to a community. The author draws the conclusion that poor working conditions and low wages are outweighed by the fact that Vita’s workplace plays a significant positive role in elderly people’s social and emotional lives. Lynch ends this part of the book with the claim that what makes exploitation acceptable to the workers of Vita is the fact that it succeeds in building a community and creating a sense of purpose for people of retirement age.

While the first part of the book is concerned with sociability on the shop floor, in the second part Lynch shifts her focus to the various ways in which the factory is represented in the media. In chapter four, “Riding the Gray Wave: Global Interest in Vita Needle,” Lynch examines media coverage of Vita from three perspectives: the perspective of the content producers such as journalists and media editors, Vita’s self-presentation, and audience responses. As part of her analysis, Lynch compares French, American, and, to a lesser extent, German coverage of Vita Needle. Describing consecutive waves of media attention to Vita in the years 1998, 2001–2003, and 2008–2011, Lynch points out the recurring themes in media narratives: the emphasis on the uniqueness of Vita’s factory, questions about the possibility of establishing similar enterprises in other countries, and the social image of elderly people as passive and unproductive. Lynch also demonstrates how different cultural and political contexts affect both journalists’ and audiences’ reinterpretation of the significance of Vita Needle. For instance, she shows how the story of the Vita factory was of major political significance to French journalists. It served as an example of the possibility of productive and engaged aging and, as such, inherently opposed the sanctity of retirement in France.

The fifth chapter, “Rosa, a National Treasure: Agency in the Face of Media Stardom,” returns to the question of the subjectivity of elderly workers employed at Vita

Needle—this time in the face of the media and the anthropological gaze. According to Lynch, being reported in the media affects what workers think about Vita and how they interpret their world. The chapter underlines the significance of media coverage in shaping workers' sense of self and in making work at Vita meaningful. In this chapter, Lynch also refers to her own experience as a researcher at Vita and outlines a variety of reactions from factory employees toward not only media representatives but also herself as an anthropologist. In this chapter, the author comes to the conclusion that the reluctance on the part of workers to share information about Vita reveals their agency and self-consciousness. Concerns about privacy and a desire to "control the narrative" about Vita prompt some employees to avoid any contact with the media. At the same time, others carefully select the stories they tell and frequently alter their accounts depending on circumstances. According to Lynch, this is how workers strive to influence the media image of Vita and the means by which they perform their identity.

In the conclusion and postscript, Lynch raises socially important questions and situates her own research in the domain of gerontology as well as the anthropology of globalization and work. While asserting that in the case of the Vita factory, employing the elderly has proved to be a win-win situation for both workers and management, the author also raises questions about the large-scale consequences of "eldersourcing" for organized labor. Lynch argues that the willingness of certain groups (e.g., retired Americans or undocumented immigrants) to work in precarious conditions is one of the major changes to the global landscape of work and employment in the world today. The author does not give a defined prognosis on the future of labor but invites her readers to review commonly used labor categories and assumptions when addressing such challenges.

Retirement on the Line could greatly benefit from a more thorough deconstruction of the American context of work and aging. While the book does include a debate on the differences in imagining the value of work in France and Germany, it might seem underdeveloped and superficial to a European reader. The American peculiarities, however, an account of which would have been of interest to the same reader, are only briefly touched on. Lynch's discussion of corporate loyalty in different American enterprises, her remarks on the discourse of "busyness," flexibility, and working lifestyles are fascinating and leave the reader wishing for a more extensive account of the details of the American context. In addition to this, the book lacks a thorough reflection on Lynch's personal position in the Vita factory. In particular, a greater discussion on the extent to which the author's overall positive opinions of "eldersourcing" might have been influenced by her close relationship with factory managers is certainly called for.

Overall, *Retirement on the Line* is an excellent description of a very specific workplace; it is an encounter filled with arguments that are interesting and grounded in original ethnographic material. Lynch's book expands beyond a mere case study and proposes broader reflections on the struggles and aspirations of elderly employees—a group rarely studied by sociologists of work. Lynch has indeed found a balance between maintaining the anonymity of informants and respecting their

voice and agency. At the same time, the ethnographer avoids the trap of becoming the overly self-concerned anthropologist who concentrates mainly on his or her ethical dilemmas.

For readers interested in the anthropology of industry *Retirement on the Line* can provide a captivating description of shop floor relations, efficiency games, and American ideals of work ethic, efficiency, and productivity. Those interested in research methodology will find *Retirement on the Line* to be an example of a high-quality ethnographic work that skillfully treats common dilemmas faced by anthropologists when conducting ethnographic research in communities extensively covered by the media as well as across a large age gap. As such, the book could serve as a great aid and a useful reference for those conducting ethnographic work in similar circumstances. Anthropologists and other social researchers working on issues of aging could refer to this book for a review of the most recent developments in debates on “eldersourcing” and retirement in the United States. Caitrin Lynch’s book can be recommended for all levels of instruction thanks to its clarity of language, precision of arguments, and the excellent selection of bibliographical references.

At the very beginning of her book, the author defines the role of anthropologists specializing in the world of work as trying to understand “the histories, experiences, and possible futures of people worldwide as they make sense and respond to dramatically changing socioeconomic landscapes” (21). Lynch’s research and its outcome—*Retirement on the Line: Age, Work, and Value in an American Factory*—graciously fulfill these requirements, providing readers with an intimate, subtle, yet thought-provoking ethnography of a community of elderly workers as well as their efforts to preserve agency and dignity.