Introduction

Glamour Labor

The excitement was palpable when the first model appeared on the catwalk of the DKNY show. With her vivid lips in a pout, her spindly legs in a blinding flash of cameras, she spiked the runway with definitive strokes, keeping time to the deep thrum of the blaring soundtrack. As she rounded the corner, the electricity sparking off of her was almost visible. Krista, a model who'd stomped many a runway in her day, described what it's like:

There are thirty, forty cameras going off; there's a tension in the room. They're there, they're looking at you, making sure everything's just right, it's on their faces. It has an impact. I think wherever you are, you are having an interaction with it, and the moods blend. They set a mood, and there's paparazzi and champagne being drunk, and there's a fervor and this music going on. All that is a certain subtle tempest of energy. And models feed off of that. They get into it.¹

What is this energy about? Frantically snapping my point-and-shoot camera as the models streamed by, I felt the zing of the crowd, the mood, the vibrations in the room. Hard to capture, or even define, it was the kind of dynamism that is both collective and singular, always moving, everywhere and nowhere at once. Spilling over boundaries, hooking us into our own vitality and interconnectedness, this is the energy fashion, for one, has sought to channel and market, and fashion models are among its most reliable conduits.

Fashion models as conduits? Aren't fashion models the people we love to hate, impossible icons whose inhuman proportions make the rest of us all too aware of our own inadequacies? The topic pushes buttons. When presenting my work, I confronted entrenched notions about the
frivolity of the profession, feminist anger at its practices, and confirmed assumptions that make everyone an expert about the field. Sometimes, I found it difficult to get a word in edgewise. The sad spectacle of teen-aged girls dolled up to look like grown women, not to mention the unrealistic body types they parade as the norm, presents vital issues of concern that bear examining and combating. The attraction of modeling for so many young girls and women calls out for demystification, by drawing back the curtain to reveal the magical workings of the glamour machine. The fact that so many are pulled in by its allure, skip college, or, worse, drop out of high school, only to be spat out by their “sell-by” date at the ripe old age of twenty-two, is worthy of real outrage.

I understand these issues completely. I was exposed to them from a young age, when people started telling me “You should be a model.” What did this admonition mean? I knew it was a compliment, but it also contained a challenge: Why didn’t I make more of myself, try to realize my potential, stretch myself beyond existing limits? I was also deeply conflicted about it, having struggled with my own body issues and nascent feminist ire with regard to being valued only for my looks. The fact is, models are mostly women. Many of the images produced by the modeling industry can be interpreted as misogynist, at worst, and supportive of the status quo, at best. These issues were still with me as my graduate studies led me toward a deeper understanding of gender, bodies, technology, and society. Fascinated by discovering the fluidity between categories I had assumed were fixed, I found that looking to patriarchy or consumerism to explain why models look the way they do explained only part of the story. Although the “model” ideal reinforces sexual ideologies while prompting us to buy things, it also idealizes a way of being in the world that engages us with images and technology in rhythms that pass beyond bodily boundaries of sex, race, and class. My research on modeling revealed new insights into tendencies inherent in the Internet, social media, and biotechnology that facilitate the spread of neoliberal and biopolitical imperatives to fuzz the line between bodies and technologies in a manner that models make attractive. Taking this angle on modeling not only acknowledged the cultural construction of gender, consumerism, and work but also highlighted the cultural construction of the body itself via a form of work I have dubbed “glamour labor.”
Glamour labor works on both body and image—the bodywork to manage appearance in person and image work to create and maintain one’s “cool” quotient—how hooked up, tuned in, and “in the know” one is. Glamour labor involves all aspects of one’s image, from physical presentation, to personal connections, to friendships and fun. Its virtual mode involves the effort to keep up with the trends by reading fashion magazines, watching awards shows, and expending the energy to stay hooked into what’s happening now in terms of styles, desirable brands, and how to get them. Its physical mode involves maintaining a fashionable hairstyle and working to achieve a body that fits the current ideal. Some scholars call these kinds of work on the body “aesthetic labor”—the work to look and behave like an image defined by one’s employer. Virtual manifestations of glamour labor have “immaterial labor echoes,” in the work to foster networked connections and build a reputation within a community of workers for whom work and play are not clearly defined. The endless possibilities for glamour labor also incite pressures similarly felt by cultural workers in fashion design, advertising, software production, photography, and other forms of cultural production, where scholars have noted the pressure to be available 24/7 for work. The key difference is that glamour labor fuses both physical and virtual aspects of bodywork in pursuit of the fashionable ideal. When life, work, and body management bleed together, “glamour labor” is a better term for describing the work to achieve the overall image touted by fashion modeling as a means to the good life.

The current era of live-streaming, geolocating, biosensing, taking selfies, and living online has intensified the pull for glamour labor. As we turn to the screen to find the information we need to achieve our new look, email, blog, or tweet about what we want to buy, be, or achieve, we intimately engage with technologies organizing bodies in time and space, with every click building an affective circuitry metering our engagement and potential, bringing it to market. How have modeling and fashion attracted publics willing to expose their body’s rhythms, connections, movements, and sensations through tracking “likes” and “dislikes,” geolocating tweets, or mapping patterns of clicks? How has wearing a device that measures the body’s vital signs and movements, engaging with new therapies, or ingesting experimental drugs, in hopes of possibly reaching optimal performance, become entangled with the
pursuit of a model-perfect body? Models’ glamour labor opens the way to optimization. Capitalizing on the body’s susceptibility to enhancement, models glamorize offering the body’s various modes of social and physical energy to be plugged in, worked out, and totally “made over” to fit today’s ever-changing standard of the glamorous ideal. By performing and promoting glamour labor, models are on the frontlines of selling a way of being in the world, which pulls bodies into productive matrixes in novel ways.

Models sell a way of life? Aren’t they just clothes hangers used to display goods for sale? Krista, the model quoted above, was indeed modeling the DKNY clothes on the runway for the assembled glitterati in the room who might have a chance at buying them—or at least borrowing them. The fashion show’s professed purpose of parading new styles to promote sales has recently morphed to promoting a brand, however. Now that images of shows instantly telegraph via the Internet to interested onlookers the world over, fashion weeks are big news, widely reported in newspapers and on television, with Internet and social media coverage of backstage shenanigans and gossip about front-row seating arrangements almost as important as the critique of what comes down the runway. Compared to the tiny fraction of audience actually in the room, the majority of onlookers couldn’t possibly buy the fashions on display. It doesn’t matter. Selling the products is only a small part of what the model does.

Of course, models do sell things, why else would a model still be required to pique our interest in this face cream, or that “it” bag, or whatever shade has become “the new black”? A larger part of the model’s job, however, is to stir up energy, spark interest, and gain attention. By selling a brand, a logo, and a lifestyle, models invite varied publics into a web of matrixed attention and exposed vitality, systematizing responses and propensities, making them traceable, possibly controllable, and therefore profitable.

You, Inc.

The sociologist Kathleen Barry notes how flight attendants earned the “wages of glamour” by crafting their bodies and personalities to meet expectations of femininity. In return, they garnered admiration and
high status, but only if their work appeared effortless. Similarly, the experiences of the models with whom I spoke resonate with the notion of work that is hidden or unrecognizable as such.

Blurring the line between work and play is an endemic feature of cultural production more generally, a trend that the communication scholar Mark Deuze dubs “liquid life.” “Cool” jobs entice young workers into Faustian bargains that sap their youth, potential, and financial resources in pursuit of glamorous work. Angela McRobbie describes this process as “the ruthless and tyrannical deployment of ‘cool’ as a disciplinary regime of work and leisure.” Models experience an extreme version this “deployment of cool,” evident in the tone of advice given to them: You must be the CEO of you, it’s your own responsibility for your success, you have to be adaptable, you have to be pliant, you have to be original, you have to bring something to the table, be professional, look the part, act “as if.” You are responsible for your own destiny, and you’d better try to be a superstar. You have to be your best self not only physically but also emotionally, and personally. As one informant pointed out, “Models are like mini corporations.”

While flexible workers who treat themselves like mini corporations have been well documented, the social theorist Emily Martin notes how these behaviors have taken on a manic tone, “pushing the limits of everything, and doing it all with an intense level of energy devoted to anticipating and investing in the future.” Stability and conformity are not valued in the current ideal worker; dynamism and change are. The individual is viewed as a set of “potentials to be realized and capacities to be fulfilled: self-maximization and self-optimization are the watchwords.” As such, fashion models, insofar as they traffic the volatile forces of affectivity and total self-maximization, are manic workers par excellence.

In the course of my research, I found that modeling work involves being “on” all the time, embodying the dream of a fully optimized life. As such, it contributes to the twenty-first-century trend toward making bodily potential and connectivity continuously available to metering and regulation. Glamour labor encourages an embodied entanglement with technology, as capital’s constant expansion banks on possibilities inherent in both bodily vitality and the capacity for connection. A complex of technological mediations produces the model’s body, from the
minute they are first Polaroided (as they say in the business to refer to the first time they are photographed by a scout or potential manager) to the moment they are famous enough to be on the cover of a magazine and subject to the Photoshopping conventions now governing how fashion images appear.

Some scholars have separated these processes into the medicalization and mediatization of everyday life. Glamour labor is physical, in terms of improving one’s image by disciplining the body via diet, exercise, and medical intervention. It also encourages virtual forms of self-fashioning and self-surveillance made possible by Internet connectivity and social media. Thus, while the social philosopher Nikolas Rose notes the rise of a “somatic ethic” in which “the maximization of lifestyle, potential, health, and quality of life has become almost obligatory,” I would add that this ethic extends to the somatic presentation of self online as well. As this obligation to be all one could be both online and off has spread, pursuing glamour labor to optimize life has regulated those who engage with it, facilitating the exercise of power through a biopolitics of beauty, which governs decisions about organizing vital forces, speculating on the body’s potential to gain or lose weight, grow stronger, mutate, transform, become more attractive, or connect. The biopolitics of beauty organizes individuals not only as consumers with desires but also as populations ready for transformation, always already in need of a makeover.

Consequently, glamour labor to look good or cool or “with it” is inseparable from the glamour labor aimed at extending the image far and wide, in the effort to put one’s bodily potentials into the circuitry that make up your “presence” physically and virtually. Put succinctly, in the circuit of glamour labor, where the model/consumer/fashion/image/product nexus converges in the event of the model “look,” models make the labor of physical and social enhancement attractive. Models glamorize encouraging a bodily variability that is not just about promoting diet pills or about getting you, the consumer, actively engaged in body projects but also encouraging investment in your engagement with others. Glamour labor varies, not just your wardrobe according to fashion, but also your body, your relationships, and your work styles, as you make your feelings, proclivities, and moods available to electronic calibration and measurement.
Those of us who exist in a manic state of constantly updating their Facebook statuses, getting shaves or new hairstyles to update their profile pictures, tweeting about their latest thoughts, checking in to identify their whereabouts, blogging about their interests, pinning images of their favorite things, tumbling their photos, or Instagramming to give them a nostalgic haze, are ideal glamour laborers. As such, we provide raw material to a system in which, as the communication scholar Alice Marwick points out, “online and offline behavior” is “combined, analyzed, and sold” by private data companies to “marketers, corporations, governments, and even criminals.”

In this climate, the tendency to look at, feel for, or be affected by a product becomes as important as buying what the model is ostensibly selling. The time and attention you spend engaging with fashion is a form of work, valuable in and of itself. Shop for a cardigan once, and those sweaters will haunt your screen margins for days because where you go online, where you look, with whom you communicate, and how you feel about it all is tracked by corporations that benefit from knowing your proclivities, constructing complex algorithms to decipher what you are talking about, where you are saying it, and how many clicks it took you to get there. It doesn’t matter whether you buy Prada shoes but that you think about them and pay attention to when the new season’s styles come out and know and use the Prada name. It matters that you are interested and are organized into a system of probability as a potential customer. Your virtual engagement opens pathways for connections to more luxury brands.

Some of your interest may stem in part from some model somewhere modeling Prada shoes on the runways or in a magazine. Whether you yourself have seen this photograph is irrelevant, however. Your engagement with fashion is far more complex than a simple one-to-one correspondence of exposure to images of fashionable products and the feeling of a need to purchase them. It is more complicated than desiring products of a certain brand, in part because brands are funny things, which aren’t all that logical. The indirect practices mobilizing brands have much to do glamour labor’s broad terrain. Every context of brands, fashion, and the social relations springing up around them pulls for glamour labor on some level. You do glamour labor when you participate in the fashion system, watch fashion television shows, post
shots of street fashion, tweet about what you wore today, or chat with others about fashion or the latest model and celebrity exploits, whether tweeted or reported online. With these practices increasingly prevalent in twenty-first-century developed economies, glamour labor has become commonplace. Whether they are aware of it or not, those who live in the tripped-out blogosphere can no longer imagine a life outside the almost intravenous engagement with the logos or brands that now so frequently punctuate speech, experience, and daily life.

It is clear to see that glamour labor is not the exclusive terrain of fashion editors, models, or the fashion elite. Participation in the fashion scene ranges from the hardcore insider status of the designers and models who work with them, and the photographers who promote the designers’ wares, to characters like Cecilia Dean, who has edited Visionaire magazine for the very select few fashion cognoscenti. The scene includes the more mainstream, yet still quite elite, Vogue editor Anna Wintour and the editors who manage the various fashion magazines that dictate or drive tastes in fashion, such as Harper’s Bazaar, W, or Elle. In the aughties, self-made fashion bloggers forced these elites to open their ranks, such as Tavi Gevinson, whose prescient observations and quirky style helped her blog her way to front-row status at many of the world’s most preeminent fashion shows at just thirteen-years-old. Elite meets street in the high school student whose onscreen ID is “topmodel212” and those who catch the eye of street fashion bloggers. One former model told me she couldn’t walk through New York’s Soho neighborhood without being stopped for a photograph, while a new recruit to the city felt that he achieved true “New Yorker” status when his look was snapped. In sum, no matter who is doing it, glamour labor involves work to be attractive, both physically and virtually, through managing one’s physique, personality, and online presence to create an image of “cool,” edginess, or relevance, an image that modeling and the fashion world has made hard to resist.

Why models, in particular? Don’t movie stars, musicians, and other public figures also embody the glamorous life? Of all the forms of work that involve some aspect of glamour labor, modeling is one of the most direct examples for several reasons. First is the issue of accessibility. Unlike singing and acting, which in theory require a discernable talent, fashion modeling seems to require little more than a pretty face.
Second, modeling—whether by pop stars, film celebrities, or anyone in the public eye—is framed by a corporate culture that seduces many into engaging with images on a daily basis. Even those who steer clear of celebrity culture can't avoid fashion, since we all have to wear clothes. Red-carpet fashion may be a fun spectator sport, but street fashion is a game available to everyone, bringing modeling and fashion closer to home than the aspirational world of Hollywood glamour. Third, while movie and pop stars, television personalities, and public figures often engage in glamour labor, fashion models always do.

Even those who don't officially work as models are models when they do glamour labor. When a movie star is asked on the red carpet, “Who are you wearing?” in that moment, she is no different from a fashion model, promoting the brand of the clothing she has on in an appealing lifestyle moment. Similarly, a celebrity in an advertisement becomes a model when she steps off the stage or the screen and into that branded world and works to maintain the right persona to keep that endorsement agreement. Garnering a magazine cover results either from successfully performing the kind of glamour work models always do (appearing on the cover of Vogue, for instance) or its failure (appearing on the cover of People magazine, being excoriated for letting herself go or engaging in activities that tarnish her image). What's more, while celebrities, pop stars, and the like might temporarily endorse a brand and then step back into their own personas, for which they have become famous, fashion models constantly brand themselves and in fact are prized for their ability to disappear into the brand, performing the glamour labor of personifying whatever it is the various brands for which they work need them to be at any given time.

In addition to being cool and on trend in one's habits and persona, modeling work, of course, entails looking the part. While not exclusive to modeling, looking “right” is frequently tangled up with a fashionable ideal. Even though current celebrity Kim Kardashian's eye-popping curves promote a desirable look, that look is frequently played off against a fashionable one. Celebrities of all types may or may not have the body that is “in” fashion, but models always do, and that fashionable body is often the measure of all bodies in the public eye, the norm from which bodies deviate. While actors and actresses famously rejected fashion during the 1980s in favor of being taken seriously as
artists, now that celebrities have been pulled back into the fashion fold, celebrities perform glamour labor on a routine basis, both by maintaining themselves according to reigning attractiveness standards and by earning red-carpet raves for getting the look “right.” With few exceptions, the rise to stardom inevitably smooths and polishes aberrant bodies, toning flab, hardening muscle, and erasing perceived flaws (e.g., the disappearance of the comedian Tina Fey’s scars, the pop star Carrie Underwood’s transformation from rough farm girl to polished Barbie, and the voluptuous fashion model Sophie Dahl’s apparent sellout to the forces of fashion when she dropped several dress sizes).

Embodying the fashionable ideal happens only some of the time for exotic dancers, flight attendants, and others whose image is a large part of their work, but for models it happens all of the time. Similarly, porn stars or sex workers call themselves models, but not vice versa. In each case, these workers embody the fashion model body, so in examining that ideal, it makes sense to go straight to the source to understand the glamour labor of embodying a fashionable look.

You’ve Got the Look I Want to Know Better

Embodying the fashionable “look” is a complex process. Much of models’ glamour labor is caught up in struggling to produce the right look at the right time in the right place. Nobody knows, however, what “look” will sell at any given moment. The “look” is a volatile thing whose existence is distributed across social networks. It has meaning but is not merely an image to be read or interpreted. The model’s look is both physically embodied by the model and represented by pictures in her book, and yet it is neither a person nor a representation. Not just an image or a series of images, the look emerges from a complex integration of objects, symbols, and activities, coalescing in this thing that is identifiable and calculable yet difficult to pin down.

The “look” is elusive because the performance of glamour succeeds only when the work involved is deftly hidden from the audience. This view runs counter to the assumption that “glamour” evokes over-the-top makeup, clothing, or hair, popular among drag queens or old-time movie stars. For my purposes, “glamour” refers to a “pre existing but previously inchoate yearning” a sense of “projection and longing,” that
the social commentator Virginia Postrel so eloquently described when parsing out what it is that glamour is and does. In my argument, this yearning drives the calculated restraint demanded by editing a look to produce a saleable body and self in keeping with whatever is considered fashionable in the moment.

The fashionable “look” is more than the sum of its parts, lending it an ineffable quality. The sociologist Ashley Mears found that “bookers and clients often grapple for the right words,” struggling to explain that a look is not just the “visible or an objectively identifiable quality inherent in a person” but, rather, “the ‘whole package’ of a model’s being, including personality, reputation, on the job performance (including how one photographs) and appearance.” The sociologists Don Slater and Joanne Entwistle described the look as that “‘certain something,’ a magical quality that the old fashioned notion of ‘charisma’ or ‘charm’ goes some way to capturing.”

The look’s volatile mix of energies is both bodily and mental, fluctuating and changing in different environments. The fashion model look includes the fashion production system, in which clothes are designed, made, and distributed; the techniques of making clothes and distributing them, but also of creating and disseminating interest in fashion; the skills, rules, and practices of fashionable expression, from the rhythms of the fashion shows, with the August issue of Vogue magazine marking the beginning of the new season; the seasonal obsolescence of clothing as dictated by the changes in fashion from year to year; the blogs and Internet sites that create constant turnover of fashionable images; interlocked systems and infrastructures (e.g., fabric manufacturing, distribution chains, retail distribution systems, cheap labor, and status hierarchies in which clothing plays part, with the Internet and social media providing access to fashion images and news about fashion insiders); and linguistic and visual codes. The look links photographers, agents, models, producers, consumers, and brands in circuits of exchange where the product is more of an event than a thing. Key to conceptualizing this system is the look’s peculiar structure as both object and process.

Since the tangle of relations defining a model’s “look” as a unit of sale includes “all of the images of a model,” it must be managed in print and in the flesh. To that end, model agents edit the models’ “book” of images, to ensure that the “right”—that is, the best or most
prestigious—images go in. The book shows the history of the model’s career, composed of clippings, or “tear sheets,” from their appearances in magazines or other promotions, and the agent carefully chooses between those with “editorial” (high-fashion) impact and those with “commercial” (mass) appeal. This management also encompasses the models’ physical appearance, as agents advise models when to cut their hair, go to the gym, wear high heels, or not to smile too much. Managers also scrutinize models’ personal choices, from which airline to travel and where to socialize, down to what to wear, even when they are just popping out to the corner to pick up some groceries. In this process, the look is “constantly reconfigured” as it passes through a network of other mediators who affect it: stylists, photographers, designers, fashion editors, and consumers. As such, when clients buy a model’s “look,” they pay for the model, her physical presence, and the resonance of that look within the broader networks of editors, designers, fashion professionals, and—importantly—fashion consumers.

Kay, a makeup artist, explained that this is why models “have to go on ‘go-sees’ and be Polaroided in the raw, on the day of,” to allow for the fluidity of the body’s presence in the flesh, its very materiality and form affected by the networks into which it is placed. June, an agent who was a veteran of the industry, explained that “you can be gorgeous, but if there’s no personality, dead in the camera, it’s not happening, won’t work.” Similarly, Brian, a photographer who liked to do small, well-studied beauty shots, was of course attracted to a certain physical look, but he also valued a certain chemistry; as he pointed out, “It’s just like anything, like meeting anybody, there’s . . . I try to remain aware of whatever sort of chemistry there might be going on that I’d feel right away.” In sum, the model “look” challenges given ideas of bodily integrity. The “magic” and ineffability of the look is that which is more, or in excess, of the picture, a quality that mixes with the changeability and force of the model’s physical presence to make up what is best described as the model’s affectivity. Models are links in a system through which energies flow. Their work imbues objects and circumstances with branded power to attract and organize action. Consequently, understanding their impact demands an examination of the ineffable and embodied force of affect.
The Superhighways of Suggestion

Any discussion of bodies and affect inevitably turns to the question of embodiment—that is, the body’s physical role in apparently mental phenomena such as perception, cognition, and engagement with the world. How can looking at the work of fashion models inform our ever-changing understandings of embodiment? The force of affect in the space of encounter may go some way, for instance, in explaining why people still continue to gather in person for fashion shows, rather than simply look at pictures of the clothes. Over and above the struggle for status, there is something ineffable about being there in person. The ineffable and the embodied are key aspects of fashion’s allure, with affective energy as its basis.

This notion of affective energy is useful for describing the indeterminate moments of potential—for instance, the potential to buy a new coat or to adopt a new fitness program, the potential for clothing to rustle when worn or for the body to beat in a pattern that is measurable—just at the moment when that potential exceeds what actually takes place when the action is taken, the thought expressed, the movement made. All material things have a level of animation. That spark, that life, exists as something not yet determined, a potential that, once realized, excludes other potentials clamoring for being alongside it. This excess of potential is part of the energy of the life force, the force of affect, and it explains what happens when a model moves her body in a way that sums up the exact mood of the moment, when she knows how to feel in a dress, or how the construction of the dress makes her move in a distinct manner and a certain look clicks, or feels right.

Modeling work glamorizes tapping into the bodily capacity to move, to act, to think, to be. The models I interviewed frequently described tuning into affective flow, going with a gut reaction, the viscerally felt impulses that guide actions whose causes, upon reflection, are hard to explain. The transmission of affect takes place physiologically, through the spoken, heard, seen, tasted or sensed. Sweaty palms make us realize we are nervous, a pulsing temple betrays our anger. Within affective flow, we “feel the atmosphere” in a room, producing a sense of belonging in a process that the psychologist Theresa Brennan claims is “social
in origin but biological and physical in effect,” in what the sociologist Deborah Gould calls “collective effervescence.” The communication scholar Brian Massumi, who argued that affect is most effectively whipped up and dampened by the media, quipped, “The skin is faster than the word.” In the same vein, the media scholar Anna Gibbs claims that media such as television and the Internet are “amplifiers of affect, heightening and intensifying affects.” As such, they play a role in “affective contagion” in which bodies “catch feelings” as easily as they “catch fire,” inflaming “nerves and muscles in a conflagration of every conceivable kind of passion.”

Attitudes can “catch fire” overnight in the fashion world. As an affective industry, fashion traffics in the moods, feelings, and predispositions that sweep everyone into their wake and then, just as suddenly, are gone. It is as mercurial and unpredictable as the weather. Sitting at her highly polished desk, Julie, a model agent at one of the largest agencies in New York, intoned in her Jamaican lilt, “You never know which way the breeze will be blowin’ each day.” Recent changes in technology have intensified the speed and range of these breezes into a perfect storm, recurring practically every fashion cycle. With the Internet now tracking reactions to events in real time, tracing geographical preferences in movie rentals, YouTube hits, and click-throughs on political websites, the flow of affect is more easily traced and, some argue, manipulated. These technologies help visualize the waves of affect that ripple through populations, leaving moods, feelings, and shifts in things as nebulous as, say, the consumer confidence index, in their wake.

There are, of course, regularities, otherwise no one could do business. In the face of ever-more volatile markets, however, the fashion cognoscenti struggle to navigate social conditions producing the elusive quality that makes a good photograph great, causes a dress to sell out in one day, or makes a model agent’s phone ring off the hook for one particular face on his or her roster. While some of this arbitrariness stems from struggles for status and power in the highly uncertain markets of modeling, as the sociologist Ashley Mears has documented, even the highest level tastemakers whom everyone else follows are swayed by the affective energy flowing through the social networks where they engage in this struggle. Waves of interest and desire for this or that product, model, or look bubble up from this social energy, energy that belongs
to no one and everyone at once. It is a collective phenomenon existing only in transit, registered as a reaction that is hard to articulate.

When the sociologist Herbert Blumer found the collective nature of “incipient taste” hard to explain, for instance, he hinted at affect’s ineffable nature. When fashion buyers said they chose one nearly identical dress over another because it was “stunning,” Blumer mused that the relation between the forces of modernity to which fashion experts were trying to respond and the “incipient and inarticulate tastes of the fashion consuming public” was “obscure.” While he did not want to undertake analysis of it, Blumer claimed this relationship constituted one of the “most significant mechanisms in the shaping of our modern world.”

Blumer may have intuited it, but he did not want to tackle the impact of affective energy and its particular susceptibility to manipulation by the media. Notably, he observed taste’s “incipience” in 1969, around the same time television was becoming a full-blown social force reshaping modern life. Our attraction to and engagement with television, and ultimately to the proliferation of screens that now make up the fabric of most American lives, paved the way to a complex system of calibrating affective flow. Flying along the superhighways of suggestion and changeability, waves of bodily affect course through us every time we plug into the matrix of electronic relations that are now part of reality for so many. Fanning the flames of affective contagion, the affective circuitry of media technologies is reaching unforeseen levels of complexity. From the first moment an enterprising ad executive decided to put a person in the picture, to the myriad fashion images on offer today, models’ glamour labor has been key to the unfolding drama of entanglement with the emotive/affective technology of the screen, making the modulation of affective energy not only possible but also profitable.

Notably, a surge of interest in affect and affect studies emerged in the mid-2000s, just as the Internet came to the fore as a social force. As television, film, and the Internet increasingly tap into and track these ebbs and flows, interrogating how technology manages affect has gained some urgency. These two phenomena are in fact inextricably linked. Affectivity and imaging are pivotal to understanding how the shift from three channels on a rabbit-eared rotary dialed television to the hundreds of channels, websites, and social connectivity making up the all-media-all-the-time lifestyle now the norm for so many brings
with it new assumptions about what bodies are and what they are for. The glamour labor of modeling helped facilitate the organization of this bubbling energy within social relations, producing value in networks where images, attention, experiences, and attitudes are exchanged.

The effervescent value of a reaction, a mood, or a feeling is fleeting. Affective energies rise and fall in the moments between sensation and sense making—that is, the moment when the glimpse of a color, flutter of movement, or fragment of tonality catch your interest before you know what you have perceived. As a result, advertising has moved away from telling a story toward focusing on making an impact. Text-heavy advertisements have given way to images that depict nothing but a small logo in a corner to let on what is being sold, as, for example, paragraphs extolling the virtues of this or that lipstick have shrunk to the single word, “Chanel,” marking an ad. The move to the sensed, rather than the meaningful, in advertising imagery points to attempts to tap into a pre-cognitive impact of images, an excess of consciousness stirred up in bodily interaction with images. As lines between work and play blur in our networked age, so do lines between bodies and technology, which raises an analogous question: How do various technological frames affect the value of the lived body’s energy in the contemporary marketplace?

Life, in Pixels

Modeling work changed from a sleepy, backwater, insider industry to a globe-sprawling set of corporations that churn through bodies to produce new models and looks because media now play on the volatile and unpredictable forces of affect. The rise of glamour labor in modeling tells the story of the changing role of affect and bodily vitality in contemporary markets. Why has bodily affectivity become such a valuable commodity? How does glamour labor work on and with that vitality? We live in a moment characterized both by speed and a veritable explosion in the availability of information, moving faster than the human ability to process it. Part of this speed comes from the fact that digitization transforms everything into a common language. The unifying language of ones and zeroes brings everything that can be translated
into it onto the same plane, smoothing out barriers that formerly slowed information’s trajectory, speeding it up and compressing it.

The digital revolution of the 1990s infinitely expanded the possibility for image distribution, far in excess of the 1980s innovation of cable television’s wildest dreams. Personal computing took on a new life with the birth of the World Wide Web. While it took some time to develop its potential (early users joked that the “www” acronym for the web stood more for “world wide wait” than for anything else), as the Internet grew in scope and power, images and information from all over the world and most points in history were soon just a click away. “Google” became a verb as search engines became more sophisticated. Everyone got an email address, and domain names became hot properties. In a scant dozen years, the number of terabytes of information sent via the Internet increased from 1 terabyte per month in 1990 to between 80,000 and 140,000 in 2002. In the roughly the same time frame, the percentage of adults in the United States with Internet access grew from 14 percent in 1995, to 46 percent in 2000, and to 79 percent in 2010, reaching 87 percent by 2014, the year in which the number of Internet users was estimated to have grown to almost 3 billion worldwide.

All manner of sports, news, and political information drew users as the print media hopped on board. On the burgeoning celebrity gossip and fashion infosphere, public exposure took on a whole new meaning as the introduction of YouTube sent many a celebrity faux pas—from Beyoncé and Madonna falling down onstage, to Naomi Campbell’s famous runway wobble and fall off of her high heels—reverberating through endless playback loops instantly amplifying the humiliation for all to see. In the late 2000s, social media such as Twitter and Facebook grew by leaps and bounds. Reportedly, Twitter had 255 million users, and Facebook 1.28 billion in 2014, not to mention the burgeoning crowds flocking to Pinterest, LinkedIn, Google+, and other services whose names will perhaps sound as quaint as the now defunct Friendster by the time of this book’s printing.

The velocity and magnitude of the images flooding our lives has created what the sociologist Herbert Simon has called a “poverty of attention.” This epidemic of overwhelmed attention spans demanded a new “structure of attention,” described by the social theorist Nigel Thrift...
as focusing on “those actions which go on in small spaces and times, actions which involve qualities like anticipation, improvisation, and intuition.”

Photography, cinema, television, and the Internet shape these structures, altering the speed and quality of our perceptions, thereby creating different modes of visibility or imaging regimes.

Inspired by the journalist Malcolm Gladwell’s turn of phrase, I’ve dubbed the current moment “the regime of the blink.”

Leading up to the blink regime, photography enframed the body and gave its image new value, cinema offered the possibility of editing it to perfection for the camera’s unblinking gaze, and television blurred the space between image and world as the glance usurped the gaze. In the fully mediatized age of the blink, a series of what Nigel Thrift calls “highways of imitation/suggestion” have proliferated as more data and images provide more distractions, links to click, or ideas to pursue, creating a suggestible crowd whose attention shifts as quickly as the silvery flashes of a school of fish. This “networked jumpiness” causes us to flit from one image to the next with little time for conscious reflection and, at times, without our registering what we actually see. Paradoxically, this new regime has also fostered an interactive engagement with images, pulling for closer “attunement” with imaging processes than ever before. The value of this attunement has engendered a new interest in engineering the biological propensity to change, a key aspect of affectivity, making it become a target of corporate interest.

Glamour labor has emerged as a social force because of the rise of blink technologies’ interaction with bodily affectivity, a change in technology that requires rethinking our understandings of what a body is and does. The rise of technologies embedded in our experience of embodiment has disturbed the formerly distinct boundaries of bodily integrity, forcing a new look at the meaning of the fashionable “ideal.” At the same time, the biotech industry, facilitated by advances in the computational technology that gave rise to the regime of the blink, has worked on the notion that genetic codes are like computer codes and are therefore programmable. Once the metaphor for the programmable body spilled into the culture, the unprecedented levels of access to its functioning informed the trend toward manipulating smaller and smaller parts of the body. This trend showed up in several sectors of the modeling work I examined, including the intensified efforts to fine-tune
the model’s body through tighter management of every body part and the efforts to harness the unpredictable mutations that spread through populations in the bioprospecting practices of scouting. The following chapters will explore how the obligation to strive for the optimal body and self has become an imperative of glamour labor in the age of the blink.

In sum, glamour labor provides a basis for thinking how current levels of technological development inform notions of embodiment. Unpacking glamour labor delineates how the body’s sensations and feelings are organized in space, regulated in time, and generally made available to tracking in movement and proclivities, entangling them with a system of enhancement, connection, and optimization. This system ranges from locating bodies in front of television sets and computer screens for the live broadcast of the Victoria’s Secret fashion show, to producing the frenzied crush of bodies at the fashion designer Martin Margiela’s release in H&M stores, to the daily effort of online tracking and sharing of one’s intake and exercise levels to achieve a “model” body. Thinking this way situates the body within technologies that systematize our interactions with images, communal relations with others, and the life force coursing through us all.

In this environment, interrogating what images mean or how they shape subjectivities misses the complexity of the processes of entanglement with them. Meaning and subjectivity are the tip of the iceberg in examining how technical apparatuses—ranging from packaging and advertisements, to more diffuse means, such as Twitter and other social media—provide the mundane means for material and affective attachment to things. It is not only the meaning of images but also our engagement and attachment to them through which corporations seek to resource the unpredictable and changeable energies of the body itself, not only in terms of its appearance or social connections but also in terms of its vital energies, drawn on by technologies that foster the tendency to perform in new and different ways.

You’ve Come a Long Way, Baby

If the regime of the blink facilitates behaviors harnessing the body as a productive resource, analyzing the ideal “model” body demands we
look beyond the forces of patriarchal culture alone. Thinking about the body enmeshed in technology’s boundary-troubling networks requires more than the usual feminist critique of modeling. Feminists tended to focus on the oppression of models who were forced to look borderline anorexic and on the women whose bodies could not live up to the industry’s impossible standards. In the 1970s, Susie Orbach famously proclaimed, “Fat is a feminist issue!” Sandra Bartky’s much-anthologized 1988 essay linked Foucault’s (newly translated) idea that modern forms of power created “docile bodies” by the “disciplines that produce a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine.” These feminine modalities included bodily practices that limit the size of women’s bodies, their shape, how much space they take up, and how they are displayed. Subsequently, the feminist scholar Susan Bordo incisively linked dieting to gender oppression, since keeping women slim and hungry distracted them from protesting their lack of power in other areas of social life.

In the early 1990s, Susan Faludi and Naomi Wolf forcefully advanced this critique. They argued that each surge in power for women, such as winning the vote in the early 1900s or the new freedom wrought by the Pill after the 1960s, was met with a corresponding backlash of newly idealized images that got slimmer with every decade. They pointed for evidence to the boyish figure of the 1920s flapper, the gaunt glamour of angular mid-century models, or the famous model Twiggy’s stick-thin limbs, which earned her that name in the 1960s. Anne Bolin, an anthropologist who studied women bodybuilders, gave this argument another twist when she advanced an “interesting theory” that “during periods of liberation, like the 1920s, when women had just gotten the vote, and the 1960s, when the Pill became available, the ideal shape for women deemphasized their reproductive characteristics—the nourishing breasts, the wide, childbearing hips.”

The demand for a “model” body, of course, has powerful negative consequences for women. In the age of the blink, however, it is also important to explore how imaging and production technologies shape understandings and the physical appearance of the body, in all of its modalities. Even the feminist scholar Laura Mulvey’s famous analysis of the male gaze, which gave full attention to technology’s influence
on shaping gendered power relations, still failed to critically assess the origin of the ideals that were “cut to the measure of desire” in the first place. That is to say, the feminist perspective on body ideals provides an important critique of gendered power relations. It misses, however, significant historic and culturally specific circumstances of this look’s origins, as well as imaging and productive technologies’ influence on producing these ideals.

Thus, while what Bartky called “the tyranny of slenderness” may be forced on some women by patriarchal forces in developed countries, how have the various imaging technologies through which the body is viewed and depicted intensified or otherwise affected that patriarchally informed vision? If men are men and they want what they want, why hasn’t the fashionable ideal been more constant over time? Bodies are shaped by gendered attitudes about what is desirable or considered ideal, but these ideals are also shaped and influenced by technology. From Twiggy’s iconically minimalist proportions, to the “glamazonian” contours of the supermodels, to the hollowed-out silhouettes of the waifs, models “model” the body in fashion. This ideal body is forged in the nexus between productive and visual technologies, and delineating the “model body” traces the changing means of representing bodies, how they are put to work, and what they are thought to be for or should be.

Engaging with social media thus exposes our proclivities for various types of connections; in the same manner, the urge for enhancement, to be all that we can be, extends to bodily optimization in pursuit of an ideal as well. For example, you might troll the Internet to seek out that new therapy; submit your genetic information to a research study or biobank, in hopes of finding ways to reduce the effects of aging send away for that nutritional supplement that may be unproven but worked wonders on your sister-in-law’s skin and hair; all while wearing a device that counts how many steps you took that day, making sure you let all of your friends know about your workouts, how long you slept, and your current skin temperature and heart rate. What’s more, the glamour labor of models normalizes these practices, practices that regulate how individuals perceive and act in their bodies. This in turn regulates the overall health and enhancement of the population, optimizing its
“state of life,” as we manically strive to be our very best selves while corporate interests track our every move, banking on the value of our future potentials.

Plan of the Book

This book begins at a pivotal moment in the history of modeling, when Cindy Crawford became “Cindy, Inc.,” a global corporation revolving around herself as a model, what she called “The Thing,” and Christy Turlington and Linda Evangelista famously refused to wake up for less than $10,000. Chapter 1, “Supermodels of the World,” describes how the increased effort to harness hard-to-manage forms of affective energy accelerated the demand for models to sell brands and how eventually, in the form of the supermodels, models became brands themselves. The inauguration of the supermodels brought the transition from a girl who models to the 24/7 supermodel icon and the supermodels who became the quintessential glamour laborers who were never off duty.

Facilitated by newly far flung webs of cable television and high-speed communications, the supermodels became household names. This transition laid the groundwork for the rise of mass fashion and the spread of glamour labor to the general populace. Prior to the regime of the blink, the fashion show, for instance, was nothing like the branded dazzle with which we are currently familiar. Chapter 2, “The Runway,” explores how the fashion show changed as television and the Internet, systems for gridding affectivity for profit, spread. This chapter tracks these changes from designer Charles Frederick Worth’s innovative use of live mannequins to the “disdainful beauties” of the 1950s, to Mary Quant’s wild leap into the future when she recruited photographic models for the runway in the 1960s to, finally, the supermodels’ celebrity and the ensuing everydayness of fashion.

Along the same lines, the regime of the blink changed the goals and methods of the fashion shoot. The value of what the model did changed from the 1900s discovery that a person’s image could be owned by them and worth money to the carefully staged and scripted studio shots prevalent from the 1920s through the 1950s, to the far more intense and invasive practice of getting one’s “soul sucked out” by the camera lens, as one model described it, to being given the puzzling direction to try to
look like a rat (as the former supermodel Cindy Crawford reported). Chapter 3, “The Photo Shoot,” tracks shifts in photographic modeling, from using models as mere props to an intense experience in which the model is expected to reveal herself utterly to the camera. Models’ stories about photographic sittings and shoots reveal how affective lability or mania became a valuable factor in modeling work for the camera in the age of the blink.

Chapter 4, “Cover Girl,” documents how advertising’s need to send a specific, meaningful message to an interested consumer shaped the work of model management in its early days. At that time, 1900s fashion designers, such as the incomparable Lucile, tightly controlled their mannequins, molding them into the “look” of their particular house. Mid-century models were given specific instruction in which expressions to wear and how to feel for a particular shoot, as photographer Richard Avedon directed models in the 1940s and 1950s. With the developing importance of capitalizing on the value of experiences and the body’s changeability, however, modeling work evolved into the professional free-for-all that it is today, where it is anybody’s guess what look clients will want from one moment to the next.

Similar changes surface in methods for obtaining and portraying the ideal body recommended to models in published manuals of modeling “advice.” Chapter 4 also explores how the popular language of model management draws back the curtain on how we envisage the “ideal” worker as a culture, since changes in instructions given to models over the years interestingly have dovetailed with significant changes in productive technologies during the same timeframe. This connection becomes particularly evident when tracing the advice given to models in modeling manuals from the 1920s to the 1960s. Chapter 5, “The Fashionable Ideal,” explores the significance of increasingly stringent and exigent dieting, exercise, and surgery advice from the 1970s onward, which reflected developing assumptions about the body’s changeability and the imperative to engage with these kinds of changes through self-altering practices in order to be an acceptable member of society, as if the model were the ideal for the whole population and as if anyone who was willing to work hard enough at it could achieve this bodily ideal. Simultaneously, however, the body’s vitality and mutability also came to be favored, as a biopolitics of beauty emerged, organizing and regulating
publics at the level of population, as a standing reserve, always already in need of enhancement and optimization, ready for a close-up, in need of that makeover.\(^7^1\)

In tandem with these developments, as more opportunities for exposure developed alongside the demand to make oneself more available in more ways, modeling work took on characteristics that prompted some of my respondents to refer to it as “the life,” a state of working that felt to many like having to be “on” all the time, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. In the transition from day job to total lifestyle, playing the role of being a model—sashaying about in crinolines, carrying a hatbox containing waist cinchers and war paints (the badge of the model’s trade), while ducking into movie theaters to make oneself scarce between calls—gave way to the casual street chic, “I only dress up on the runway” attitude of today, where models live the part, hiding the effort required to make looking glamorous seem banal but never boring.

While the general public engages in varying levels of it, the models and modeling professionals I spoke to for this study claimed they felt as though they were never off duty and were always at work to produce the right “look” in person, in photographs, and online. Model agents made it clear that it matters where models live, where they eat and shop, and on which airline they travel. As Chapter 6, “The Job,” explores, some respondents reported being told explicitly by their agents they had to put on the show all the time, even if they were just running around the corner to do an errand, mindful of the impression they might make as they are out and about, conscious of their online image created by the photos snapped of them in fashionable neighborhoods or at social events and posted to blogs or websites dedicated to documenting the modeling world. It seems like a lot of work, but models who really want to “make it” report trying to make it look fun to be exposed in this way, to be “on” all the time, to be out there in the spotlight, as often as humanly possible.

Chapter 7, “Scouting,” outlines how the turn toward affective branding has shaped a new image regime facilitating the model industry’s rapid expansion into a global network, broadening the field for scouting of prospective models, intensifying competition and turnover as a result. Increasing interest in tapping into affect’s vitality has intensified glamour labor as model managers have sought tighter control of their
charges. This chapter tracks how the tightening of control over models was met with a widening field of scouting for new recruits to the industry. As the public’s exposure to and interest in fashion has grown apace, fashion weeks have proliferated beyond the traditional fashion hubs, and scouting for new models has reached into ever-more remote regions. Consequently, modeling contests have grown in size and number, modeling agencies have opened offices in dozens of countries, and fashion has become “news” as television shows and websites treating fashion have become commonplace. Banking on the new value of mutability, model scouts have ranged farther afield in search of that precious combination of features that might make millions. The age of the blink has facilitated this expansion, converting more of the population into a standing reserve, made ready for their makeovers by a steady diet of reality television and twenty-four-hour access to the newest fashions, updated by the minute.

Scouting’s rapid geographic expansion has done little, however, to broaden the racial parameters of the fashion aesthetic, as Chapter 8, “Black-Black-Black,” documents. While models of color are more prevalent in high-fashion images today, historically the modeling industry has been closed off from taking the kinds of risks that involve troubling the idea of “fashion” as dictated by what the media studies scholar Alison Hearn has called the “corporate imaginary,” that is to say, within the given signs and symbols that have evolved within the corporate world. In the image economy of the regime of the blink, models strive to embody the values of their working environment, calculating their impact, self-regulating and commodifying in order to generate their own “persuasive packaging,” their own “promotional skin.” For black models, however, the repertoire for creating a “promotional skin” has traditionally been limited by stereotypes and cultural assumptions, which shape black models’ glamour labor in specific ways. Their self-branding has demanded more intense forms of bodywork and self-commodifying, at times using their race as part of their brand, while at other times essentially erasing their racial characteristics by straightening their hair or pushing their bodies to fit a Euro-American standard. While my respondents experienced their race as something they created or dissimulated according to client’s whims, at the same time they were keenly aware of how their work was shaped by prevailing expectations
of what “race” should look like, indicating the power of pre-existing racial tensions into which they must fit the aesthetics of the look they build when doing glamour labor.

At the same time, as one model agent at a large agency put it, “The standards that people say about beauty, they’re all malleable, they’re always changing.” He claimed this shift became particularly prominent after the 1980s, when the “standard of the blue-eyed blond was broken” and replaced by a “more global” ideal. Chapter 9, “Touch-Ups,” explores how, in recent decades, modeling work has come to require embodying the ideal of a *malleable* body, especially since the 1980s and 1990s, when digital technologies facilitated the desire to manipulate appearances, since digitization enabled an infinite malleability of appearance down to the tiniest pixel. Modeling work increasingly became the work to always be ready for, or in the process of, transformation, and in so doing, models glamorized this practice for the general public. Finally, the Conclusion considers the theoretical ramifications of these phenomena, placing questions raised by looking at modeling work and its cultural impact within debates about affect, emotion, bodies, and technology in a digitized world.

**Taking It to the Streets**

Changes in the kinds of bodywork models are required to perform reflect changes in assumptions and practices with regard to affect’s value, which shape the kinds of bodies models portray as an ideal to the general public. For this reason, I chose theories of affect and affect contagion, which serve to map the unsaid, unseen, emergent potentials efflorescing in the confluences of model-image-body-product, because they had far more explanatory potential than the usual “consumer reading an image” or “model selling a product” scenarios with which modeling is usually explored. Affective energy belongs to everyone and no one at once, however, which presented me with a dilemma. How could I examine the workings of affect, when it is a social energy that can only be detected in its effects? I knew the model “look” was constituted in part by affective energy, but I wanted to examine how affective energy got into the “look” in the first place. I knew that the model body was the “ideal” body, but I wanted to know more about what shapes that
ideal and how our notions of what our bodies are for have changed over time. I suspected that models were showing us ways to be in the world that made our life energy and potential somehow available to be organized as a source of profit, but I needed to know more about exactly how that worked.

To explore this theory in the real world, I talked to models about the nature of their work to create their “look.” I asked what they considered to be their job, what it was like to be in front of the camera or on the runway, how they experienced the industry as a whole, and how they got into modeling in the first place. Then I let those questions lead to further discussion. I also wanted to get a sense of the history of the lived experience of modeling and so turned to the records of expert advice in the field to see in what ways it meant to be a model, to be that ideal, has changed over time. I was trying to get a sense of what it’s like to live in the camera’s eye, to get at when, how, and why interpersonal energies are circulated by imaging technologies, and how that circulation is turning a profit in the circuits of value in which images, feelings, attitudes, and other forms of bodily energy are now being made productive.

How best to cut into the process, to investigate how imaging work draws us into a new level of engagement with technology? To get at this question, I hit on the idea of studying the history and practices of image production, and I zeroed in on those images that seemed a powerful influence in contemporary life—that is, fashion images. My interest in bodies and control led me to think about the most iconic bodies in the process of image making, that is, fashion models.

The choice made sense for a number of reasons. First, I had access. I live in New York City, and as anyone who lives or works in Manhattan can attest, it’s hard to avoid contact with the fashion industry. Whether it’s stumbling upon the lights and scurrying assistants of a fashion shoot as one turns down a side street or finding that your usual lunchtime spot has been temporarily transformed by the tents that used to mushroom overnight in Bryant Park, like any New Yorker, I couldn’t help but be familiar with fashion.

Second, I spent my first few years in New York living with a fashion photographer and so was exposed to the modeling world through fly-on-the-wall access to photo shoots and industry events such as “model parties,” where modeling agencies throw a party to promote
their models to photographers and other potential clients. I was periodically “scouted” to be a model—that is, asked if I wanted to come to an agency and talk about possibly signing with them—but these casual offers never led to any real employment. Since I fit the part, however, and was living in that world, I did occasionally model. I posed in return for clothes or to do a friend a favor, but I never quit my day job. Once I decided to make modeling the topic of my research, I used my connections to the modeling world to start building a snowball sample, asking each person I interviewed to recommend one or two more. I was surprised at how easy it was to meet models, once I started asking. Contrary to conventional wisdom that models are self-centered, stuck-up, stupid, and snobbish, few of the models I interviewed fit the stereotypes; they were warm, friendly, and unusually forthcoming.

Finally, I didn’t have to write a grant to get access to some of the most comprehensive collections of literature on fashion. They were right up the street in New York. They included not only the few extant histories of the profession but also primary sources such as the model “annuals”—some of which survived from the 1920s and 1930s, showing pictures of the models on the roster in a given year for early model agents John Robert Powers and Harry Conover, for instance—and some of the remaining model “how-to” books or primers from the 1920s through to the present day, which provided insight into how dictates of fashion affected the bodily ideals to which most models sought to aspire, a piece of research crucial to understanding how these ideals have changed over time.

I did have assumptions about the modeling world, as many of us do. The dreams and allure depicted by fashion models flooded my adolescent years when, like many teenagers, I developed body image issues. I thought I was too fat when I compared myself to the menagerie of bone-thin models whose images I’d plucked from various magazines and taped up around my mirror. I both loved and hated those images. They taunted me with their inaccessibility combined with their promise that I, too, with a little work, could become like them. Fashion modeling seemed like a glamorous world, a one-way ticket to womanhood for an awkward fourteen-year-old, like stepping out of a constrictive skin into a world of freedom, excitement, and adventure.
This personal connection to models and modeling also resonated with the mood of the times when I entered graduate school in the mid-1990s. Models were everywhere. The reign of the supermodels was in full swing, and the public interest in models had reached a fever pitch, with the journalist Michael Gross's sensational pop history of modeling, provocatively titled *Model: The Ugly Business of Beautiful Women*, on the best-seller list. The world seemed to be on a first-name basis with Linda, Christy, Naomi, and Cindy. The transvestite singer RuPaul rose to fame admonishing the supermodels to “work it, girl.” They could be seen cavorting in George Michael’s “Freedom” music video, telling us about fashion on MTV’s series *House of Style*, or on the arms of rock stars, prizefighters, and movie stars who were only too willing to be their escorts. This intense interest in models has become a facet of everyday life, a facet of the social world this book examines. The modeling world is anything but everyday, however, and gaining access to this rarified domain presented several challenges.

You Can’t Sit with Us

How does one meet models, let alone get them to agree to an interview? Hang out in model bars? Follow them to their castings? Try to sneak backstage at a fashion show? For the average sociologist, these are not easy propositions. My life in the modeling world prior to graduate school helped, but my small circle of friends from that arena was hardly big enough to produce a research-worthy sample. I hit a gold mine when a friend sympathetic to my cause offered me an occasional day job as a casting assistant at the photo production company where she worked. In some ways, this break is just another New York story, since firms like my friend’s production company tend to be clustered in fashion centers like New York (or Paris or London). As a casting assistant, I worked with models who were seeking jobs and took notes under the table, in between my regular duties of managing the flow of traffic coming in, getting the models ready to be photographed for their “tryout.”

Sometimes we saw hundreds of models in a day, and I made use of this direct contact to make arrangements with anyone who was willing
to meet me for research interviews. Sympathetic to my project, my friend sent models my way even when I wasn’t in the office, and the collaboration proved to be quite fruitful. While this casting agency dealt only with commercial, not high-fashion, clients, I met a whole range of models, including those who had worked in high fashion. Even though I was not at castings for high-fashion magazines or other luxury-goods manufacturers such as Chanel or Dior, models who had worked for those clients often came through. What’s more, journalistic and scholarly accounts of these types of castings describe situations similar to the ones I observed both as a casting assistant and in the field: a room full of models waiting to be seen, the client’s desultory glance at the head shot or book, the quick dismissal with no indication of whether those few moments made a positive or a negative impression.

The casting agency was a great resource but skewed my sample toward older models and, surprisingly, men, who, despite their minority status in the modeling industry, seemed to be easy to find. These men, or “boys” as they are referred to in the business, seemed to have no qualms about making arrangements to meet me in a coffee shop, or at their agency, or wherever. The ease with which I secured interviews with male models makes sense, given the gendered structure of power we live in. As indicated by their willingness to meet with me, and their willingness to give me the names of other models, I was a relatively unthreatening prospect for them. Perhaps the male models had less to lose as well— their schedules did not seem to fill up at quickly as those of the female models and, since they make less money than the women, perhaps less was at stake in taking time out of their day for an interview with a sociologist.

Getting access to the young female models who tend to do high fashion, however, was another story. The ones I got access to—at industry parties, for instance, or from other respondents—would say “no” outright when I called them for an interview or “yes” and then cancel. It was clear the female models demanded more drastic measures. I decided I needed to go to where the models were—the castings. When I managed to secure an interview with a female model who had walked runways and worked for trendy clients such as Abercrombie & Fitch, I took a risk and asked her to share her agenda with me. Typically, when they are looking for work, models get a list of castings each morning,
and the day’s work consists of trying to make it to each one of them, taking the subway or cabbing it all over town. I figured that I would go to these castings and pose as a model, if need be, in order to make the necessary contacts.

The first casting on the list was on lower Broadway, just north of Soho, in a relatively fashionable part of the city. I walked into the building with two other girls, both quite tall; one was very slender with long blond hair, and the other was more voluptuous with big eyes. They were unmistakably models and seemed to be looking for which floor to go to, so I asked, “Are you going to the casting? I think it’s in Suite 903.” They seemed grateful, and while waiting for the elevator, I made my move: “I’m a sociologist and I’m studying the modeling industry.” I explained a bit of what I was doing, and they seemed receptive, so I followed them down the hall to a very big, open, and well-appointed office with sculpture on broad shelves, very large computer screens on desks perched at multiple levels, and a wall of windows looking out over lower Broadway.

We were asked to sign in, and the voluptuous one muttered under her breath, “You can be my friend.” I didn’t sign in; using my new identity, I went to sit and wait with them. The slender one was just starting out and had been in New York for only two weeks, up from Texas. My “friend,” who seemed a bit older, had been at it for seven months. The first girl seemed nervous. She said she was trying out modeling on school break. I thought maybe she was on break from college, but later my new confidant said she was sure it was high school.

Eventually they called us into another room. We entered to see three people seated at a table. We lined up in front of them. Perhaps I appeared to be there for the job; one of the people behind the table gave me a quick once-over. It made me flinch to be looked at in such an appraising way—and it gave me a momentary insight into what models go through every day, as part of their job. After thanking us for coming, a woman who seemed in charge, dressed in all black with funky vintage shoes and glasses, dismissed us, and as we walked out, I invited my informant for coffee so we could talk more about her work as a model. She accepted, making it a very productive day.

Once I found how remarkably easy going to castings could be, I decided to try for more. One sweltering July afternoon found me out on the street in the blistering sun, staking out the entrance to a casting,
accosting models as they came in or out. After receiving the brush-off from more than one model, I got lucky: A girl leaving the casting not only agreed to talk to me but invited me to meet her and her roommates at her “model apartment,” too. Agencies rent or own apartments and use them to put up girls who are trying out the industry or who are in town only for a few weeks and need accommodation. Usually these are regular apartments that have been fitted out like dorm rooms, with bunk beds and a chaperone, to look after the more-often-than-not teen-aged inhabitants. This particular apartment was in Tribeca and housed six models in what should have been a two-bedroom apartment. There was one bathroom for the six of them and a twenty-three-year old chaperone. We did a group interview in their living room; miraculously, all six were home, my tape recorder worked, and I came away with new insights into how models get work (many of these girls were found at model search contests or scouted in the street) and how modeling can become a whole way of life.

By the time I did that interview, I was knee-deep in doing the research and getting bolder all the time. My sample was getting pretty well rounded, but I felt it needed more representation by top management. Calls to top agencies in New York had produced a few hits, but for the most part I’d been shunted to lower-level staff, and I wanted to talk to the head honchos. I decided to play the international card, and I cold-called modeling agencies in Paris, saying I was a researcher from New York, and would they take the time to meet with me? I secured five interviews with agencies in Paris this way, conducted in a whirlwind trip to Paris that included the coup of getting an appointment with the owner of the top modeling agency in the world at the time, who discussed the modeling world with me in her beautifully appointed office overlooking a grand Parisian boulevard.

These interviews led to others, until eventually, I had spoken in depth to fifty-four industry professionals and models, some speaking with me for almost two hours. The population under consideration is not large. The reported twenty-two hundred modeling jobs in the United States are a relatively small group compared to the more than six hundred thousand jobs in advertising recorded for 2008.77 Fashion models constitute an even smaller number within the population of models overall.78 I focused specifically on fashion models because they are subject
to the strictest aesthetic criteria and therefore the pressures on them to perform glamour labor is easily identified.

I asked respondents how they got into the modeling industry, what types of clients they worked with, how they felt about the opportunities available to them, and what their experience of the industry was more generally; the rest of the interview was open-ended. Taped with consent, transcribed, and manually coded, these interviews were conducted between 1999 and 2004 and between 2007 and 2012. The sample age ranged from sixteen to twenty-eight for the models. The other workers I interviewed tended to be slightly older, mostly in their thirties and forties. The sample's racial composition was predominantly white, with one female Asian model, four black female models, one black male model, one black female model agent, and two female Hispanic models, as well as one model agent of Hispanic origin, reflecting the white bias in fashion modeling my respondents described.

Models are not the only ones I talked to. Since modeling is an “art world,” as the sociologist Howard Becker describes, made up of not only the front-stage players but also many supporting players, I also talked to photographers, stylists, casting directors, the occasional creative director, and model agents—or “bookers” as they are sometimes called. Employing the ethnographic technique called “participant observation” when I wasn’t interviewing, I read microfiched newspaper articles about modeling, thumbed old copies of books like So You Want to Be a Model, went on photo shoots, attended industry events, pretended to be a model at castings, staked out the lobbies of modeling agencies, and went to fashion shows.

As I investigated the modeling world, people amazed me with what they were willing to share. It didn’t hurt that I seemed to be part of their world, but I think it was also an advantage that I wasn’t. Having that distance made me a safe stranger, what the sociologist Georg Simmel described as a person whose “distance and nearness, indifference and involvement” makes it possible to elicit sometimes the “most surprising openness—confidences which sometimes have the character of a confessional and which would be carefully withheld from a more closely related person.”

Working with these confidences, I hope to put these moments of sharing into context, to shed light on recent changes in technology that
are tending toward engaging with affect to elicit a glamour labor aimed at revving up the body’s potential to look and be its very best, to be fully enhanced and optimized. By analyzing how changes in imaging technology have made capitalizing on affective energy possible, I track how models glamorize this form of labor, which pulls publics into a form of entrainment, in which bodies, actions, and impulses are brought into alignment by the media technologies with which we so willingly engage, in part because models have made them so attractive. The value of directing affective energy, in the form of affection for a brand, or interest in looking at branded images, or participating in branded experiences, has skyrocketed in part because the rewards can be so great for hitting the right note with the buying public. Habituating that public to needing the new “it” bag each season and to “throwaway” fashion has become a huge part of fashion marketing, in which models play a pivotal role. Although we participate gladly, why are tracking and molding our pleasures and energies increasingly so important to the corporate bottom line? By investigating the glamour labor of fashion models, that is precisely what this book seeks to find out.