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**Just a Job: Stuckness and security in the lives of women in the freezing  
works in Aotearoa New Zealand**

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## Abstract

Women employed at freezing works in Aotearoa New Zealand are often understood to be “stuck” in a shit job. As no qualifications are required to work at freezing works, it is considered to be “just a job”, lacking the social and economic mobility of a career. This is because, under neoliberalism, a good job is one that is self-fulfilling and that allows you to “go places” or “get ahead”. However, the flip side of mobility is economic precarity and insecurity.

Based on interviews with nine female freezing workers, as well as autoethnography, this thesis demonstrates women’s own understanding of what it means to be stuck in the freezing works. These women do not understand stuckness to be unambiguously negative. Stuckness is also economic security. Freezing works jobs not only provide necessities and some luxuries, but they are also *just* jobs, that do not demand the full involvement of the self. Contemporary concepts of work cannot fully account for these women’s experiences of work. This thesis, therefore, develops the women’s own concept of “stuckness” as a framework for understanding their work lives. It explores how the freezing works becomes a sticky job, through analysing how women come to work in the freezing works and end up staying there, how they experience everyday work on the production line, and how this stuckness is embodied. This case study demonstrates that in a world of precarity, what looks like getting stuck in a shit job is actually an increasingly rare instance of achieving security.

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## CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION

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### The Empirical Questions

*It was sometime during my first week at the freezing works<sup>1</sup> when I sat down for an 8.15 pm lunch with a couple of undergrads from Otago who were working over the summer break. We were sitting around the table in our white overalls and white gumboots, lamenting how sore we were and how hard the job seemed when one of the girls leaned in conspiratorially and said “you know that woman at that table over there? She said she’s been here for fifteen years!” This was met with shock from the other girl, “I couldn’t imagine being stuck here for five years, let alone fifteen”.*

*The creeping dread of being stuck in the freezing works of all places is especially terrifying for these young bright-eyed undergrads for whom fifteen years is three-quarters of their life. We all had passionate career goals in industries far removed from this world of death and raw meat.*

...

In the first week of my first season in the freezing works in Invercargill where my mum worked, this conversation seemed like completely banal workplace chatter, which, in fairness, it was. I had only gone to work there in the first place to gain money for this very thesis. However, I soon realised that while this was “just my job”, it was also something potentially worth exploring for my thesis. So, I embarked on a study of the everyday work lives of women who work in the freezing works in Southland. As I came to the end of my Masters, I returned to this conversation, as it gets to the heart of what this thesis is about: stuckness.


These young women, including myself, understood stuckness as a negative state, something to be avoided at all costs. Being stuck reflected a lack of mobility, and a failure to progress from a job to a career, which reflected the neoliberal framing of work that we had

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<sup>1</sup> While meat processing plants are known by various names globally, such as slaughterhouses or abattoirs, freezing works in Aotearoa New Zealand were called so simply because Aotearoa New Zealand historically exported frozen meat. Today they are also known as the meat works or just “the works” by workers.

been brought up with and internalised (Hilgers, 2013; Trueman, 2020). I had viewed my previous job in the fast-food industry in the same way – I did not want to be working in the fast-food industry or the freezing works for longer than a couple of years. Both were jobs I did to make enough money to move on to something I wanted to do. However, the freezing works was a significantly different experience than the fast-food industry. This was the case from the application process to the actual job itself. It was easy to get and keep a job at the works, the freezing works offered considerably better pay, and they did not require the performance of femininity. There was no need for “lookist” hiring principles (see for example Warhurst et al., 2009) that prioritise makeup or an overly sweet and fake disposition.

Something that I now see in the conversation I had with those girls was the fact that it felt so natural for us to feel that being stuck at the freezing works would be a nightmare and a failure. Upon reflection, I questioned these assumptions. Why did we perceive having a secure job so negatively, especially when everything else in the world feels so precarious? Further, why is it that our older colleagues were not repining being stuck in the same way that we were? Had they just gotten used to it? Did they not care anymore? Was the idea that they were “stuck” a condition that *we* applied *to* them – or did they secretly feel this way too? Was it even possible that they liked the job? Most of the women I worked with were meat packers who prepared the meat for sale after it was butchered by others. Although meat packing paid better than the fast-food industry, it did not pay as much as what the largely male butchers, sawmen, and boners got. Butchers refer to those who work on the slaughterboard and do the slaughtering and boners and sawmen both of whom work in the boning room working to process the carcasses down for the packers. While the women would not hesitate to tell me they wanted and deserved more pay, they agreed that they earned enough to live contentedly.

In search of answers to these questions, I asked nine women who worked in South Island freezing works to reflect on their experiences of their working lives in semi-structured interviews. The best way I can describe the women’s responses to being stuck would be with the shrug emoticon<sup>2</sup>: . That is to say that while they may have had issues with management or various health and safety issues and so on over the years, they were not especially passionate (negatively or positively) about their work lives. None of the workers would hesitate to call it a shit job, but they did not seem to mind having a shit job. They did

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<sup>2</sup> Also called an emoji (which is technically speaking a different type of graphic), a small graphic image used online and via messaging services.

not seem to mind being stuck in Invercargill, 2022's Shit Town of the Year<sup>3</sup>, stuck at the freezing works, and stuck at the bottom of the pay scale. In this thesis, I also autoethnographically reflect on my own experiences in the freezing works as a packer. Compared to most of the women I interviewed who had around a decade or more of experience in the industry, I had only worked as a packer for around two seasons. This allows me to provide an autoethnographic perspective on stuckness which provides a useful point of comparison.,

## **Stuckness**

I initially expected to be able to use a pre-existing theoretical framework to make sense of my research findings, some grand theorist like Pierre Bourdieu, for instance, as I had learnt to do in my undergraduate and graduate coursework. However, the more that I thought about the ethnography and examined the interview transcripts, the more I came to realise that the women's own category of stuckness was the most appropriate way to make sense of their experiences. As described by Gibson-Graham (2014), I use "thick description and weak theory" (p. S147) to develop the women's own concept of stuckness and use it to make sense of their work lives. I use what Gibson-Graham (2014) refer to as the "small facts" (p. S147) of freezing work life to speak to "large issues" (p. S147) of work, gender, making a living under contemporary capitalism, and achieving secure work in insecure times.

Through writing this thesis, I have come to understand stuckness as multi-dimensional. I use the concept of being stuck (also stuckness or stickiness) in multiple ways. I found that the freezing works were an especially sticky location for multiple reasons. The first way I use stuckness is the negative way the girls and I were using it, to refer to the idea of being stuck in this specific workplace in this same job at this same location for an extended period. Another way that I use stuckness, however, is in recognition that while older women also used the term while discussing their everyday work lives, for them stuckness was more ambiguous, and not a solely negative condition.

Developing the concept of stuckness was useful because it helped to account for the multiple complex factors that play into why people stay in seemingly boring or hard jobs. I found that older women with a decade or more experience had faced age-based discrimination

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<sup>3</sup> Towards the end of 2022 Invercargill won a poll entitled "New Zealand's Shit Town of the Year". While not much weight can be given to an informal poll not open to public vote, it provides a not inaccurate picture of the town with regards to how Invercargill is understood in Aotearoa New Zealand's national imagination (Brew, 2022).

and that they were either told or believed, that they were not employable in other industries. These women would explicitly discourage me from getting stuck in the freezing works in the way that they had. However, another major reason for people becoming stuck in this industry is the job's financial security. Many of my co-workers were parents, and they were not only able to provide for their families but also able to spend money on things that many workers in entry-level jobs could not, such as house renovations, international holidays, or even recreational drugs. Moreover, there is no requirement for specific qualifications. Regardless of age or experience, anyone who is physically able to work and wants a job can usually get and keep one. The process of getting a job in the freezing works was the easiest I had ever encountered. There was no interview, no need to market myself and my skills. All I needed to do was fill in an application form with my personal details and state where I expected to work within the plant.

Freezing work jobs, therefore, differ from many contemporary forms of work. They differ from David Graeber's (2013, 2019) "bullshit jobs", which are jobs that are perceived by those who do them as both boring and providing no societal value. Freezing works jobs also differ from Anna Tsing's (2015) account of work in the ruins of capitalism, where work is irregular, unreliable and insecure. While these concepts make sense of many jobs in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand, I found they were in stark contrast to the freezing works. They described work as defined by its precarity, insecurity, and meaninglessness, which was not at all what the women described to me, nor what I myself experienced. I found instead a haven in the ruins of capitalism, and a job that was 'shit' in that it was physically and mentally tough, but decidedly *not* 'bullshit' as it provided financial and social security, and was an essential service and therefore provided societal value. None of the theories about work that I and my supervisors knew about helped me make sense of my fieldwork. So, it ended up being the case that the analytic categories I use were driven by the ethnography itself. In turn, the small facts of the women's freezing work lives speak to the large issue of work in contemporary capitalism.

I (and the women I interviewed) used the concept of stuckness not only to refer to being stuck in the industry in general but also in relation to the small facts of day-to-day work life. For example, it is used when a person has been doing a specific monotonous job within the freezing works for anywhere from a couple of weeks to a whole season. It was not so much the lack of variety itself as the physically and mentally demanding aspects of being stuck in one

position that the women were concerned about. Therefore, I also discuss how being stuck in the freezing works is embodied by women, in terms of the injuries, like RSI, that freezing workers are prone to. Some had injuries from long-term strenuous work, further sticking people to the freezing works. It would be hard to find jobs elsewhere due to these injuries, and equally, because of the comparatively good employment conditions at freezing works, they were able to continue working rather than being let go as might be the case in other jobs. Stuckness, therefore, has a dual quality: it is negative in that women are stuck in a shit job in a usually shit town, but positive in that the job is an unusually secure one.

## **Making Sense of Freezing Work Lives**

The existing literature on freezing works suggested a number of themes that I expected I would find: industrial relations, ethnic identity in the workplace (particularly Māori identity), and, given that freezing works is a hyper-masculine job, gender discrimination. By doing this research I thought I would provide an ethnographic, experiential account of these themes, reflected in the literature. However, this was not the case, and instead, I found a contented discontent, summarised by the phrase “just a job”.

### **Industrial relations**

Looking through the literature it was clear that most of the work that had been done on the freezing works was by historians and political scientists (see, for example, Boraman, 2019; Webb, 2015; Webb, 2019) and focused on industrial relations, especially strikes. This thesis is not about unions or strikes, indeed the influence of unions today still varies greatly from plant to plant. However, the effects of this historic union action still shape the experience of working in freezing works today and are one of the things that make the job so sticky. This includes comparatively high wages, access to onsite physiotherapy to deal with injuries, and good working conditions, such as a ban on processing when the temperature in the rooms gets too high or too low. There have been instances of union activism over the past two decades, however, at the plant where I worked this was usually on an individual case-by-case basis. For example, one of the women I interviewed took her employer to court over not being re-employed due to injuries she had received at work. With the assistance of the union, she was able to get her job back. However, for most workers today union activism is rare. Even in this instance, while this woman was passionate about her union membership, the conversation immediately turned to something else, showing how active union engagement was not at the forefront of how women spoke about and made sense of their work lives. The most common

forms of resistance I encountered were informal, such as go-slows, eating sweets in the packing room, throwing meat at one another, and absenteeism.

### **Ethnicity**

Another common analysis of Aotearoa New Zealand freezing workers is one based on ethnicity and on the centrality of the relationship between the industry and Māori, which I expected to be reflected in what the women told me. However, I depart from that framing because while I interviewed both Māori women and Pākehā women, neither group prioritised their ethnicity as a factor in narrating their day-to-day working lives. That is to say that the Māori women and the Pākehā women had similar trajectories into freezing works work, did the same jobs, got stuck for the same reasons, and said roughly the same things about topics such as working conditions, relationships with co-workers, and financial security. Māori and Pākehā in Southland have similar incomes, and income differences are along the axis of gender rather than ethnicity. So, in Southland, Māori and Pākehā share a common class position, which was reflected in interviews with the women, as the stories they told and the understandings about their work they shared with me were almost indistinguishable on the basis of ethnicity.

From my own experience working as a Pākehā/Māori freezing worker, I noticed that a more prominent distinction seemed to be between Māori and Pākehā workers on one side, and those from overseas, typically immigrants and refugees from non-English speaking countries, on the other. I did not interview these immigrant women due to having fewer connections in the various networks through which I recruited participants. Therefore, I cannot comment on their experiences of being women in the freezing works, outside of how the women I interviewed talked about them.

### **Gender**

Based on what I could find, the existing literature on Aotearoa New Zealand's freezing works led me to assume that gender and in particular gender discrimination would be a defining feature of the women's daily work experiences. These assumptions came from feminist analyses of work in hypermasculine industries which suggested that on-the-job gender politics would be important. However, despite the fact that the freezing works in general is masculine, women work primarily with other women because of the jobs they actually do.

Traditionally women rarely worked in the actual meat processing jobs in freezing works, rather they were in admin and service jobs. The major factor that allowed the entry of women

into freezing works was the relatively recent creation of “boning rooms”. This is where the whole, chilled carcass is processed into much smaller cuts of meat, such as tenderloins, sirloin steaks, various chumps, whole legs or shoulders, various bones, trim (the small offcuts with no bone or fat that cannot be sold as anything else), fat, racks, and so on. These are sold to customers, typically supermarkets, ready to put on their shelves, which did not used to be part of the process. Up until roughly the 1980s, international customers only ever ordered whole carcasses and their own in-house butchers processed them. However, in the latter half of the twentieth century, there were various global changes to the market, such as Britain joining the European Union, the United States and Europe changing their hygiene standards for imported products, as well as advances in the technology used to process meat (Tolerton, 2010b). All of this meant that Aotearoa New Zealand freezing works were not only able to, but also needed to, switch what they processed to appeal to the new market. Around the 2000s, the meat industry started to produce pre-cut meat, and so the need for plants to have a boning room increased (Tolerton, 2010b). This saw the creation of many meatpacking jobs, which made work in the industry more available to women. What I found during my time in the freezing works was that the boning room, especially the end of the boning room where the cuts are packed, was a women's environment, with most of the workers being women with few exceptions. While I had initially assumed that this would speak to a larger issue of gender discrimination, as these jobs are often the lowest paid, the women disagreed when I asked. While they acknowledged that the jobs women did were lower paid, they did not see themselves as subject to gender discrimination. So, while gender clearly structures these women’s work lives, my thesis is not about women fighting for a space in a man's patriarchal workplace, as the women were not engaged in such a project and did not narrate their lives through this lens. Therefore, just as this thesis is not about industrial relations or ethnicity, it is also not about gender politics. None of those potential analytic strategies fully explained why women got stuck and how they understood stuckness as security.

### **Location**

Instead, in seeking to make sense of why women become stuck in a shit job but seem to not mind, I turned to the topic of location. My research was conducted in Southland, around Invercargill, which is where I and most of my participants lived. The population of Invercargill is a little over fifty thousand, and that of Southland is roughly double that at just over 97,000, and so the workforce is small (Stats NZ, 2018a; Stats NZ, 2018b). The meat industry has been central to Southland’s economy throughout much of its history, and its fluctuating fortunes

have always shaped peoples' lives there. In 1991, the largest works in the region at that time, Ocean Beach, in the small town of Bluff, was closed with a loss of around 1500 jobs. Many people either left the region or the country entirely. However, some stayed and took up work in the various smaller freezing works that popped up in the Southland region. According to the 2018 census, labourers in the Southland region made up almost twenty percent of the population, which is almost double the national percentage of eleven (Stats NZ, 2018b).

These things all contribute to answering the question of why people get stuck, because Southland is a very easy place to get stuck. Incomes are high compared to the cost of living, especially accommodation costs. Renting a two-bedroom house in Invercargill can cost anywhere from \$280 to \$400 per week to rent compared to Auckland City which can range from \$417 to \$875 per week (ENZ, n.d). So, as people can have relatively financially secure lives, it can be argued that there is a positive side to being stuck.

There are six different plants owned by prominent companies that operate in Southland, those being Talley's (Affco), Alliance Group, and Silver Fern Farms. Given the small workforce as well as the limited number of employers, many people have gone from plant to plant within the same region, and because most plants in Southland process mutton, lamb, and bobby calves, there is a high degree of skill transferability. It is this that makes working in the meat industry so sticky (or secure) – having so many employers compared to employees means that workers are always needed and it is incredibly easy to stay stuck in the industry, even if you are no longer able to (or want to) work for one particular employer.

## **Roadmap**

Looking back on the story at the beginning of this chapter, I and the young girls saw being stuck in the freezing works as a strictly negative concept. Through carrying out this research I have come to understand it as nuanced, and even positive at times. It is not an easy job by any means, both physically and mentally, however, it also is a job that provides the income to support not only oneself but also one's family. In this sense, I reframe stuckness to also become security and this is how stuckness came to be the frame through which I made sense of the women's working lives. This idea of the ease at which people, especially women, can become stuck in this industry, as well as my re-framing of the idea of being stuck in a job, forms the analytic framework throughout this thesis.

In Chapter Two, “Methodology”, I explain why I did not do participant observation even though this is a social anthropology thesis. I explore the issues around how to conduct research in this industry ethically while retaining an in-depth look into the daily lives of freezing workers. One way that I was able to do this was through semi-structured interviews with nine women, three Māori and six Pākehā. To capture the embodied and tangible aspects of the work that I was not able to capture through participant observation, I used my positionality as an insider to conduct autoethnography, including a personal journal I kept during my time as a freezing worker. I have placed the methodology chapter first as it was the women and the ethnography that led me to choose the analytic strategy that I did. Specifically, my time working at the freezing works and talking with the women generated the research questions that will shape the rest of the thesis.

In Chapter Three, “Making Sense of Work”, I discuss contemporary concepts of work. The work of Graeber (2013, 2019) and Tsing (2015) regarding bullshit jobs and the ruins of capitalism respectively could not provide the analytic framework that would make sense of the women’s experiences but did highlight how unusual they were. From there I turned to Gibson-Graham (2014) and their concept of “thick description and weak theory” (p. S147). This approach allows the women’s own idea of stuckness to become the analytic frame, and best answer the questions I had.

In Chapter Four, “Freezing Works”, I explore the literature on freezing works in Aotearoa New Zealand. This literature focuses on the 1970s and the 1980s, particularly the militant unionism and strikes that were commonplace during those years. There is also another body of literature focussing on the impacts of the Employment Contracts Act 1991 (ECA), which saw the decline of union membership across industries in Aotearoa New Zealand. There is comparatively little written about today’s freezing workers. So, for contemporary literature, I needed to look abroad. The conditions of exploitation and vulnerability described in the literature on overseas slaughterhouses are very different from those found in Aotearoa New Zealand freezing works, so the analyses required are different. From what I could find, in all these bodies of literature, women feature mostly as spouses of workers if at all, with only brief mentions in any given piece. For this reason, my research is not like the situations described in the literature on freezing works, in that the literature is primarily concerned with industrial relations. Rather my thesis is about what the work lives of women in this industry look like in times other than these major politico-historic moments, and how this is generative of stuckness.

In Chapter Five, “Getting Stuck: Getting in and Staying There” I analyse the various ways in which women came to be working in the freezing works across three groups of women according to their personal levels of experience and time in the industry. These categories are “stuck” for those who discussed feeling unable to leave the industry for whatever reason; “becoming stuck” for those who discussed a desire for change in job but only indicated an intention to change jobs within the industry; and finally, “currently not stuck” which includes women who no longer worked in the freezing works and did not indicate an active desire to go back. I also explore the various ways in which the women did or did not get stuck in the freezing works.

In Chapter Six, “Being Stuck: Relationships in the Freezing Works” I discuss three different types of relationships that shape workers' day-to-day work lives, each of which is generative of stuckness. Speaking on how relationships affect daily lives, industrial meat production, like most factory work, is a highly streamlined and repetitive process. This allows for different relationships between co-workers which assist in making the work and time spent at work okay. First, while the women I spoke to do not necessarily characterise their work experience as one shaped by gender, it still structures their lives. Most women are meat packers and so work mostly alongside other women, doing similar jobs. Second, family is another aspect that shapes freezing works and is one aspect that has changed very little over the decades. Many of the women I spoke to and many that I worked alongside are mothers and so how they interact with younger women is again shaped by this part of their identity. Many workers are family, and it is not uncommon to have gotten their jobs through family (including myself) and continue to work alongside them as co-workers, or even above or below them as direct superiors or otherwise. These familial ties have in past decades and today been further generative of stuckness. Finally, the relationships along the production line are perhaps the most obvious relationship that shapes workers' day-to-day work lives and can make or break the job in terms of stuckness.

In Chapter Seven, “Feeling Stuck: Physicality, Materiality, and Embodiment”, I discuss how stuckness is embodied by women. Stuckness is also a physical experience, embodied by those who find themselves stuck. The physical consequences of being stuck in the meat works are worn on the body by the women and can take the form of anything from aches and pains to permanent injuries. This is also the reason why, as the months of the season go by, freezing workers slowly transform in various ways: they are more hunched over; more frequently taking

a second to catch their breath and stretch their tired muscles; becoming more irritable with a shorter fuse; they become more and more sleep deprived, especially on the night shift with constant three a.m. finishes; more trips to the on-site physiotherapist, first aid officer, and if it gets really bad A&E, and the list goes on. Due to the physical toll that this job has on its workers, even with some of the best working conditions in the world as far as industrial meat production goes, sometimes people become unstuck from the freezing works, as their bodies simply cannot cope. Alternatively, this physical toll can also lead to people becoming more stuck in the freezing works as the injuries they have sustained prevent them from being able to do anything else, and so they stay stuck in a workplace that takes some care of them.

In the conclusion, Chapter Eight, I argue that the small facts of freezing work life for women can speak to the larger issue of what makes a job a good job, and more broadly to contemporary work and contemporary capitalism. In the very beginning I was not interested in the freezing works as a site for research because it was “just a job” and conclude that this very characteristic is what makes it a great site for research.



## CHAPTER 2

# METHODOLOGY

...

### Introduction

My intention for applying for a job in the freezing works was not to find a thesis topic and carry out research. It was just a job. I wanted to escape working in fast food, which had been rapidly decimating my mental health, and earn enough money to pay rent over the upcoming semester. I had only considered this job because my mum had worked there and suggested that I apply. It is not uncommon for students to work in the freezing works over the summer holidays to save up for the following academic year.

However, when I began, I was shocked at how different working at the freezing works was compared to my previous work experiences. While there were not many opportunities for physical distinction in the freezing works with regard to different cultures or subcultures, there was a freedom of personality that I found to be relieving. There was no need to perform my femininity to impress customers with a fake smile and saccharine disposition if that was not how I was feeling that day. There was no need to dress up my language if I did not have the right words. People were swearing left and right, including to and with their immediate superiors, and I recall seeing someone with a “kick me” sticker on their back in my first few days. People threw small pieces of meat around either with their mates or to people they were unimpressed with and made no effort to conceal if they were having a bad day. Overall, I recall one of my first impressions I shared with my mum was that “there is so much that they do down there that people would get fired for at my old jobs – people have gotten fired for less at my old jobs!” At the time the idea that someone could, even jokingly, call their supervisor a cunt to their face and be met with only a jovial “fuck you too” in return was nigh impossible to comprehend. Now after having worked there for almost two seasons, it seems restricting to having to go back to any different sort of hierarchy.

I started wondering whether my job would be a good topic for this thesis because the contrast between this job and the ones I had previously was so stark. I had never before had this feeling of security and freedom from the forced performance of femininity. After

considering this difference more deeply over the initial months of beginning both the season and my Master's degree, I realised that this new world would be of interest for a thesis topic.

In this chapter, I will discuss the methods I used (interviews and autoethnography), methods I did not use (participant observation), and my reasoning behind these decisions. Due to the potentially litigious nature of massive companies that own the freezing works, participant observation carried a risk both to my participants and myself if I discovered and wrote about events or experiences that could harm their public image. I was concerned about putting my participants' jobs at risk if they reported things that were negative about their workplace. Additionally, there was potentially a physical risk posed by the distraction of a student conducting research in a workplace with dangerous machinery. So, I decided against participant observation. In lieu of this I conducted semi-structured interviews with nine women off work grounds as well as autoethnographically recording my own experiences as a worker in a diary I kept primarily on my phone in a locked file in my notes application. This allowed me to hear the stories the women had to tell about their everyday work experiences as freezing workers and compare and support this with my own stories alongside theirs. I will also address my positionality as both an insider and outsider, which affected how my participants interacted with me during the interviews. The effect I noticed initially was that the older and more experienced women treated me with guidance and encouraged me in my studies and to not get stuck in the freezing works. Further, because I was a co-worker, the interviews resembled the many gossip sessions that were had over lunch during my time as a meat packer. Finally, I will introduce the nine women I interviewed, and for analytic purposes, I will categorise them based on how stuck they were or were not at the time of this research.

## **Methods and Planning**

After deciding to research the everyday life of women in the freezing works, I needed to decide how I was going to do it. I did not use participant observation, mainly due to ethical concerns with maintaining the anonymity of the women. As I expected stories of conflict with management and rampant sexism, I did not want to jeopardise their jobs. Another major concern was getting permission from a company to conduct this kind of research, given how litigious these companies can be. The kinds of analyses found in the literature and my own prior experience as a worker made me think my findings would reflect poorly on their corporate image. To provide anonymity for my participants, as well as because of the logistical challenges of getting permission for such a small project, this is not an ethnography of one

plant. Instead, this thesis is based on interviews and autoethnography. I interviewed women who had worked at five different plants across the South Island, in Southland, Otago, and Canterbury. The women I spoke to had held a variety of positions in the industry, including packers, boners, sawmen, supervisors, quality control, compliance officers, and more.

I chose many of my participants using the snowball method, beginning with my mum's network, which parallels how I initially got the job in the first place and, indeed, how many freezing workers get their jobs. My mum has been in the industry long enough to have formed connections and friendships with many workers. Her networks allowed me to contact women through various plants in the lower South Island. However, I only interviewed Māori and Pākehā women, as that was who made up the majority of these networks.

One of the defining characteristics of working at the freezing works is the season. This is a period over some number of months, typically from late November to around May/June the following year, over which a worker has a contract with the employer. The length of the season depends on the animal that is being processed and in what part of the plant and on what shift (day or night for example) you work. I worked in the boning room on the night shift, and our season began in late November and ended roughly in May or June, depending on the number of sheep and lamb available that year. All of my interviewees were Māori and/or Pākehā women who have spent anywhere from a couple of seasons to several decades in freezing works in the mid-to-low South Island.

### **Interviews as an Insider and Outsider**

I conducted semi-structured interviews primarily at my mum's house, sitting at our dining room table, as I was living with her at the time. I also did some interviews at the home of the interviewees due to constraints around their schedules and home life. As I was a co-worker and my mother's daughter, but also a new worker and a student conducting research, my time among this group of women could only be described as insider/outsider – which in turn affected how the interviews were structured and conducted.

Before I really started my research I thought, as the literature led me to believe, that the interviews would be explicitly political and gendered. As meat production is a hyper-masculine industry, I thought the women would tell stories about discrimination or gender pay gaps, and this influenced the questions I prepared to ask the women. And while their work lives are

shaped by these things, they did not turn out to be major topics of conversation when I talked to them.

The interviews were instead very casual, reflective of the casual nature I found to be standard for freezing workers. Rather than impassioned political critiques, they were conversations among two co-workers about everyday happenings. As I was a co-worker (an insider), the interviews resembled a typical work lunch-time gossip session, especially with my same-age peers with whom I might gossip at work. However, as I was not only younger and less experienced than many interviewees, and a graduate anthropology student, I was also an outsider. An observation I had made when I was working in my plant was that the older women (fifties plus age range) and the women with long-term industry experience (minimum seven years' experience across various plants) almost functioned as tutors or guides for the younger, more inexperienced workers regardless of their actual job titles. I myself received patient if not firm guidance not only at work itself but also during the interviews, about all manner of things from how to do various jobs to how I should avoid getting stuck in the industry. Therefore, interviews with older women also contained occasional encouragement about why and how not to get stuck. I could never differentiate if this guidance was due to their roles as the more knowledgeable and experienced workers, or if it was because I am my mother's daughter.

### **Autoethnography**

Along with interviews, I also used auto-ethnography in lieu of participant observation. Autoethnography places "personal experience within social and cultural contexts" (Reed-Danahay, 2009, p. 28). As Ettore (2017) explains it "is all about placing the 'I' firmly within a cultural context and all that that implies" (p. 2). She goes on to explain that "autoethnography is all about describing the cultural dynamics that an individual confronts rather than personal dynamics as in traditional autobiography" (p. 2). Autoethnography as a method of qualitative research allows "a researcher's personal experience to describe and critique cultural beliefs, practices, and experiences" (Adams et al., 2015, p. 1).

Using auto-ethnography helps me to get from my experiences what I could not get from participant observation and did not get from the interviews. The women did not think to discuss the everyday, taken-for-granted happenings as it is 'just a job' and so these things were not perceived as noteworthy. No one was especially passionate or prideful about the job and so the things that were given weight by the women I spoke to were generally related to their social

lives. When it came to work being discussed it would be things that stood out as being unusual such as explosive drama between workers, times that production would have to stop such as machines breaking down or chemical spills and so on. When the routine is broken it becomes noteworthy, however given the nature of factory work, it is difficult to describe what routine is.

Autoethnography allowed me to use my own experiences to more effectively convey what it is like to work in this hidden workforce. It helps me to contextualise the experiences and stories of the women, I can map what the women discussed onto my experiences within a plant to situate their experiences. Autoethnography especially allowed me to explore the embodied and sensory experiences of working the freezing works, particularly the effects of mental and physical exhaustion, the cold and the heat, as well as the clothing that is worn.

This method helped me to parse these quotidian experiences and allowed me to see how people coped with everyday gripes. I made sense of what the women told me in part through contrast with my own experiences working as a meat packer. Systematic reflection on our similarities and differences gave me insight into how the women got stuck in a job that was described as a shit job that is not too bad. For these reasons, the autoethnographic stories I tell will appear alongside the other women's, to allow a deeper discussion of the experiences they may have taken for granted.

## **The Women**

When I analysed my ethnographic material, I found it most pertinent to look at the women in groups based on their age and experience in the industry, which correlated to three categories of stuckness. This reflects the fact that age, experience, and the need for financial security were the primary driving factors behind their daily experience of work life. The first group, "Stuck", is women who are stuck in the freezing works. This group are more contemplative than younger women on this matter and typically warn others against becoming stuck. Second, the "Becoming Stuck" group are women who seem to be in the process of becoming stuck. They have expressed interest in doing other jobs within the meat processing industry but are generally content staying there. The third group, "Not Stuck", are those that are as yet unstuck and who do not want to and have no plans to get stuck.

## **Stuck**

The first group consists of three women, all born in the 1960s, with between two to three decades plus experience each. Two of these women discussed wanting to change to another industry but cited ageist discrimination as having prevented this. All said that it would be impossible to get the same financial security, on-site benefits, or flexible hours elsewhere, so feel that they are stuck where they are.

*Denise* – Denise is a Māori woman born in the early 1960s, who has a husband and a few adult children. She was the most experienced freezing worker I spoke to, with experience in virtually all jobs the freezing works from kitchen experience, where she would cook for the men, to quality control and many other jobs. She started at Ocean Beach when she was a teenager and has been in the industry for over three decades non-consecutively, having left at various points to have and raise her children, as well as getting more work experience elsewhere. She attempted to leave the industry but was told that she was too old to be employable by the hiring manager at a job she applied for. She is therefore stuck in the industry as a meat packer with no plans to leave until retirement.

*Claire* – Claire is a Pākehā woman who also has a husband and adult children. She has worked at multiple plants over the course of the past two to three decades. She is happily stuck (secure) in the industry as a compliance officer, with no plans to leave due to the benefits of her position, such as flexibility of start and end times, access to good coffee in the office, and other factors that will be explored in the coming chapters. Her job and longevity in the company give certain benefits, such as being able to be loose with her clock-in times without facing punishments.

*Frances* – Frances is a Pākehā woman with adult children. She started as a meat packer over fifteen years ago and slowly worked her way up to quality control and beyond. She is also stuck in the industry and cited age-based discrimination as a reason for being unable to get a job with equal pay in a less physically demanding industry. Like Claire, there is a freedom that her position and longevity grants. She has been able to travel the country to train in various jobs relating to auditing and other tasks, as well as going overseas for two seasons to work certain machinery. Normally it is exclusively the butchers that are sent overseas, as packers are too easy to train for foreign governments to pay for the expense of overseas packers. She has the same amount of freezing work experience as Yvonne in the category below. However,

because she expressed both a desire to change not only jobs but a desire to change industry altogether and also an inability to do so, I have placed her in the “stuck” category.

Likely because of the length of their working experience in factory work generally as well as freezing work life, these three women are much more reflective about their time as freezing workers than the younger women. This made the tone of the interviews contemplative, and also allowed me to gather a more in-depth work-life history as compared with the other women. It was easier to recall their experiences given the distance to them, as opposed to the other groups of women who will still likely feel in the midst of their work-life histories. They all believed that, willingly or otherwise, they would likely be working in this industry until they retire, and so are well and truly stuck. Although they seemed content with the money they were making, they found the physical toll the job takes on their bodies debilitating at times.

They discussed many times the topic of young women taking advantage of the opportunities they did not have access to in the 1960s. Frances and Denise particularly encouraged my studies as a preventative measure against becoming stuck in the freezing works. In this regard, I inferred guidance from the women. They were specifically encouraging me to stay unstuck, and in the event that I cannot, to at least move upwards to higher paying, less physically demanding jobs such as supervising or auditing.

In this same vein, the discussions on gender as well as ethnicity were more prevalent in these women’s interviews compared to the younger women. They acknowledged that issues regarding gender and ethnicity are structurally present, but even in that case, did not discuss them much when narrating their day-to-day lives.

I initially expected there to be more discussion on labour relations in the freezing works, especially given these women worked in this or related industries around the 1980s and 1990s. Although they mentioned it, they did not give it much weight, and it generally did not seem of significant concern or of interest to them. A union representative that I spoke to at my work mentioned that over this period in history women were actively and deliberately excluded from unions, although I can find little written evidence of this. Additionally, women in strikes are largely depicted as supportive spouses, rather than as workers or strikers. That union activism has not been part of their work lives may explain their lack of interest in the topic.

## **Becoming Stuck**

The middle group consists of four women who were all born in the 1970s and have between five to fifteen years of experience in the freezing works in a range of positions. For this group, the job is becoming sticky. They were interested in different experiences both outside and inside the freezing works but for the most part, content staying in the industry due to the security it provides or the lack of security provided in other sectors.

*Tracey* – Tracy is a Pākehā woman with a husband and two young adult children. She started as a manager for a freezing works cleaning company/crew and became a meat packer in another plant after roughly a year.

*Jen* – Jen is a Pākehā woman with a husband and two children. She started working as a meat packer and eventually became the 2IC (second in charge) of the boning room, overseeing the boning room packers, and working to support the head-room supervisor who is in charge of the entire boning room and the workers.

*Yvonne* – Yvonne is a Māori woman with teenage children. She works as a boner/sawman, which is the highest-ranked position in the boning room in terms of pay, skill and status. It is also the most dangerous job in the boning room, due to the proximity to large saws and dangerous equipment. While women sawmen are not unheard of, it is still relatively uncommon in the freezing works to find women in this position. She started at roughly the same time as Frances whom I introduced above. I have however put her in this category because she does not cite the same external pressures forcing her to remain stuck.

*Joanna* – Joanna is a Pākehā woman with teenage and adult children, and is semi-stuck in the industry, with a little under ten years of experience in a variety of roles, mainly working as a meat packer. The way that she talked about her job reflected an apathy towards change, being content with the pros and cons of her current position. She said that she would likely not find better elsewhere.

I categorised this group of women based on their proximity to stuckness. These women were less reflective about their work-life histories than the older women, focusing more on their day-to-day concerns both within and outside of work. Similarly, discussions about gender and ethnicity were limited to specific instances during their day-to-day work rather than comments or critiques about larger structures. They all seemed content where they were, and

with the benefits and financial and social security that the job provided. This group had the greatest financial responsibilities, with childcare, healthcare, mortgages, house renovations, and so on, and the financial security of being a freezing worker was significant in their ability to manage these loads.

The main concerns for the women in this group were being able to provide for their families and having a healthy work-life balance. They were concerned with the physical and mental toll the job puts on its workers and were especially critical of the long work hours (eight to twelve plus hours) keeping them away from their spouses and children. However, these discussions were held with an underlying tone of pride in their roles. They wished for healthier boundaries but also acknowledged that this may not be feasible given the kind of work that freezing workers must do. At least one of them acknowledged that they might have similar complaints regardless of what industry they worked in.

The focus on day-to-day affairs meant that these interviews felt more like co-workers talking, rather than an interviewer and an interviewee. However, like the first group, this group of women also spoke to me with a degree of maternalism, encouraging me in my studies with often explicit encouragement to not become stuck.

### **Not Stuck**

The third group of women, whom I have categorised as being currently not stuck, were closest to my age (year of birth ranging from the early 1980s to the mid-1990s). They were close colleagues, and we had already had conversations about how we did not want to get stuck prior to the interviews, which made it easy to ask them for an interview. At the time of our interview, one had even left already with no plans to go back again.

*Chloe* – Chloe is a Māori woman who has a partner and no children. She left the industry after working as a packer for three seasons to pursue other opportunities. She faced many difficulties with co-workers throughout her time at the freezing works, which contributed to her not becoming stuck.

*Nicole* – Nicole is a Pākehā woman with three young adult children. She left the industry altogether after working as a labourer (cleaning and bagging racks) for around two years.

*Storme* i.e. myself – I am a Pākehā/Māori woman doing a Master's degree. I had initially started working at the freezing works to fund living costs and stopped after almost two seasons. Just before I was due to move back up north to start my first MA semester the initial covid level four lockdown prevented travel, and so I stayed on as an essential worker while also working on the coursework component of the degree. I would describe myself as not stuck as I do not work at the freezing works currently, but due to the financial difficulties of post-graduate study, I find myself repeatedly tempted to go back after I finish. *Just for one more season before I find something else* is a common thought I have. I have no desire to go back, but it is unavoidable how much easier it is to apply for these jobs and how much more money can be earned than working in a minimum-wage hospitality job with much less mental exhaustion. This personal insight has informed my understanding of how people become stuck.

No one in this category had more than three years of experience as a freezing worker, and as such there was not a lot of history to draw on for a work-life history to be formed compared to the first group. Rather, these women focused on the day-to-day relationships between themselves and their co-workers, and the difficulties of the job including the toll on the body. Due to the closeness in age between us, the interviews mostly sounded like two same-age co-workers or friends, and so there was no maternal urging to not become stuck, but rather a mutual agreement to that effect. Like me, Nicole had received guidance from the older women. All of us had concrete plans for what to do afterwards if we had not already left.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

While I was not able to carry out participant observation due to ethical and practical concerns, I was able to employ other methods. I interviewed nine women who occupy various positions with experience across several plants in the lower South Island from Southland to Canterbury. I also used autoethnography which allowed me to explore the more intangible aspects of the freezing works and to contextualise the women's stories in lieu of participant observation. This chapter also introduced the women I interviewed as well as the categories of stuckness I will use to analyse their stories throughout the rest of this thesis. In the next chapter, I explain why it is the idea of "stuckness" that emerged from these interviews and autoethnography that serve the framework of this thesis rather than a traditional grand theory.

## CHAPTER 3

# MAKING SENSE OF WORK

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### Introduction

This is a thesis about work. Specifically, it is about industrial labour in the post-industrial Western world now that most industrial jobs have moved to the “developing world”. With this in mind, I turned to contemporary literature to look for useful concepts on contemporary work. Most contemporary theories about work centre on the gig economy, service jobs, or “bullshit jobs” (Graeber, 2013, 2019). This discussion is dominated by ideas about irregularity and precarity, which I found to have little relevance to my case.

More specifically, this is a thesis about women’s work. The contemporary literature on women, gender, and work was not useful in the same way that the literature on work more generally was not useful. It derives from research within workplaces unlike the freezing works, most commonly offices (see for example Zwick, 2018) or the gig economy (Churchill et al., 2019; Cook et al., 2021). Again, this literature focuses on precarity and socio-economic vulnerability instead of the security which I found in my research.

In this chapter, I use key ideas from Tsing (2015) and Graeber (2013, 2019), key theorists in this field, to show that freezing works work is fundamentally different to many contemporary and precarious forms of work. While this body of literature is useful for demonstrating the contrast and therefore the stickiness of the freezing works it sheds little light on what it is like to work there. Therefore, I followed Gibson-Graham’s weak theory/thick description approach (2014). Ghassan Hage defined stuckness as “a sense of existential immobility, which is premised against an imaginary mobility, where a sense of ‘going somewhere’ is a prerequisite for a viable life” (cited in Vignehsa, 2014, p. 3). My participants concept of stuckness is in stark contrast to Hage’s definition: in some ways it is being stuck and being able to be stuck that makes a viable life. Deriving a theory of stuckness from my participant's own concepts and understanding of their lives provides the greatest insight into their lives. This in turn provides insight into the nature of work in contemporary capitalism.

## **Industrial Labour in “Capitalist Ruins”**

Anna Tsing (2015) provides a broad outline of the key dynamics of Western post-industrial capitalism. She argues that after World War II, modernisation acted as an innovative promise that there would be massive improvements to the global economy with the proliferation of “regular jobs” (p. 3). What she means by “regular jobs” is “‘standard employment’ with stable wages and benefits” (p. 3). She goes on to say that these kinds of stable jobs are increasingly rare, and most jobs nowadays are highly irregular and precarious. She writes that capitalism is in “ruins”, a word that she uses in a literal sense to refer to places that have become ruined and ruinous due to capitalist advancement. In these places, there is no security and no well-being. The promises of capitalism have not been met, and due to the ruination of capitalist advancement, the precarity of capitalism has left people scrabbling to make a living (pp. 210-13). This creates a contemporary work environment of precariousness and exacerbates vulnerability in industrial relations, which affects different groups of people to varying extents.

The capitalist ruins affect women in particular ways due to being in particularly precarious positions because of the persistence of gender inequality (Cook et al., 2021). In Aotearoa New Zealand the gender pay gap is 9.1 percent<sup>4</sup>. This means that is harder for women than men to achieve economic security. This is exacerbated for wāhine Māori, for whom the pay gap varies by industry, but can be as high as 27.8% (Ministry for Women, n.d.). Women are often expected to be primarily responsible for the economic upbringing of children. They are expected to support the household, and ultimately be responsible for everyone having what they need. According to a 2016 report from Statistics New Zealand and the Ministry for Women (2017), the pay gap between female parents and male parents was much greater than that between men and women without children, which they refer to as a motherhood penalty. A couple of families of my research participants were living on a single income, due to, for example, spouses’ illnesses or disabilities, being a sole parent, etc., in a context in which it is increasingly difficult to live on a single income (Wise Move, 2022). Due to this difficulty in finding secure employment and the rise in the cost of living, there is particular pressure on women as sole or majority caregivers, and so it is difficult to achieve economic security. So,

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<sup>4</sup> According to Stats NZ, in the year 2021 in Aotearoa New Zealand, women were earning a median \$26.37 to men’s \$29.00 (Statistics New Zealand, 2021).

while my participants do not narrate their working life in gendered terms, they are inevitably affected by the gendered nature of work.

In the absence of regular jobs, many people instead work in the gig economy (see, for example, Petriglieri et al., 2019; de Ruyter & Brown, 2019; Standing, 2014), a form of work characterised by precarity. A gig worker, or a person that works in the gig economy, is referred to as:

A free agent pursuing the next job in return for money, yet in no way beholden to the company that supplies the work: free to pursue whatever he or she wishes ...with no semblance of any long-term expectations attached to any work that they undertake (de Ruyter & Brown, 2019, p. 5).

Instead of a full-time job with a contract and related benefits, gig workers are defined as contractors. Some have viewed this in a positive light, arguing that the gig economy is more flexible in its hours and allows workers to be more independent (Ungureanu, 2019). Others, however, argue that this new form of labour allows companies to take advantage of socio-economically vulnerable workers with insecure working arrangements (Zwick, 2018; Petriglieri et al., 2019; Churchill et al., 2019). Other authors have opted for a more neutral stance, citing the potential for the future of the gig economy to be either good or bad, depending on a variety of technological factors that have yet to be implemented on a larger scale (de Ruyter et al., 2019). While the worker is not beholden to the company, neither is the company beholden to the worker. Freedom and insecurity go hand in hand.

Another defining characteristic of gig workers is their positionality as neoliberal subjects. In this context, neoliberal subjects are workers who are in a “permanent pursuit of adaptability, which is hailed as a virtue yet constitutes a constraint, [and] gives rise to a system of dispositions that leads individuals to perceive themselves as subject to a logic of constant adaptation requiring deliberate effort” (Hilgers, 2013, p. 84). Neoliberal subjectivity is characterised by an emphasis on constant movement and seeing one’s self-identity as a “flexible collections of skills, usable traits, and tastes that need to be constantly maintained and enhanced” (Gershon, 2011a, p. 867). In these quotes, it can be seen that the words being used to describe neoliberal subjects reflect identity work situated in a social milieu that prioritises movement, change, and improvement, as opposed to staying in one place or state.

Precarity is presented as a positive state in that it provides freedom from stuckness. Multiple scholars have also noted that this new form of labour brings with it an expectation of higher degrees or education, which was not previously seen or expected of the working class. (Churchill et al., 2019; Gershon, 2011b; Hackshaw, 2013; Standing, 2014; Trueman, 2020; Ungureanu, 2019; Zwick, 2018).

The other key to the neoliberal self that can be seen in the quotes above is that there is an intimate connection between the self and work. People are expected to market themselves in the way a brand would in order to acquire work in the gig economy (Petriglieri et al., 2019). This phenomenon has been termed aesthetic labour (Warhurst & Nickson, 2020) to describe the idea of employers hiring based on the aesthetics they have in mind for their employees: typically young and conventionally attractive people are preferred. With employers going so far as to prioritise appearance over qualification, a type of appearance-based discrimination termed lookism has been documented from as early as the 1970s and 1980s and has been gaining recent attention in the scholarship. Lookism is pervasive and has been documented as providing economic benefits for employers who want to curate a specific aesthetic in their stores, typically based on traditional gender structures and femininity, which in turn affects people not only economically, but also socially (Warhurst & Nickson, 2020; Spiegel, 2023; Takáč, 2020; Warhurst et al., 2009). Highlighting the effects lookism has on young women, Warhurst and Nickson (2020) specifically mention that this group is being sexualised “even in ostensibly non-sexualised environments” (p. 126) indicating the consequences of this kind of employment. This pairs with the expectations of performances of femininity placed on young women. A particular example is of women being told to “give us a smile” when it is perceived that they are not quite bubbly or smiley enough in a given situation. For women, this requires a performance of a certain type of femininity where the wearing of make-up and stylish or trendy clothes as well as the ‘correct’ perceived emotions, expressions, or body language is prioritised in order to maintain the public performance. This was an experience I did not encounter in the freezing works, which helped me make sense of the stories my participants told me regarding their own identities and freezing works work.

When I asked my research participants about themselves, they would rarely talk about work, and in reverse, when I asked about work, they would rarely talk about themselves. Their identity is not tied to work and vice versa, and as such, it can be said that they are not *performing* identity at work: they are *just working*. They do not have to perform aesthetic

labour. They are not, therefore, using work to perform their selves. The relative lack of precarity, financial security and freedom from the demand to enhance and market oneself provided by the freezing works provide a stark contrast to work in the gig economy. While contracts end every season, they are typically re-signed every year. In addition to this, depending primarily on external factors (such as market demand) there are regular hours (anywhere from forty to sixty-plus hours a week), and on-site health care available to all staff. Given the precarity in the job market, the benefits of these jobs resemble what Tsing (2015) called regular jobs. This work much more closely resembles old labour or those regular jobs that seemed much more common after World War II and before the 1990s, which provided financial and social stability.

### **Bullshit Jobs**

Another key writer on contemporary work is David Graeber, famous for his concept of bullshit jobs (2013, 2019). He defines a bullshit job as one that is simultaneously unproductive, and that provides no value to either those that perform them or society as a whole. Graeber argues that we have seen the creation of many jobs in the twenty-first century, but in fact, most of these jobs are useless. He says that

productive jobs have, just as predicted, been largely automated away (even if you count industrial workers globally, including the toiling masses in India and China, such workers are still not nearly so large a percentage of the world population as they used to be) (Graeber, 2013, para. 3)

He then argues that despite this massive yet gradual reduction in productive jobs, people do not work less. Instead, the creation of bullshit jobs has filled that gap rather than allowing for more free time. Scholars who use or discuss Graeber's theory of bullshit jobs argue that this phenomenon of bullshit jobs was developed from systems set up in the early twentieth century and eventually evolved into the system of bullshit jobs that are seen today (see for example Dean et al., 2022; Delucchi et al., 2021; Ferreira et al., 2022; Soffia et al., 2022).

While freezing works jobs are often described by the workers as shit jobs, they are distinctly not 'bullshit' in the Graeber sense. Food production is undeniably productive and there is an increasing demand for meat (Milford et al., 2019; Whitnall & Pitts, 2019), especially Aotearoa New Zealand lamb and mutton which are highly valued. The fact that this is not a

useless job is very clearly seen in the fact that during the 2020 and 2021 Covid lockdowns, the freezing works, which come under the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, were classed as essential services due to their significant contribution to the economy and did not shut down. Rather than being a bullshit job in Graeber's terminology, I argue that the freezing works is simply a shit job in the colloquial sense. The freezing works are gory, messy, and physically and mentally demanding work that takes a toll on those that are stuck (or secure) there. Despite this, there is value and use in this job, which differentiates it from the bullshit-ness (Heller, 2018).

Bullshit jobs affect women in particular ways, given traditional gender roles associated with maternal nurturing assigned to women in the "developed world". There is often a paradox for women entering the workforce. As Kiesling (2018) notes, women are expected to be the ones to care for and provide for their children and are therefore often considered only for feminised bullshit jobs whereby they are expected to take care of their workplaces (secretaries and receptionists are given as examples of this). Situating freezing works jobs in comparison to this makes it clear how much less of a bullshit job they are for women especially. This is traditionally hyper-masculine work and women are not required to do care in the workplace.

The theories discussed above have been developed to make sense of what is happening in the world of contemporary work and as such contemporary theories of work focus on precarity and the gig economy. Therefore, these theories were not much help in making sense of my participants' lives, as precarity and meaninglessness were not how they experienced or narrated their work lives.

### **Thick Description and Thin Theory**

The literature on contemporary work shows that analytic frameworks and theorisations are most useful and insightful when they emerge from the work contexts themselves. When I tried to apply existing theories none of them fit, and they made no sense of what was actually going on in the freezing works today. I instead follow Gibson-Graham (2014) and their idea of weak theory combined with Geertz's thick description, as this approach encourages the prioritisation of the small, everyday facts of life. They specifically focus on the relationship between small facts and large issues, and argue that thick description is a way of rethinking and understanding the economy overall. On the significance of thick description as a way to make sense of the economy, they argue that:

Thick description steps in as a method that directs interpretive attention not only to material practices but to the nuances, affects, multiple codes of meaning, silences, jokes, parodies, and so on, that accompany them. While theory might have little to say to such complexity, it is never absent, nor can it be bypassed (Gibson-Graham, 2014, pp. S148)

They conclude that “It is ethnographic thick description and weak theory that have helped us to imagine the becoming of community economies motivated by concerns for surviving together well” (Gibson-Graham, 2014, pp. S152).

A thick description, therefore, allows deeper insight into the nooks and crannies of capitalism that a grander economic theory might not. They argue that the current state of economic practices described in the literature is so complex that current theoretical frameworks do not do justice to the empirical evidence (Narotzky and Besnier 2014, as cited in Gibson-Graham, 2014). In this regard, Gibson-Graham says that “weak theory does not elaborate and confirm what we already know; it observes, interprets, and yields to emerging knowledge.” (p. S149). Employing weak theory and thick description allows for a better understanding of the freezing works from the point of view of the women who work there. Using a stronger theory would hide the small facts of this site. Given the unusualness of the freezing works as a site of ethnographic research, a stronger theory risks misinterpretation of the aforementioned small facts.

Once they are revealed by thick description, small facts can speak to large issues. Thick description is privileged over strong theory because it allows the small facts of freezing work life to speak to the large issues of work and security in contemporary capitalism. The small facts of freezing work life further reveal the large issue of financial security. Despite the precarity and instability seen in the literature, the freezing works have become a haven of financial security and allow the workers to “survive together well” (Gibson-Graham, 2014, p. S152).

Gibson-Graham argues that “rethinking the economy is a revolutionary task... To rethink the economy as a site of ethical interdependence is to abandon the structural imperatives and market machinations of capitalocentric discourses of economy” (p. S152). They introduce the idea of a diverse economy as

a reframing that allows for a much wider range of social relations to be seen to bear on economic practices including, to name just some, trust, care, sharing, reciprocity, cooperation, coercion, bondage, thrift, guilt, love, equity, self-exploitation, solidarity, distributive justice, stewardship, spiritual connection, and environmental and social justice (p. S147)

The idea of a diverse economy allows for a deeper understanding of what is going on with regard to the small facts of freezing work life for the women I interviewed. Gibson-Graham's work differs from my research in that they focus on economies outside of traditional capitalism as sites of hope and revolution, whereas my research is situated within the heart of traditional industrial capitalism. What my case shows is that there are pockets of good jobs and security within the existing capitalist order.

Gibson-Graham's examples of traditional capitalism also differ from mine in that they centre on crisis whereas my research participants do not experience their traditional industrial jobs as being in crisis. The examples given by Gibson-Graham involve situations of crisis, giving the specific examples of "financial, refugee, climate, obesity, ecological, waste, housing, or species extinction crisis, to name just some" (p. S151). They explain that crisis is increasingly normalised which is further supported by the breadth of literature that discusses contemporary precarity and in particular precarious employment (see for example de Ruyter & Brown, 2019; Petriglieri et al., 2019; Standing, 2014; Churchill et al., 2019). The freezing works are however a pocket of non-crisis and stability within the existing capitalist order. The idea of the freezing works as a leftover pocket of security and stability allows for a greater understanding of that work in the context of the ruins of capitalism.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

When I initially started to look for theoretical ideas to help me understand what was going on in the freezing works, I looked to the literature on contemporary work, as well as work about life within capitalist ruins. Because the freezing works are one of the few remaining sites of industrial labour in Aotearoa New Zealand, the idea of capitalist ruins sounded promising. However, as this literature defines work by its instability and precarity, it felt disingenuous to apply this to the freezing works when that is not the experience of my

participants or myself. Much of the literature about contemporary work also featured the idea of identity work, whereby there is an expectation of maintaining certain personality features and physical appearances that maintain traditional gender structures (see for example, Petriglieri et al., 2019; de Ruyter & Brown, 2019; Standing, 2014; Hilgers, 2013; Gershon, 2011b). Again, this is not what I found or experienced.

A common way that freezing workers will refer to the job is that it is shit, or bullshit. However, I very quickly understood that they do not use the word in the same way as Graeber, to refer to jobs that are both useless and valueless. The freezing works is a shit job in the sense that it is physically and mentally difficult, however, it is definitively useful and provides value to the employees, the company, and the economy.

From here I realised that the best analytic framework I could use to understand the ethnography was that which emerged from the women themselves. So thick description and a theory that takes seriously the participant's own concepts as described by Gibson-Graham was the most suitable idea that I could find to help to understand the women's work lives.

Using Gibson-Grahams' (2014) thick description approach, the idea of being stuck in the freezing works came out of the stories the women told me. It was what they used in their own descriptions of their work lives. Freezing works, which might be seen by some as a backwater in a negative sense, a backwards remnant of an industrial age that has almost disappeared from Aotearoa New Zealand, actually provide a secure haven from irregularity and precarity for those who work there. Being stuck is often seen to be a negative thing, as in Hage's definition: "a sense of existential immobility, which is premised against an imaginary mobility, where a sense of 'going somewhere' is a prerequisite for a viable life" (cited in Vignehsa, 2014, p. 3). However, in opposition to the current neoliberal framing of stuckness, in the case of the freezing works, it is being stuck that makes a "viable life" (cited in Vignehsa, 2014, p. 3). The supposed 'backwater' of the freezing works where it is so easy to become stuck, therefore, can be reframed as a haven of financial security and stability for women.



## CHAPTER 4

# FREEZING WORKS: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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### Introduction

While the previous chapter discussed the more conceptual literature on contemporary work, this chapter turns to what has been written on the freezing works in Aotearoa New Zealand specifically. I focus primarily on the Aotearoa New Zealand scholarship due to the wildly different industrial contexts in other nations. This literature focuses primarily on political action during the 1970s and 1980s, and has been written by historians and political scientists both at the time and in retrospect. This means that the scholars that are writing today still focus on the old days of the industry from around the 1970s and 1980s. There is also a body of literature that focuses on the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s. This scholarship is part of a broader literature on work that focuses on industrial labour and is informed by Marxist theory. The primary focus is on the relations between management and the workers as 'labour'. There is little written on workers' lived experiences or daily lives

The literature on the political action of the 1970s and 1980s provides the context in which my participants' working conditions were formed, and it is these working conditions that make the freezing works a non-bullshit, stable job. However, this set of literature is unable to completely account for the daily lived experiences of the workers and particularly what it is actually like to work in the freezing works today. Especially unaccounted for, is the place of women working in the industry, as they are primarily featured as partners, neighbours, or otherwise proximate to the industry rather than as workers. What my research contributes to the literature, therefore, is a focus on the daily lived experience of women working in the meat industry in Aotearoa New Zealand.

While there has been little ethnographic work on the freezing works in Aotearoa New Zealand, there is international literature on freezing workers' lives. Primarily based in the United States, this set of literature focuses on themes I have already shown are not particularly relevant to my case study, such as precarity, exploitation, identity work, and migration. Despite

the contexts being so different, what the international literature does show is how the materiality of working in the meat processing industry affects daily work life.

### **Freezing Works in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s**

The Aotearoa New Zealand meat industry cannot be discussed without mentioning the strikes and unionism of the 1970s and 1980s. Political scientists and historians both at the time and today have focused on this period which has been of interest to academics given that union action resulted in important political changes, such as improvements to working conditions. Another central aspect of freezing workers' lives that is portrayed in the literature is the connection and camaraderie between the workers. This literature further focuses on the relationship between workplace culture and worker militancy, particularly on how the materiality of the job shaped workers' political lives. While there is comparatively little in the "blood and guts" literature about actual union gains during this period, the NZ Meat Workers and Related Trades Union (NZMWU) credit this action specifically as to why the working conditions, the pay, the hours, and other benefits are as good as they are today (New Zealand Meat Workers and Related Trades Union, n.d.). While this literature focuses on men in the past, the aspects of the freezing works that it covers are also things that women today deal with such as the materiality of the job, family connections, and informal resistance.

It is common for literature on the freezing works to be focused on the killing floor specifically, rather than stations further removed from the butchering. As boning rooms are relatively recent, they have been given less attention in the literature. Due to butcher or slaughtermen being a male-dominated position, and the killing floor being a male-dominated space it is no wonder that men have also dominated the literature. In the 1980s and 1990s the Aotearoa New Zealand meat industry was, for the most part, focused on the export of whole carcasses. As the purpose of the boning room is the processing of whole carcasses down to cuts of meat which are then sold to customers, there was little economic sense in this room existing. Instead, what was known as small goods rooms were used for the processing of things like offal.

I was told that by the women and men I spoke to who worked in the freezing works during the 1980s and 1990s that there were no women in the freezing works, suggesting that not everyone that worked at a freezing works plant was seen as a freezing worker. Denise, whom I interviewed, stated that she started working in the freezing works in the cafeteria

among other positions since the late 1980s, which is a period of time “before women worked in the meat works”. This suggests that ‘freezing worker’ was a specific identity belonging to certain members of the workforce – that is to say, the men that worked on the killing floor.

The most recurrent idea in the literature is of the “blood and guts” (Boraman, 2019; Webb, 2015; Leckie, 1991) nature of the work. This phrase is used to refer to both the materiality of the job as well as allude to the archetype of the ‘rough as guts’ freezing worker. Specifically, the literature argues that the materiality of labour in the meat processing industry is generative of the workplace culture underpinning formal resistance during this time. For example, Boraman (2019) argues the combination of blood and guts, and mechanisation of meat processing work, for example, the implementation of the chain system in the 1930s (Inkson & Cammock, 1984), played a major role in generating conflict in the 1970s (Boraman, p. 8). Leckie (1991) also argues the blood and guts nature of the work and perception of meat workers as being rough in nature is a deliberate and necessary performance of masculinity, aimed at defending themselves and their working conditions. The image was fostered of a masculine freezing worker who stands up for himself and his boys, which is an image that has stuck with the industry through the decades, particularly due to the works being a major employer of Māori men. The traditionally masculine and Māori bonds in the workplace, it is argued, are generative of physically and mentally tough men.

Historians have also written about the workplace family. This idea of a workplace family is used to describe the close bonds that workers have, which was used almost as a coping strategy for the blood and guts nature of the job. As Webb (2019) explains, intergenerational familial hiring was common in freezing works, especially among Māori employees. Those who worked in the industry have also argued that this familial hiring practice is one of the reasons for the immense sense of pride and camaraderie felt by workers (pp. 88-89). There is a lot of goofing around that goes on – things like throwing pieces of meat and hose fights are not uncommon (Boraman, 2019; Leckie, 1991). This speaks to the necessity of good unity among workers to deal with the materiality of the job. This is a positive aspect of working in the freezing works, which is one reason workers find themselves stuck there. Oral histories between 1970-1980 show there was a strong drive towards the workers controlling the conditions of work – ensuring working conditions suited the workers’, their families, and the wider community’s needs (Webb, 2019, pp. 83-84). Having participated in a 1988 strike, John Leckie (1991) wrote that because the freezing works were such a major employer within

communities when strikes did occur, the ramifications were more widespread, as their family members were also caught up in the process (p. 89).

Most of the literature on resistance in the Aotearoa New Zealand meat industry, from the 1960s to 1980s period, focuses on formal resistance like strikes with the initial goal of improving working conditions and pay, and eventually fighting redundancy. However, there is also mention of more informal forms of resistance. Some literature written in the 1980s (Inkson & Cammock, 1984) deals with how the organisation of management in the meat works inherently affected how the freezing workers resisted control and expressed their autonomy. A main argument in this regard focuses on the implementation of the chain system, which is the system whereby one carcass, suspended on a hook or gambrel travels past a number of workers each of whom undertakes a small part of the carcass deconstruction process, as opposed to the solo butchering method previously used where one butcher processed the whole carcass. In the early twentieth century, this allowed for greater worker autonomy in their direct surroundings. This is something that I found generally remains the case today, as some of the women I spoke to and worked alongside cited the autonomy of specific workstations allowing for strategic positioning to hide from watchful QCs (quality control officers) or security cameras (to eat lollies for example). Some other forms of resistance listed by Inkson and Cammock (1984), common among freezing workers in the late 1970s and early 1980s:

[M]eat workers interviewed by one of the writers have reported various kinds of individual theft and sabotage, including the deliberate rejection of good export meat by inspectors (Inkson, 1977). Absenteeism, over-utilisation of accident compensation, neglect of quality, indiscipline, passive resistance to supervisors, and tardiness at critical times all appear to be prevalent in the industry, particularly in works where the logic of efficiency is unmodified by a more "human" managerial style (Inkson, 1979). All of them provide the most insignificant and unskilled of meat workers with means for the individual expression of autonomy and counter-control (Inkson & Cammock, 1984, p. 155).

Virtually all of the examples on this list are things that I personally witnessed during my two seasons in the freezing works which further reinforces that the chain system in the freezing works at this time shaped and continues to shape how freezing workers understand their power within the industry on an individual level (Inkson & Cammock, 1984).

The 1970s and 1980s for freezing works were defined in the literature by the union action that dominated the political lives of freezing workers fighting for better pay, better working conditions, and fighting against redundancy. Much of what freezing workers fought for during this period remains the case today, however, in the interim, especially in the 1990s, much political change was to come that would affect the industry to this day.

### **The 1990s: Restructuring and the ECA**

The literature written in and about the 1990s focuses on industrial relations and changing legislation. Historians and trade union specialists (Boraman, 2019; Jerrard, 2006; Webb, 2015) have been particularly interested in legislative changes which shaped the trajectory of the meat industry in the aftermath of the strike period. The late 1980s and particularly the early 1990s saw a legislative change that had major impacts on the state of employer/employee relations in Aotearoa New Zealand, as well as devastating consequences for freezing works and small communities. In the late 1980s, the Labour government introduced changes that resulted in the general deregulation of the labour market, including union membership becoming voluntary, which led to a decline in wages (Hince & Vranken, 1991, p. 477). When the National Party came into power in 1990, they furthered the deregulatory legislative changes made by Labour and thus the Employment Contracts Act 1991 (ECA) was passed. This meant that working conditions, as well as pay, worsened and union membership declined dramatically in the country (Lafferty & Dorsett, 2018, p. 67).

In just one example of the dramatic changes this period saw, the major English-owned meat processing company Vestey went into receivership, which saw the closure of six plants in the country. Notable among these was Tomoana in Hastings in 1994. During the economic restructuring of the meat industry, redundancy strikes increased, yet the extensive strikes that marked the 1970-80 period of the industry declined. This decrease in strikes and other forms of organised resistance has also been attributed by historians to the weakened position of the unions. In the early 1990s there was an economic recession and the unemployment rate jumped up to 11%, which compounded the hardships many freezing workers were already experiencing. The freezing works had become less secure with jobs being fewer and further between, it was particularly a struggle to find employment elsewhere given that for many men the freezing works were the only job experience they had (Boraman, 2019; Jerrard, 2006; Webb, 2015).

Historians explain that for many small, predominantly Māori communities, the plant closures in the 1990s were financially and psychologically devastating. Many workers had been in the industry for two decades and had no other work experience, and a number had already experienced redundancy from other plants which had suffered the same fate earlier. Webb (2015) explains some of the workers who had already been made redundant had still not found a job by the time the 1990 recession hit, thus adding a further layer of suffering for the communities. He adds, “working in the meat works in the 1990s was hell in every way” (as cited in Webb, 2015, p. 144). Until then, there had always been a sense of family among freezing workers, especially within predominantly Māori communities. After the restructuring and de-regulation policies of the late 1980s and early 1990s, Boraman (2019) argues that this family environment and the pride that workers had in their jobs had declined, and that strikes had decreased overall (pp. 31-32). Despite this, for those that managed to keep their jobs the previous wins in terms of pay and working conditions remained, and an aspect of familial ties and freezing worker pride remained.

While there has been much written on the state of the meat processing industry in Aotearoa New Zealand in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s, there is comparatively little that I could find written about the 2000s and beyond. While there is work written today the focus is on the past, with an emphasis on the experience of strikes and unionism and comparatively little on the actual working lives of freezing workers.

### **Ethnographies of Freezing Works**

There is little that I could find written ethnographically about freezing works in Aotearoa New Zealand about the period from the 2000s onward. While ethnographic literature about industrial meat processing is relatively rare in Aotearoa New Zealand scholarship, there are some international ethnographies of slaughterhouses in America that do provide insight into the day-to-day work lives of meat processing workers. Due to there being little union organising in America, this literature shows a very clear image of ethno-socioeconomic precarity and vulnerability. This demonstrates the comparatively less precarious and better working conditions in Aotearoa New Zealand freezing works.

The international literature focuses particularly on the meat industry as a site where the systemic oppression of vulnerable gendered and ethnic groups is particularly visible. This is part of a wider shift in the literature on industrial labour more generally, away from the primary

focus on class and towards a more holistic theoretical analysis that includes class, ethnicity, gender and other forms of identity (see for example Simon, 2000). The discussion of labour in the meat industry in the twenty-first century in the United States presents slaughterhouses as a site of segregated labour; dirty, smelly workplaces where typically minority groups make up the workforce, suggesting these places are perhaps associated with being a dirty and smelly ‘man’s world’ where the more vulnerable people in society work. They are argued to be places of “horrific work, reliant upon the expendable bodies of Black and Brown workers, many of whom are immigrants” (Stuesse, 2018, p. 79). This body of work focuses on the relationships between class, ethnicity, gender, and the workplace, and highlights the need to focus on women specifically in industrial labour discussions (Steusse, 2018; Keating, 2013; Stoll, 2017; Simon, 2000).

The American literature demonstrates how a lack of a united workforce and a lack of unions go hand in hand with worse working conditions. This shines a light on how the political action in Aotearoa New Zealand by freezing workers in the 1980s affected the industry today, by way of contrasting the good working conditions won by union action. Anthropologist David Stoll (2017) notes that there was historically a lack of labour unions in slaughterhouses in the United States. These slaughterhouses are well known for having both poor pay and unsafe and unregulated working conditions, leading to a high turnover of workers (p. 116). Workers need to make a considerable effort to organise any new employees. With the increase in Spanish-speaking immigrants from Latin America has come to a shift in work culture. Noted is the divide between Black and Latin American workers, particularly in that African American workers are much more likely to stand up for safer working conditions. This had the consequence of companies giving hiring preference to immigrants (who are more likely to ‘put up with’ poor working conditions) as opposed to locals (Steusse as cited in Stoll, 2017, pp. 113-14). Stoll argues that the tensions between American-born workers’ and immigrant workers’ rights will be used as a strategy to keep the unions out of the meatpacking industry (p. 116). This speaks to the structural vulnerability often faced by meat processing workers in the United States.

While in this regard the United States is unlike Aotearoa New Zealand freezing works, an aspect of relationships in the meat industry in America that is similar to Aotearoa New Zealand is the importance of camaraderie to surviving there. Timothy Pachirat (2011) writes of his time in a Great Plains slaughterhouse and again describes the horrific nature of

industrialised slaughter based on his own experiences undercover. He credits the camaraderie of his co-workers to his lasting on the killing floor at all (pp. ix-x). While working in slaughterhouses in America is much different to working in freezing works in Aotearoa New Zealand, the international literature shows the value of ethnography to academic discussions on industrial relations. It shows the day-to-day realities of working in the meat processing industry globally and shows how thick description can be used to get into the nooks and crannies of daily life and what shapes work lives.

### **Women in the Freezing Works**

Through all these different bodies of literature, there is a lack of focus on women. It was often the case that women rarely worked in these spaces and were often excluded from unions and union action. Earlier literature put the spotlight on women as spouses or community members, but rarely as workers. The partners of freezing workers felt included in the strike activity, showing the community aspect. Leckie (1991) mentions that women were more vulnerable than men when it came to the disruptions of home life that came along with the strikes (Boraman, 2019; Leckie, 1991). Where women do feature as workers in the literature, the discussions centre around them becoming “one of the boys” (Webb, 2019, p. 96) and being included in the camaraderie as the freezing works was a man’s world. However, it does seem that some aspects of the literature about men did apply to women too. For example, one woman who was a boning room delegate indicated that the freezing works were an intergenerational employer of women as well, as her mother had also worked in the industry (Leckie, 1991).

Based on what my research participants said there was a sentiment of disinterest as they were not necessarily interested in joining the union at that time in the 1970s and 1980s as they were more focused on being mothers or partners in addition to being workers. They said they felt that the unions did not have their best interests in mind, and that what they were fighting for would benefit the men to a greater degree than them. Evidence from the literature would suggest this feeling was reciprocal as employers saw women as being anti-strike because of sexist understandings of women being “too obedient and hence disinclined to strike” (Boraman, 2019, p. 15). Speaking to my participants I found this sentiment of disinterest bordering on distrust of unions is still seen today.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

The scholarship that covers the meat processing industry, while broad in scope, rarely focuses on ethnographic descriptions of day-to-day work lives, especially in Aotearoa New Zealand. The 1970s and 1980s were pivotal periods for the Aotearoa New Zealand meat industry. The changes that were brought in through militant unionism and activism are still seen in the industry over five decades later. This is crucial to understanding my participants' working conditions and therefore why the job is sticky. However, the ethnographies written during the 1970s and 1980s do little to reveal the everyday lives of freezing workers today. There has been a noticeable decline in union activism over the decades since, and for the women that I interviewed, participation in the union was not an important feature in their daily work life. The academic interest in strikes and unionism has meant that there has been a decline in ethnographic studies in correlation with the decline in industrial labour.

The ethnographies that do exist are mostly based in America and focus on issues not relevant to my case such as the vulnerability and precarity faced by migrant workers. They provide a thick description of the everyday lives of slaughterhouse workers that show the reality of many workers lives in the industry in America. This literature shows the value of ethnography in opening up the discussion of the everyday lives of meat processing workers.

The context provided by discussing the literature and theory in the last two chapters demonstrates that the freezing works can be seen as a secure haven in comparison to much work these days in the ruins of capitalism. The next three chapters will focus on the everyday lives of my research participants. This will provide an in depth understanding of the small facts of women freezing workers' lives in Aotearoa New Zealand, and show how these small facts speak to the large issue of financial security.

## CHAPTER 5

# GETTING STUCK: GETTING IN AND STAYING THERE

...

*I was coming off the heels of what one might call a quarter-life crisis – a period defined by swirling feelings of failure, resentment, and aimlessness. Haunted by that neoliberal voice in the back of your head that mocks you for not having your life ‘together’ by now.*

*After talking with mum about these things, she sent me an application to the freezing works where she was an employee. It was an eye-wateringly easy process compared to my other job-seeking endeavours, which had required in no particular order: multiple forms of ID; a new interview outfit that would never be worn again; multiple applications; a unique and specially crafted CV and cover letter; the ability to market oneself to strangers in an interview, only to get ghosted afterwards; and if successfully hired, the ability to maintain a performative work personality reflecting this ‘interview-self’ for the duration of your employment. Repeat ad infinitum.*

*It was jarring how much easier it was to apply for the freezing works. I had to fill in an application with my personal details (name, address, contact details), which shift I would prefer (day shift or night shift), what area of the plant I was applying for (boning room for me), and if I had any health conditions that would affect my ability to work. No running around trying to jump through hoops to perform a particular neoliberal-worker personality or need to worry about lookism dictating how I needed to present on the clock. The way that I got my job – through a connection with a relative – is common within the industry. The comparative ease of getting a job in the freezing works, whatever the method of entrance, makes it an alluring option for many.*

*I quit my fast-food job the second I heard that my application to the works was successful and made plans to go back home to Invercargill and work over the summer, as many a university student had done before me.*

...

## Introduction

Before discussing the details of the daily lived experiences of women in the freezing works, I discuss how exactly women get into and end up stuck in the industry. I found that the women I spoke to could be put into a few general categories, which align with the categories of ‘stuckness’ as outlined in Chapter Two. The first group of women in the ‘stuck’ category consists of Denise, Claire, and Frances, who could be described as being well and truly stuck in the freezing works. The second category of women was ‘becoming stuck’. Yvonne, Joanna, Tracey, and Jen exhibit some mobility, but this is generally limited to movement within the industry. The third category is ‘not stuck’. This category includes me, Nicole, and Chloe, none of whom currently work in the industry in any capacity. Across these categories there were various trajectories into the freezing works, ranging from passively drifting into the job to actively choosing to do so.

One thing that all of my participants said, however, was that money was either a major or sole contributing factor in their decision to enter the freezing works. Many also had some family connection to or at least local knowledge of the industry before entering it. While prior related experience opens the possibility of working in the freezing works, money is probably the most common motivating factor. Freezing workers in Aotearoa New Zealand earn what can be described as a not-insignificant wage. From my experience, the starting wage is at least one or two dollars higher than the minimum wage. This, along with working anywhere from forty to fifty hours a week, can mean over a thousand dollars a week before tax for an entry-level job which speaks to the large issue of financial security.

My first encounter with the idea of really being stuck in the freezing works was talking to women who had been there for well over a decade or more with no plans to leave. This stuckness manifests in the imperception of the passage of time – the day-to-day of clocking in and out becomes months, the seasons become years, and before you know it the years become decades. It was hard for me and colleagues my age to think of these small facts of day-to-day life as anything other than negative. After talking with the older women, I realised stuckness was more nuanced. Often the women framed being stuck in the freezing works in a negative way. However, often, at least by those with over a decade of experience, stuckness was connected also with a sense of financial security. I use the frameworks of stuckness and gender

in this chapter as a way of understanding the importance of the financial stability and security the freezing works provide to the women I spoke to.

Looking over the interviews it was clear that stuckness exists on a spectrum rather than a binary, with the midpoint being somewhere between a positive and negative perspective, a sort of indifference meets contentedness. When the older women thought of stuckness as negative, it was largely in relation to younger women, whereas they thought of it more ambiguously in relation to themselves and their own jobs. They advised younger women about the importance of focus, self-improvement, and betterment so that they do not get stuck, which was in and of itself gendered as they did not show the same concern for young men. The women use the example of young boys at work (whom they say have no focus and then become old men with no focus) as a cautionary tale to highlight the importance for women of focusing on larger, long-term goals. I got an impression from the older women that worry seemed to arise, and stuckness became negative, when a younger person has career options they felt they themselves did not have access to. In relation to their own careers and in the context of their own opportunities however, a positive aspect is the freedom the freezing works provides in terms of benefits afforded to those with a long-standing position.

The middle group of women often expressed the desire to move out of their current jobs, due to issues with working conditions, but more often than not listed jobs still within the meat industry as potential alternatives. This speaks to the allure of the freezing works, particularly the financial aspect and ease of transference of skills. By contrast, the younger girls almost exclusively talked about being stuck in a negative sense, reflecting a neoliberal subjectivity we were raised with. The younger women seemed to have the same career aspirations for themselves as the older women had for them. Overall, this chapter analyses how and why women became freezing workers in the first place, which allows the exploration of how and why women get stuck there.

## **Stuck**

This group of women, Denise, Frances, and Claire, all born in the 1960s, have multiple decades of experience in the freezing works in a variety of roles. In this section, I will explore how they came to be in the industry.

### **It is what it is**

The women in this first group lacked passionate motivations for entering the freezing works and were simply finding a job. When I asked Denise why she went to the freezing works in the first place, it seemed like a decision that was almost made for her – not that she understood this in a particularly negative or positive light, simply ‘it is what it is’:

Because that’s what you did in [my hometown]. It was either the fish factories or the freezing works, and when you were at high school that’s all they ever talked about was, you know, I gotta go to the freezing works because that was really good money.

Here Denise demonstrates two points that were raised by other women I spoke to – which are that this job is “just what you do” and the key motivation of money. There were only two options for teenagers in her hometown once they left school, and she chose the option which would give her the highest income the in the quickest time period, rather than choosing out of a passion for the job. The idea that working in the freezing works was something you just do, because it was just “what everyone did”, crops up in the literature in reference to what the freezing works were generally like in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Webb, 2015; Webb, 2019; Boraman, 2019).

Likewise, although not in reference to the freezing works specifically, Frances’ perspective on jobs and job seeking in general back in her teenage years in the 1970s and 80s provides insight into one reason why women her age get ‘stuck’ in jobs.

A job was a job – very few people had career aspirations back then, you know, unfortunately, but it’s just the way it was.

Frances and Denise have the experience and the hindsight to understand the various ways things might have been different but refrain from dwelling on any negativity. Both women are from smaller towns in the South Island, which did not have many options for teenagers (young women especially) entering the workforce.

### **Money**

Money is the primary reason many find themselves in the freezing works. Denise explained that she initially went into the job for money, wanting to earn some income after leaving school, and just never left:

If I had to do it all over again, I would actually do something completely different. Back in those days in the 70s uni was free and we just thought ‘oh no we just want to get out of school; we just want to get a job; we just want to make money’ and everybody went to the freezing

works...a small handful carried on but to get to uni you had to do seventh form, you know. It was hard enough getting to the fifth form and doing school cert you don't want to do two more years.

Here Denise explains the way many people in her generation in Southland and Otago moved through life: whatever produces the best results in the shortest amount of time, in this case, whatever route earns the most money the quickest:

I went there because of the money. I thought that's a quick way to make a lot of money, because I didn't know what I wanted to do, so I thought that'll do me in the meantime until I decide what I wanted to do [...] But yeah, I never left the meat industry. I left when I had my children, but I always went back because it was quick, easy money.

Although Denise states that she never left the meat industry, during her interview she mentioned a couple of times that she did leave, to take care of her children as a stay-at-home mum, or to work in the deli section of a supermarket. Despite these periods away, Denise characterises herself as never having left the industry, as she always came back.

The stability of income in the freezing works made it very easy to keep going back and to stay. It would have been more effort to find a new job and train in an entirely new set of skills. She explained:

The women I've spoken to at work, three years of study to become anything seems too hard. Even for me, you know like ... I was quite happy at [the current plant] for a while but as time went on I sort of wanted to change, but everything I could think of changing to, from a nurse, physiotherapist, was three years study and I thought 'god what do I live on for three years?' you know? I've still got a mortgage, and it's well and good coming to the freezing works in the Christmas time but what about in between? What do I live on? And it's really really hard when you live on say \$800 a week ... to go to a student benefit<sup>5</sup>. Students – and I don't care what anyone says – it must be hard. You know students wouldn't have the outgoings that I would have at that time because I would have had a mortgage, three kids at home, but still it's hard.

[...]

*Yeah, and depending on what other expenses you've got, who you live with and...*

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<sup>5</sup> Meat processing workers can expect an annual income of anywhere from \$46,000 to \$86,000 (Careers NZ, 2019). The student benefit (allowance), which is only available for undergraduate students, depends on a variety of factors such as marital status, age, having dependents, and income, but can be expected to be anywhere from \$9,360 to \$30,680 per annum, before tax (Study Link, n.d.)

Yeah, like it's all right if you've got a partner who can help carry the load but not everybody's got that. But you know like a lot of women have dreams, but they cannot see how they're gonna live, you know? ... We all kick ourselves; we should've done that in the 70s when uni was free [...] But the 70s was for living. Who wants to go back to uni? Of [course] we all kick ourselves now even when we had the time to go back once the kids have left home or gone off to school or whatever, you were stuck with that problem of 'oh god I've got a mortgage, I've got school fees, I've got this I've got this, how will we live?' Especially the solo mums, the ones that had a partner, their partner's income didn't stretch to uni you know, it stretches to run the house and food and everything else but there is no extra to stretch to uni and because you're in a long term relationship you weren't eligible for a student benefit so there's nothing for that group so it's to the freezing works.

There are a few points here that Denise brought up about the feeling of lost opportunities due to more pressing financial needs, namely the ever-growing list of expenses that come along with being an adult: mortgage, childcare, household costs, and so on. There is a sense that many women must work in the freezing works and then become stuck there because there are few other opportunities that provide adequate income to run a household. In fact, most of the women that I worked alongside in the freezing works were mothers, earning money to care for their children and grandchildren. As the above discussion with Denise indicates, it is not inaccurate to assume that many of those that work in the freezing works would rather be doing something else or "chasing their dreams", as Denise puts it. However, the fact that women often left school with few qualifications would later limit their opportunities. Indeed, there is the knowledge that going from a job earning around a thousand dollars a week, down to around two hundred on a benefit, would put you in a financially vulnerable, or even financially impossible, position.

Now that Denise has fewer financial burdens, she is freer to pursue other opportunities. However, for women her age, there is the reality that her age prevents this from happening, and so she feels that it is too late to change jobs.

I don't see myself leaving freezing works because I got told last year I'm not employable. Because I applied for a part-time job to get out of the freezing works and I got told "oh no you're not employable, you're 57" so I'm stuck here now till I'm 65.

From this experience, Denise concluded that she is stuck in the freezing works until retirement, despite her desire for change. Denise's story shows the intersection between financial security and meat processing, and therefore why the freezing works are such a sticky occupation.

Frances was also motivated to get a job in the freezing works to earn money:

*Did you start there for money?*

Yes. Sole reason.

*What did you think going in? What did you think it would be like?*

I didn't. It was just a job. Just a job that paid better than where I was.

Frances pointed to her lack of career aspirations as unfortunate in retrospect but common at the time in other comments she made. If this perspective (of both acknowledging a lack of career aspirations and understanding this as being negative in some way) is as common among workers in her age group as I infer from her and Denise's statements, this perhaps gets to the heart of why many older workers will frame stuckness negatively. The women understand that working in the freezing works has less cultural capital than other jobs or careers which are more highly valued (Pachirat, 2011; Chiles, 2017). This combination of no career aspirations, meaning no qualifications, as well as the good money provided by the freezing works makes freezing works work sticky.

### **Family and Community**

Another reason that women started working in the freezing works and got stuck there was family connections to people already working in the industry. Having family already in the works made these women aware of the freezing works as a possibility for themselves. Family connections were extremely common in the works in the 1970s and 80s, and Webb (2019) notes that once someone got their foot in the door, they would often bring in relatives to work alongside them. This method of entrance does still happen today and there were quite a few women who started alongside their family members, for example, mothers and daughters, siblings, cousins, and so on.

While making connections that allow a family member to join the same well-paying job may be initially seen to be a good thing, some without these immediate family connections may feel disadvantaged. When I asked Frances for her perspective as someone who did not get hired through familial connections, she responded:

At [our specific plant] all, when we started [in 2006]: [it was] all [this person's] family, all [that person's] family, you know? And it was wrong cause half of them were useless, but they got there because of who they were, which is real kick in the ass for everyone else trying to get work.

*So they get bumped in the queue?*

Mmhm. See Mataura, years back, when grandad worked there, once the paper mill shut down, and there was a lot of unemployment, they actually stopped employing people from the same family. They allowed one person from each household to be employed in the meat works. It distributed the income evenly around the entire community. Not one house taking six thousand dollars home but six houses taking a thousand dollars home. So which in that turn, kept the economy going, kept the housing going, and kept families going without dividing families. Or dividing neighbour against neighbour because we've got four unemployed in this house, and you've got six employed in yours. It didn't last that long because the economy soon came back up and more jobs were created elsewhere, not in the meat works but in other industries. That's one if people put their heads down and think about it, it's actually good for the small districts and it's a pity a lot more wouldn't do it.

[...]

Well, all industries and all throughout the country. Instead of shutting down plants for this and this and this, and having a high unemployment rate... Instead of having 'haves' and 'have nots', it will equally distribute the income. It's a very egalitarian view, but! It works! But big companies won't look at it because their theory is 'that's old ways, they don't work'. They do work! Modify them to suit.

Frances scrutinised the practice of bringing family into the works without regard to work ethic and ability, as there were multiple people she remembered as being bad at their job in some way. She believed that this practice, of only allowing one member per household at the works saved the local socio-economic structure and the many different families therein. It is indicative of how vital the financial security of the industry is for small communities, making the job especially sticky in places where job opportunities may be limited.

Frances also demonstrates something that the younger women did not seem to, which is the reflection in hindsight on her own life and experiences. Perhaps because she and the other older women have significantly more experience in both the meat works and factory work more generally, they are more likely to compare and contrast how the running of these industries looks on a macro-scale over time, as opposed to the younger women who focus on the small issues they ran into in day to day life. Frances showed how these two views are connected to each other in that how people are employed in the freezing works work can potentially affect the income of not only the individual workers but the wider community including their families, especially in 'Small Town' Aotearoa New Zealand.

Another common mode of entry is through employment agencies. One way to get your foot in the door is by going through an employment agency that will apply to the freezing works

on the person's behalf. These agencies typically work by people signing up with them and providing their curriculum vitae (CV). The agency will then match the person up with a job they think will be suitable and organise an interview if appropriate. For example, Yvonne who is in the following category explained how she entered the freezing works in 2006 – she started in September of that year as a candidate through the agency, but the freezing works themselves officially hired her as an employee that December. In the case of this employment agency, one of the main job sectors they focus on is industrial, and it seems from this that these agencies channel people into the freezing works.

### **Decisions and Advice**

Simply drifting into the freezing works is a particularly sticky method of becoming employed. Denise brought up a point that gave me an insight as to why some of the women would tell me directly or otherwise not to get stuck in the works.

Even though people moan about the work and the hours I don't see them leaving. I don't see them trying the better themselves, I don't see any of the girls that come through the freezing works better themselves.

This quote shows that Denise feels that the women and girls that start working at the freezing works should try to not become stuck, by saying that they should try and “better themselves”. This implies that being in the freezing works is a last resort job choice and that there are better things to be doing. It is also very gendered because she specifies that she is talking about girls not boys, or women and not men. Perhaps she is implying that she wishes for “better” things for women. Although I never asked them directly, I infer from this, as well as from similar advice from Tracey and Jen, that these women saw my enrolment in a post-graduate degree as me potentially trying to ‘better’ myself.

Denise also however sees women working at the freezing works as bettering themselves in a different way:

In the last two years, more women had bought [houses] through working at the freezing works, doing shit jobs, ... they have saved more and bought their first homes... They are focused on saving to buy the house.

Here Denise gives an example of what she believes is a positive or worthwhile use of time, specifically that working in the freezing works requires focus on bigger personal goals as opposed to getting stuck. There seems to be a drive to focus on things that are outside the freezing works in some way, be it material or otherwise, that will help people to become

unstuck or prevent it in the first place. Although focussing on earning and saving to buy first homes or the like seems to be another way in which people become stuck (as was the case for Claire), Denise seems to believe this to be more meaningful, rather than simply staying there without thinking about it. The very particular coping strategies that people use or recommend to deal with stuckness as described by these women speak to the ease at which others may find themselves stuck without the motivation to avoid it.

Older women are particularly concerned about young girls today still getting stuck by drifting into the freezing works, rather than having made a purposeful decision about why they are there and what they want to do with the money and having a particular financial goal. For example, another way girls get stuck is by becoming pregnant and having children:

The boys?! And that's what they, they are boys, some of these boys are getting up to 40 years old still live for the drinking and smoking ... a lot of these guys, or boys, are A-grade boners or B-grade boners, have got no focus they not interested in buying a house or even a nice car they've got no interest in travelling. The girls have got no interest in travelling but they ... are focused on saving to buy [a] house ... I've seen a lot of girls do that over the last couple of years ...and I just think well you've saved hard; you've gone without to do that you know. But in saying that I've seen a lot of young girls come in so gullible, look at an A-grade boner and think he's marvellous. Two months later she's pregnant.

The use of different vocabulary to describe people of different genders in different stages of life reflects how Denise values life choices which run counter to becoming stuck. She uses the word “boy” to describe men of any age to reflect what she would consider immature and unfocussed behaviour and attitudes. She uses this word to describe freezing workers that live paycheck to paycheck and season to season with no long-term outlook or goals. Denise also uses the word “girl” in a similar way to talk about women of any age or younger women at the beginning of their working lives. She then uses the phrase “young girl” to describe the women who come into the freezing works and then very quickly become pregnant. Her brief mention of this is framed in a way that communicates disappointment, which I inferred from her down-cast tone and also her argument that having a family to support leads to becoming stuck, the costs of childcare among other things grounding women where they are.

The third woman in the “stuck” group, Claire, gives a different and more positive perspective on the concept of being stuck, which is the contentedness she feels. Claire has been in the industry for over twenty-four years. She initially started in the boning room in a different

town and is currently working on the compliance team in her plant, which involves inspecting and testing the meat products to make sure they are fit for sale and consumption. I asked her how she came to be in the industry for as long she had:

*Did you intend to stay [in the freezing works for, so far, two and half decades]?*

No, same as everybody, you go there for a season... and I just never minded it so kept going back.

Claire argues that nobody really goes into the freezing works expecting to stay, rather the opposite. The argument is that most only intend to stay for a short while and then leave, but in the case of some they realise they are content with the work so are content to stay. She explained that after having kids she had to earn money to pay for a new kitchen, which she did, and then the next year she had another big purchase she had to make, and then by that point, she just kept going back because she never minded the work, and the money was good.

For this group of women, having the hindsight that comes along with many decades of work experience meant that they were the most contemplative of their experiences feeling stuck in the freezing works. They shared their own experiences but also pointed out warning signs in younger workers that they recognised as indicative of stuckness as well as examples of what they would like to see for young women instead.

## **Becoming Stuck**

With experience spanning seven to fifteen years, Yvonne, Joanna, Tracey, and Jen are in the process of becoming stuck in the meat industry, but are still mobile *within* the industry. While they do demonstrate a willingness and ability to shift jobs, it is almost always within the freezing works, either between positions or different plants. This group of women tend to describe their entrance to the industry similarly to the previous group, with stories of drifting in and a focus on money. However, they actively choose between a range of jobs within the industry.

Some women described their entrance to the meat industry as a ‘never’; they never knew what happened there, they never thought they would work there, or they never intended to stay once they got there. Joanna, for example, said:

I never thought I’d *ever* be in the freezing works, to be honest, I thought it was a guy’s job; never thought I’d see myself out there.

The drive for a better income was a key motivating factor for women in this group as in the last group. Yvonne told me about why younger and younger people may be entering the works, in addition to why most will stay:

A lot more teenagers now. Some of them are doing really well, and you can tell they're actually really quite into it, because ... they need the money, which we all do at the end of the day, because that's why we're there.

Yvonne explained money as the reason why the meat works are sticky, especially for younger people.

Unlike the older women who drifted into the industry, Tracey actively desired to work in the freezing works, as she wanted a new experience. She started out cleaning and aimed to get her foot in the door, but had no family connections. As she explains, she had managed a cleaning company that was contracted for cleaning the freezing works but not in the processing rooms themselves. She wanted to shift from cleaning to meat processing as it would give her an opportunity for mobility. It would enable her to learn something new in an industry she had become aware of. However, it was included in her cleaning contract that she was not allowed to transfer into the boning room as a process worker, so she changed companies:

I needed a job, and I knew how to clean freezing works, and I'd actually always wanted to transfer into a boning room but because I managed a cleaning company in [my hometown] ... the contract was they wouldn't hire us into the rooms. So that's part of the reason I went out there... Something different, [I wanted to] learn something different.

Tracey's experience shows how a prior connection to the freezing works is what led to her wanting to work in one, and how this familiarity and her desire for change drove her to apply to work in the boning room. Her entry to the works, or more specifically the boning room, still involved having a prior connection to the industry, despite not having family already employed there. She also highlighted that a primary factor in her choosing the boning room was "to learn something different". Both this and the fact that this interview was conducted during her last season at this particular freezing works (as she intends to work at another plant) indicates an opposition to stuckness.

Jen, who had around seven years' experience, also indicated, at least implicitly, that she desired change in her employment situation. She started as a packer when she started in the boning room and only two years later she became the 2IC (second in charge) for the boning room, supervising the pack end.

*How long have you worked there?*

Seven years I think, started as a cleaner.

*How long were you a cleaner [in the freezing works]?*

About a year, year and a bit.

*Were you always the supervisor?*

Nah walked in as a worker, next season [I] was lead hand, season after that [I] was 2IC.

Even though Jen had prior management experience, she explained that she started as a packer and worked her way up to leading hand, who helps the supervisor run the room. The boning room (at my plant at least) will have two blue hatters, which is what the supervisors are called due to wearing a blue hair net, as opposed to the white hair nets that the rest of the workers wear. The blue hatters are the head-room supervisor, in charge of the running of the room, the 2IC, the second blue hatter, assists the supervisor, and both will have 'leading hands' to assist them. In the plant where I worked the supervisor was typically focused on the 'top end' (the boners/sawmen end of the room), and the 2IC oversaw the pack end of the room. Jen indicated that she transferred into the boning room specifically because she wanted to learn something new, and within a couple of years she was in a management position again. When I interviewed her, Jen was excitedly leaving that freezing works to start the next season at a new plant where she was happy to go back to being a worker without having to worry about the stresses that come with being a supervisor. While Jen had a desire for mobility, the good pay and the ability to stay within the industry as opposed to having to start the job-seeking process over, meant that Jen could stay comfortably stuck, or more accurately secure in the freezing works.

Workers like Tracey and Jen who have been in the job for longer than five years, but not quite ten, seem to be on the fence about the idea of staying. They both acknowledged that the possibility of new opportunities was enticing. However, they also indicated the security of having a stable income as well as a group of co-workers with whom to socialise or commiserate over working conditions as being something to be content with.

When I brought up the idea of being stuck with this group of women, they again encouraged younger women not to get stuck. I got the impression from Tracey that if being stuck can be avoided, it should be, indicating a generally negative perception of stuckness:

Just don't get stuck in it, [in the freezing works]. Or if you do, go like your mother, go up through that line [i.e. get promoted] ... and out there [at that plant you work at] there's not really a lot of potential to [go up].

She takes a moment here to warn me against getting stuck. However, unlike the older women, she notes that if it comes about that I must stay in the freezing works, that I should keep climbing up the ladder – do anything to avoid getting stuck in the boning room for the rest of my life. Like the first group, women in the second group are often keenly aware of just how easy it is to become stuck in this industry and wish for the younger ones to strive for better.

This group of women often talked about change and articulated their reasons for wanting to change, typically referencing larger issues of working conditions and the physicality or materiality of the job. However, they also typically suggested jobs within the industry as alternatives, suggesting that the benefits of the freezing works such as financial security make the meat industry more sticky.

### **Currently Not Stuck**

This group of women, Nicole, Chloe, and I, are all former freezing workers with less than three years in the industry. Born in the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, this group of women was raised almost exclusively in neoliberal schooling with an emphasis on careers over jobs, mobility, and identity work, especially lookism, as a means to achieving this. Reasons for joining the freezing works were less passive than other groups, and all had already left at the time of their interviews. While the freezing works are “just a job” for the older women, for the younger ones they are only a stepping stone on the way to other more personally important life goals. This is reflected in the comparative lack of quotes from the younger women as their interviews more closely resembled work gossip sessions compared to discussions of job histories as with the older women.

Those of us in this group started these jobs for money, and while I got my job through family connections, the others did not have these and so entered by submitting an application. It was through my mum that I managed to get this job at all and subsequently set me on the path to getting out of the crisis mode that was my mental health. She knew I had been struggling and so offered to send me an application to work with her over the summer holidays. Even though this improved my mental health, I judged myself for being what felt like stuck in a job after job I did not like.

Likewise, during my first season, there were a few other university students, all girls, that were there specifically to earn enough money over the summer holidays to use over the following year for rent, bills, or fun. These girls, generally late teens to early twenties, all

started with a very explicit intention to quit at specific times. In fact, one girl who had done this multiple seasons in a row started to count down the months, weeks, days, and when it got down to it, the hours until her last day.

For the younger ones, Chloe, Nicole, and even myself, the idea of being stuck in the industry for a decade or longer was a negative one. Working at the works is seen as a liminal phase to the younger generations of workers – a point in a journey between student and career woman, rather than a destination. It seemed growing up in a neoliberal era that we were all encouraged to always be moving upward to bigger and better things as the second group of women seemed to be doing. There seemed, at least to me, to be an implicit understanding of what a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ job was to have. We seemed to be taught a binary that a career is good, and a job is bad, and specific occupations can be sorted into one of these two categories. It almost feels as though the only reason someone would be in a job is that they are waiting to find their career, or that they have failed in some profound, existential way.

I went to an all-girls high school (years 7 to 13 or first to the seventh form) where educational achievement was valued. Neoliberal subjectivity and the expectation of geographical and social mobility seemed to be built into my schooling, so that we as young women felt obligated to “be something bigger than all this” and “make something” of ourselves. This schooling did nothing to curb the feelings of failure when you have not in fact become a raging success before the age of thirty. Working at the freezing works, or any kind of industrial work or trades was not presented as a career choice for young women at my school.

Nicole felt that ‘outsiders’ look down on freezing workers precisely because of the negative understanding of stuckness – the cycle of working a season and going on a benefit in the off-season and repeat ad infinitum.

Everybody looks down their noses at freezing workers because they’re just no-hopers because they work a season [then] go on benefit. Well, you know some of those old timers are doing so frickin well for themselves. Gavin’s been there, he’s 40, he’s been there since he was 18, he is a couple months away from freehold on his house and he's a 24/7 single dad.

Nicole uses the phrase “no-hoper” in a similar way to how Denise used the word boy, however, she framed her argument in a positive way by defending the workers who get stuck. This is perhaps reflective of the fact that she only worked two seasons before moving to a different job altogether, and therefore left before becoming stuck. This explanation from Nicole is an

example of a positive frame of stuckness, for this man the focus is on how well he has managed during his time and the good he has accomplished for himself. Having not become stuck herself, Nicole is more positive than Denise, who accomplished the same thing as Gavin, but who seemed to focus on things outside of her accomplishments, the things she wished she could have done instead of or as well as being a freezing worker.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

While the idea that being stuck in the freezing works may initially seem to come about after decades of working there, from the interviews with the women it emerged that the potential to become stuck can be seeded from the outset of employment. In interviews I asked the women about how they came to work in the freezing works in the first place to see how these various factors may have contributed to their stuckness or lack thereof. I found that the women's reasons for applying aligned roughly with their age groups and experience levels.

Looking at their reasons gives a major insight into some of the reasons why people may become stuck in the first place. Looking further, however, the stories the women tell about the small facts of how they came to end up in the works, are different depending on their experience levels and how stuck they may or may not be. The older women's experiences were more passive, telling stories of how getting a job without career aspirations was just what was done. Many younger women seemed to have specific goals or time-frames in mind for when they would leave. The middle group of women were somewhere in between the two extremes whereby they were actively choosing different jobs in the same industry. There was a commonality among all of the women, simply put, the freezing works are a quick way to earn some money, which speaks to the large issue of financial security. While it is not an easy job by any means if you are physically able you have a reliable, regular source of income. For the women I spoke to, this was able to assist in them funding comfortable lifestyles as well as providing for their families. These factors prove sticky for many women.

While stuckness may be triggered by the entrance into the freezing works, it develops more nuanced meanings when working on the production line and with co-workers. In the next chapter, I will discuss the experience of being stuck in the meat works and what the various interpersonal relationships look like. These interpersonal relationships further help make the job sticky as well as make being stuck more worthwhile.



## CHAPTER 6

# BEING STUCK: RELATIONSHIPS IN THE FREEZING WORKS

...

*Sitting in the small, ever-unchanging dining room at work with speckled, water-stained ceiling panels and linoleum flooring, I watched the cleaner come around and wipe down some tables and sweep the floor. Sitting at my table in the very middle of the room in my white overalls, I had my Miss Brill<sup>6</sup> moment. I watched as different people came and went, always at the same times, always doing the same things – the boys who carpooled together rolled their smokes by the bench at the front of the room before going outside for a cigarette; the 2IC came in from the smoke shed, empty coffee cup in hand, to go and set up the room for night shift; the headroom supervisor would pop in looking for the boners to take attendance; some of the dayshift slaughter board guys will finish their last smoko and go back up to the slaughterboard for their last run<sup>7</sup>.*

*My free-spirited workmate would come in and sit down and the conversation turned into one of our regular, pre-work therapeutic chats. We unpacked what it was like to work with these people. We would discuss work ethic and life in general in this “small, dysfunctional family”, as my mum often describes the freezing works, reflecting Webb’s (2019) description of whakawhanaungatanga and camaraderie in the freezing works. By being in that space my own disposition of preferring quiet was nurtured as a disposition of preferring the cold and lonely yet busy work that happens in the freezing works.*

*Everyone was wearing the same, short-sleeved white overalls over casual street clothes, yellow-soled white gumboots, standard issue bright red earmuffs, and white hair nets (some were wearing blue hair nets to signify that the wearers were supervisors, and others were wearing red hair nets to signify that the wearers were ‘broomies’, a person cleaning up, clearing floors, throwing away waste, changing bins and so on).*

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<sup>6</sup> Miss. Brill, was a short story I had read in high school English class about an older woman who went to her local park to people watch. It was written by Katherine Mansfield (Mansfield, 1922).

<sup>7</sup> A run is what we would call the time during work in the rooms, between breaks, typically two hours.

...

## **Introduction**

In the previous chapter, I considered how women come to be stuck in the freezing works. This chapter discusses the day-to-day of what it is like to work in the freezing works once you are stuck there. Everyday life in the works is shaped by the organisation of industrial meat production therefore it is pertinent to briefly describe the process of meat production. This is driven by numbers and getting the largest number of animals processed at the highest possible quality. The process as it relates to the purposes of this chapter can be broken into three main parts: the yards, slaughterboard, and the boning room. The yards are where the animals are stunned and led through to the slaughterboard. The slaughterboard (also known as the killing floor) is where the animals are slaughtered, and the pelts, offal, heads and so on are removed. The carcasses are then sent to the boning room where they will be sawed and boned into various cuts of meat which are then packed and shipped to various supermarkets overseas.

Some of the women I spoke to were not currently based in the boning room, however, all of them had been meat packers there at one point or another. This chapter will focus primarily on the relationships between workers in the boning room in order to paint a specific picture of what it is like to work in the freezing works. While the previous chapter was organised by three different categories of stuckness, women in all of these categories have worked in the boning room and have similar experiences of their time there, so this chapter is instead organised by some of the main factors that shape freezing work life. However, the three categories of women were more or less interested in these factors depending on their life stage, with older women being more concerned with familial and gender relationships and younger women without children who do not intend to stay more concerned with the day-to-day relations of the production line. As with being stuck in the freezing works in general, these things are not strictly positive or negative, as they can be perceived as both or either depending on the individuals and relationships involved. Many of these small facts of daily life in the freezing works further help to make the job “sticky”. While in the last chapter I showed that financial security made staying alluring, this chapter will demonstrate that the daily experience of working in the freezing works is not too bad, meaning staying for the money is bearable or not too onerous.

First, I will introduce some of the ways that gender shapes – and does not shape – working in the freezing works. Gender most powerfully shapes work at the structural level, but

is less shaping on how women act on a daily basis. The positions that women most commonly occupy are the most lowly paid. This reflects a belief that the women themselves adhere to, that certain jobs are women's jobs due to the need for fine detail work and others are men's jobs due to the need to be "brutal". However, women do not need to perform femininity in the way that they do in "lookist" customer service roles. Secondly, I will look at the different facets of working with family and around other families, and how this affects the day-to-day running and experience of the boning room for family members and non-family members. Thirdly I will discuss the relationships between people on-line, which is the word used to describe working anywhere along the production line. I will discuss how camaraderie between workers shapes these relationships and how these relationships shape the room while it is actively processing. Other aspects of relationships at work that I will focus on are the divisions among the workers as well as the relationships between the workers and the companies they work for. The aspects of working in the freezing works that I will discuss make up the small facts of daily life for the workers including the creation and maintenance of camaraderie through joking and 'us vs them' dynamics. These dynamics work to make the job okay, meaning that people stick with it.

## **Gender**

The highest-paid jobs in the freezing works – A-grade jobs such as butchers or boner/sawmen in the processing rooms (slaughter and boning) – are occupied by men. This is something that, as far as I can tell from the literature, has always been the case. The gender makeup of the freezing works was more diverse than I had initially anticipated, in that there are men and women in both the processing rooms. However, on both the slaughterboard and in the boning room the A-grade and most B-grade jobs are occupied by men, while the C-grade jobs are occupied by women. A-grade jobs are located at the top end of the production line in both rooms and so the space and the work ends up actually being gendered.

At the beginning of this research project, therefore, I had expected gender relations to be a daily concern, and that women would be fighting a daily battle in a patriarchal workplace. However, while gender structures the daily lives of the women, dictating where they will work and consequently how much they will get paid, they rarely narrated their work lives as a site of struggle. As for the younger women the focus was on day-to-day interpersonal struggles, it was primarily only the older women who reflected on the unfairness of the division of labour.

Jobs that were closer to the deconstruction of carcasses and raw meat, and that involved a need for strength and speed, were understood by the women I spoke to as ‘masculine’ jobs. Jobs that are more distant from raw meat were regarded as feminine jobs. The language used to describe certain jobs was frequently gendered, such as “brutal” and “rough” to describe jobs on the slaughter board compared to “attention to detail” and “delicate” to describe most work in the boning room, revealing an implicit acceptance of the idea of masculinised and feminised work. Denise explained that the end of the room where animals get killed is a more physically and emotionally difficult place than the boning room, and uses a story from when the plant first started to process bobby calves approximately ten to fifteen years ago to argue that butchering is a man’s job:

Yeah, but like you see the men, that’s all in a day’s work for them, you know. And I’ve heard some of them talking, especially [when] we first done the bobbies, ones of the butchers come down and said, “oh that little bastard woke up when I was ripping the skin off” and I thought Oh my God it was alive!

*Just such a casual [comment] to throw out – ripping the skin off.*

You know and they’re going to have their lunch and so I said, ‘what’d you do?’ He said ‘oh I twist the neck’ you know oh my giddy aunt so she’s just of the things that they say but I suppose that’s why they have men [do] those jobs because [they] have got a stronger stomach; they’re more brutal!

Denise illustrates what she understands as a difference between men and women as she explains that men are inherently more brutal than women and so are better suited to the gorier jobs, and have less of a moral or ethical issue with the reality of actively participating in the mass slaughter of animals. She explains that not only are the men okay with the violence of their jobs, but the way they referred to the animals was also more brutal, using words like “little bastard”. This can also be seen as a distancing mechanism that makes it easier to deal with the idea of killing animals daily. Using distancing language may also have the effect of demonstrating the attitude expected of the men that slaughter the animals, setting the tone and reflecting a “rough as guts” masculinity performed among the slaughtermen. Denise also said:

If you go up the slaughter board there are no woman from [where] the carcass comes in, to the pelt pulling – and it’s *quite* a distance. Like a small in space but it is quite a lot of people. Yeah

you'll find no women are there and a lot of those jobs women are capable of doing but it's no women there, even today there's no women there in the area - all males.

Denise reiterates here that the workers in this room are all men, but she does argue that despite these jobs being more "brutal" women are equally capable as men of doing them. There is an implication that despite the fact that women are just as capable of doing the job, there is a pre-existing bias towards hiring and promoting men which can be traced back decades.

However, being seen to be more suited to the slaughterboard results in men getting better pay. Jobs at the top end of the production line are A-grade jobs and these jobs are in a higher pay grade than the other B-grade and C-grade jobs in the boning room and so the highest-paid employees are almost entirely men and the lowest-paid employees are mostly women. Denise told me that she had sat down one day and calculated the pay difference between A and C graders to be roughly five dollars an hour. A-grade jobs are also the most secure positions, because they require a great deal of training on how to use very dangerous equipment. The financial security afforded by being in this highly skilled position makes it more likely for A-graders to stay in that position. They are the highest position available on-line, with only supervisors and administrative positions outside of the production line entirely above them.

Denise demonstrates frustration towards the fact that women are not provided equal access to job progression as men:

It's harder for a woman to get back to the saw and they have to work harder to get there, whereas men seem to be able to come in and cruise right through... I feel that we place second to a man, I really do, but that's just me and depends how strong a pusher you are... I mean a man can walk in and say "yeah I can bone" and they'll put him straight on the knife, a woman can come in and say "yeah I can bone" and they'll say "yeah well you're packing", that simple, no argument about it... They say there's no favouritism in the room, but you and I know for sure there is.

Frances, although she does not work in the boning room, nor is she on a pay grade (as those in supervisory roles are paid via a different method to those in the processing rooms) said the same thing: "they ask a man 'can you use a knife?' and they put him on A-grade". It is easy to see why C-graders feel negatively about the A-grade sawmen and the B-grade boners.

However, another point of difference is between women's work experience in the freezing works and other jobs, particularly with customer service roles, especially in the sense

that there was little to no ‘lookism’ involved. There was no requirement to dress up particularly femininely or market yourself as a caring customer service employee, wearing a fake smile all day. The difference between this workplace and the incredibly performative job of fast food was day and night. In my fast food job, we were told that customer satisfaction is paramount and relies on a good presentation. The uniform for a freezing worker by contrast is strictly regulated to adhere to international regulations, to allow us to ship to certain countries. Each country that orders meat from New Zealand has certain standards the plant must follow for them to accept and pay for the product. This means the opportunities for distinction are decidedly low. No one would be specially dressed up, most men and women opting for comfortable sweatpants, a long-sleeved top of some kind, woollen socks and scuffs, the women having their hair up in a quick bun style. Little to no makeup (technically not allowed due to health and safety, but it was not uncommon to see women with simple makeup on), no jewellery (again due to health and international regulations). Those that wore short-sleeved tops had tattoos that they did not bother covering up, whereas often customers in fast food would refuse to be served by workers with tattoos, and often employers would tell workers to cover up out of fear of this happening. During the initial covid outbreak, and each subsequent lockdown and red alert level, when it became mandatory to wear facemasks, these opportunities became even less – it was only the eyes and maybe the hands (if not wearing gloves) showing.

The gendered frameworks of work in the freezing works, a doubled-edged sword, structure virtually all aspects of work life, including what jobs women are assigned to, how much they get paid, and how these factors shape work life overall. However, the issue of gender was only discussed by the older women and generally only in response to the questions I asked. They did not talk about such things on a daily basis. The younger women did not articulate a belief that this was a sexist working environment, and the lack of lookism in comparison to other jobs they have had may contribute to this perception. Although women get paid comparatively less than men in freezing works, everyone gets paid comparatively higher than non-freezing workers. The gender makeup of the freezing works affects not only the security and therefore the stickiness of certain positions, but also the interpersonal relationships between workers. Using the extended metaphor of family found in the literature about the industry in the latter part of the twentieth century is one way that gender becomes more visible in the freezing works.

## Family

As discussed in previous chapters, family connections have been one of the more common recruitment methods into the freezing works, both past and present. Here I will discuss how family connections shape and structure daily work. Having a high concentration of family members working together provides financial security for families, but it does seem to make the work uncomfortable to a degree for those not in these family units. When it comes to this industry one of the most well-known aspects in the literature is the familial connections within it, which has remained virtually intact over the last few decades (Webb, 2019). When going over the literature and coming across the idea of a workplace family, it is very easy to have a romantic image of a picture-perfect, happy family. I propose thinking of an arguably more realistic family metaphor, in that the freezing works are similar to a family reunion; it is messy, there is drama, there is discrimination and racism and sexism, but the overarching theme is that everyone is in it together, for better or worse. That being said the large number of kinship groups that work in the freezing works also bring along pre-existing family dynamics that have the potential to affect the workplace.

There were many mother-daughter pairs (including me and my mother) at the plant at which I worked. Many of the mothers, including my own, worked at the plant for well over half a decade before their daughters started working there. This adds to the relationship dynamic at work, in that some of these young and inexperienced girls and young women, are not just ‘the new girl’, but are ‘someone’s daughter’. This perhaps contributed to the feeling of the freezing works being a ‘family’ in a more realistic sense, as opposed to the capitalist or corporate view of companies as being a family. The petty in-fighting, the complaining and whinging, and fights and the forgiveness felt more like a ‘real’ kinship because almost all the workers were part of close kinship groups or community ties in some way.

Although not all of my participants entered the works through family connections, I found that there were many people in the boning room, especially young women, that came in through or at the same time as a family member. This seemed to be especially common among the Pacific Islander families at my plant, and after I asked Nicole about this she said:

Oh yeah! especially the Islanders families, like it’s the whole lot. Like as terrible as it is if somebody died you lost half your fuckin room... It was predominantly the Islander families that would have you know “it’s my cousin”, but in actual fact you just don’t know if they’re actually related or not, but they *are* a family unit... But it was quite cool seeing the camaraderie

there sometimes like I remember ... was it somebody's birthday or something, everybody bought in food, and I was trying food that I've never tried before. What was that one that Islanders always have? Chop suey?

Nicole's reflection on family units reflects the situation of family members putting their foot in the door for other family members, which I saw at my workplace, at least in the boning room. However, a lot of the families that I saw in the work had entered at the same time rather than one after the other. In many of these cases, it was not uncommon for there to be a family member or friend in a higher position, for example in the office where they are able to give a direct character reference for the applicants. Nowadays, there is almost always a need for more freezing workers, especially for knife hands and sawmen, so these direct connections can go a long way to reassure the headroom supervisors of the kind of workers these people will be, even if they do not work in the same positions. They may feel more comfortable as they already have a read on the work ethic and personability of the one family member and can infer from that what the new worker will be like, as opposed to a complete stranger. For example, as my mum had an already established rapport at work, it was easier for me to fit in.

Again, it was my older participants who had more to say about family relationships, as they were the parents of children in the freezing works, whereas the younger women with no family connections in the industry were more concerned with friendships. I asked Tracey if the plant she worked at has always had a lot of families working there, and she responded:

I think that one has [always been a family business]. [...] But I think it's just sort of like everything, some kids follow in their parent's footsteps.

Likewise, Nicole noticed the same thing at a different plant. Although she personally had no familial connections, she noted that there were a lot of families and that typically it was the Pacific Islanders who had the most relatives at work.

Most of the women I interviewed who had children had gotten those children jobs at some point and so had had to work with their children. For them, it was usually difficult to navigate the identity of being a freezing worker and a parent. They felt uncomfortable as what they would do as a freezing worker was different to the way they might act as a parent in different contexts. For example, Joanna and her daughter were both packers:

I don't like [working with family] at all, but that's just me because I kept looking to see what [my daughter] was doing, if she was alright, if she was piling up ... Some people can do it obviously, you know the room's mostly family... It's easy for some but not for me.

As a mother, Joanna is concerned for her daughter. With the rest of her co-workers, she does not have that same apprehension, but still does feel a similar familial affection: “you spend more time there than at home really...so I feel like the room sometimes is my family ... not my family but they’re part of an extended [family]”.

Yvonne also had children in her workplace. Her two sons worked in the same plant, but adjacent to the boning room, rather than in it, doing the whole carcasses (packing whole mutton and lamb carcasses for export to be further processed at their overseas destination). The carcasses are kept in the same or adjacent chillers to the ones that the boning room uses, so it is not uncommon for both the whole carcass team and the boning room to be processing at the same time. I told her that I had often wondered if people knowing who my mother is, and if the higher position she occupies affected how I was treated or perceived by others – you become known as ‘her daughter’ or ‘her son’. In response, Yvonne said “my boys get that too! [People at work are] like ‘I see your son’s working here’ and I go ‘both of them are here’ ”. Yvonne therefore confirmed that people do associate children of workers with their parents, but framed it in a positive way.

Some employers give workers free food at Christmas time, in Yvonne’s plant each worker gets a free leg of lamb. This means that households with more than one worker will get more than one leg of lamb. I had initially believed that I would be repulsed by the idea of eating meat once I found out how it was processed, a belief which turned out to be untrue, and in response to this Yvonne said:

Nah not here, darling! I really enjoy getting my lamb at Christmas time, [because I get] three legs of lamb, cause the boys.

This can be related back to the financial security and stickiness of having multiple family members on the job. Yvonne’s household received three substantial pieces of meat which can last for multiple days’ meals as well as keep in the freezer for a long time.

Frances, who has had children in the freezing works, has a more negative view of familial connections. She corroborated the idea of relatedness making it easier to get your foot in the door but argued that familial connections negatively affect workers who are not part of these families.

When we started, [it was] all Joseph’s family, all John Miller’s family, you know? And it was wrong because half of them were useless, but they got there because of who they were, which is real kick in the ass for everyone else trying to get work.

*So they get bumped in the queue?*

Mhmm

She was concerned that nepotism had the potential to negatively affect those who were more suited to the job but were not related to someone of importance and so not given priority. She emphasises how “useless” the workers who got bumped in the queue were compared to others who got looked over. Due to the relatively linear flow of work on-line in the boning room, if one worker is unable to keep up with the high demands of the freezing works, it affects everyone’s ability to process to the best possible standards. Ultimately, the paycheck comes down to how many carcasses can be processed, and with each carcass processed comes with it a bonus depending on the specific carcass and its weight and grade. So if there are workers slowing everyone down either because of mistakes or inability to keep the same pace, fewer carcasses can be processed, and so everyone in the room will get less pay than they otherwise would, had all the workers been more competent.

Family connections can be a doubled edged sword for both those with those ties and those outside the family units. On the one hand they can be a vital way for households to have multiple income streams, as well as providing security in times of need. On the other hand, concerns of nepotism favouring familiar workers as opposed to better-fitting workers raises concerns of loss of income due to any number of potential on-line mistakes or blunders. In either case, having family ties in the freezing works makes it much more secure for family members and so it is easier to stay stuck in the works where those connections exist compared to other jobs where they do not.

### **On-line in the Boning Room**

The relationships between the packers are largely shaped by the material realities of the production line: what cuts are being processed, how fast the room is going, and where along the line you are working. Some packers find themselves stuck on one or two stations, due to being particularly good or experienced at these jobs, which means people will usually have a section of the room that ‘belongs’ to them where they have precedence over how things are done. This introduces a further dimension to stuckness in that people are not just stuck in the freezing works but also stuck in particular jobs therein. The women who spoke about relationships among the packers were mostly the younger women. With no family concerns, they were more interested in discussing the day-to-day stress of being at work and how the production line directly affected these stresses. Relationships along the production line are a

double-edged sword in that the positive and negative aspects of these relationships make the job sticky.

### **Stuck or Secure as a Meat Packer**

Being stuck as a packer can mean being stuck on particular jobs. This brings up the topic of stuckness again, as many workers found themselves doing the same job day after day. Again, this is not an unalloyed negative. Certain jobs along the line are more or less supervised and valued, and sometimes workers can be working alongside their friends or people they like. Chloe, who only had around three seasons of experience, usually worked weighing and packing the racks as well as in the chillers and scanning the tickets. She explained to me that when people are too slow, depending on the job, they might get kicked off and moved somewhere else in the room, rather than getting help at all. She added that if she looked over and saw the person on that job who replaced her also struggling to keep up that it “feels real good”. She argued that for others doing more supervised jobs there was a higher chance of being removed altogether, at least for that shift. Additionally, as these less supervised jobs were more highly valued in some senses, the employees were typically those that could be more relied on for one reason or another. For example, if an employee was known to be leaving by next season they would not be trained on these stations at all, and if someone had a connection to a well-known and liked employee (for example a family member or good friend) they might be more likely to be trained there. If a person was especially skilled at a job they would be valued for that job and could end up being stuck there for the whole season.

I mentioned to Joanna that getting stuck in one position can be quite boring and monotonous, but she provided some insight as to why there is less day-to-day rotation.

Sometimes because of the people that aren't turning up all the time it's you find yourself stuck on certain jobs because they've gotta put people where they're good at to keep the room going... And it doesn't mean that the other people aren't good at it, it just means that they're more experienced at that job. Like they wouldn't put me packing racks if they wanted to go fast... They would put me probably [packing] shoulders or main scales where I'm more efficient you know.

Joanna shows how some freezing workers will use the word stuck to describe their situation in a way that is neither strictly negative nor positive – there is a security and contentedness to being stuck. Being stuck on a job may lead to increased instances of RSI for example, but as

Joanna explained, there is a security in knowing that you are stuck there because you are more skilled, reliable, and competent than most other workers.

Although from my perspective being stuck was annoying due to the lack of variety and rotation, there was also a sense of pride that came with it. We would joke about certain people living at a certain job in the room; “you basically live there!” or “oh she’s back home” and so on. This is another example of workers framing stuckness as something other than negative, as words like “live” and “home” have positive connotations. If you live at a specific station, it means that the supervisors put more trust into you not to make mistakes which take time and money to fix. It means the supervisors do not need to worry about that particular station and can put more energy into other parts of their jobs. Getting stuck also allowed workers to group themselves together with other workers that lived on the same station as friends. It also allows freezing workers the time and space to adjust their workstations to their specific preferences and allows them to develop and employ methods that work for them.

Being stuck as a meat packer, where a worker is on the line, their abilities, relationships to their co-workers and supervisors, and what cuts are being processed all structure the workday. This can lead to fun and pride in one’s own ability as being put on a job that is seen as more difficult and self-supervising signals good ability and reliability. Whereas, being stuck on a job that is more highly supervised and looked down upon due to ease or monotony can lead to stress and interpersonal conflict, as well as boredom and injury. Being stuck on a particular job is a double-edged sword in that it indicates ability and can be seen as a sign of freedom, but also the lack of rotation can be dangerous. This highlights the nuance in the idea of stuckness as it can also reflect security for those experiencing it.

### **Grubby Banter or Anger and Aggression?**

The performance of the workers in a room affects how much money you make per shift, the primary reason people are in the job in the first place. Any stoppage along the line affects tally, which is the word for the number of carcasses processed. There is typically a set number of carcasses to be processed by each room for each shift. The full tally for the plant I worked at, which only had one chain and one saw for the primal cuts, was usually 2,500 for a ten-hour shift, with about five to seven hundred carcasses in each two-hour run depending on if it was mutton (three to six hundred on average) or lamb (five to seven hundred on average). If the total number of carcasses for that shift and day is completed then everyone can go home early, but if something goes wrong and the room has to stop or slow down, then it will take longer to finish. Furthermore, a part of freezing workers’ pay is calculated based on how many carcasses

are processed with a carcass bonus depending on the number, type, and weight of the whole carcass before they are sawed (the bonus is calculated according to each carcass rather than all of them over the shift). If something happens and the room has to stop for a considerable length of time, and we cannot catch up, this means that fewer carcasses can be processed per shift, and thus the room may not be able to meet tally.

Stoppages along the line can therefore add strain to relationships between workers and responses can be performed in either a friendly way or an angry way. Pranks are sometimes used to express frustration or aggression at other workers, highlighting another example of how things are ambiguous between conflict and camaraderie. A common prank that has been documented in the literature is meat throwing (see for example Boraman, 2019). When I was working as a packer meat throwing typically happened for a couple of reasons, which would differ depending on the two parties involved. If they were both friends, it was a jovial signal of boredom or camaraderie. If they were not friends, it would typically be to signal that the person ahead was missing meat they needed to pick up – the person that was doing the throwing would be signalling they are frustrated that they need to handle more meat and bones than they otherwise should be. This was also typically accompanied by a loud “pick up your shit!” and if ignored for long enough “I’ll throw it at your head next time” (this did not actually happen from what I remember, but the threat is usually enough for someone else to come by and give the person a hand). Pranks can help to make the day okay and the job sticky. In fact, not having pranks or teasing directed your way can indicate a lack of friends which leads to being more likely to become unstuck. This behaviour also shows that freezing works are not a ‘lookist’ type of job whereby workers have to worry about smiling and being nice and polite, as a primary form of bond-building relies on ‘vulgarity’ on some level.

### *Anger and Aggression*

Around half of my participants were packers at the time of the interviews, and all had packing experience from when they first started in the freezing works. Joanna and I both typically worked on the main scales, at the end of the production line in the boning room, where the packed cartons are labelled, strapped, and sent to the next room, where they are kept in a freezer or chiller before being sent away. We had been talking about the stress of being at the end of the line when the whole room is slowed down or even stopped due to a malfunction in our computer or equipment. The computers on site all use the same programme, which is managed offsite in the North Island. If something in this system crashes then the boxes of

packaged meat cannot be labelled and therefore cannot leave the room. The other piece of equipment that may break down at the end of the line is the strapper, which straps the closed and labelled cartons together, ready for shipping. Often the plastic strapping would get stuck or the roll would run out and have to be changed, which takes a few minutes. If the room is going quite fast, then the cartons get backed up very quickly – a problem that slowly makes its way up the line. It is not uncommon to see full cartons stacked four high unable to be pushed further down the various belts, which leads to what we called ‘mountains’ of meat. If the mountains got too high this might lead to meat falling on the floor which would mean the headroom supervisor would have to call for the sawman to stop, agitating the rest of the room due to losing good progress. Joanna and I discussed frustration at being blamed for this:

People ... more jobs up the line can't see what the strapper's doing you know like “well why are we stopping? Useless” and it's like “um [it's the] machine!”

*The computer only goes so fast, and there's only two holes in the wall.*

But they can't see what's going on, so they're like “ugh useless people, put someone else on there”. Well, it's still gonna happen.

*...When you haven't done it before you're like ‘why are they going so slow? Surely, it's just a label and you push [the box] out’, and then you do it and you're like ‘oh I understand why [the people on main scales] yell now, I understand why’.*

Like Sophie said the other day, do you remember when she said, “it'd be easy on main scales the whole room waits for you”, and it's like “ah okay,” what do you say to that? That is true in the sense, but stress and the pressure of knowing that everyone's looking at you to see if you can fix it or not or if you gotta wait for an engineer or ‘oh my god this is gonna be ages’ and then I think about tally – “well it *was* gonna be an early night, now it's not”.

People working further up the line will be quick to blame those working on whichever station has slowed or broken down, despite it not being the person's fault. Both Joanna and Nicole talked about how people will turn on each other when the line gets stressful, and both see it as inevitable. However, Joanna has developed strategies for coping with this as she has been working in the freezing works for longer than Nicole, who discussed stressful times she experienced in retrospect with few to no coping skills.

I had asked Nicole what her first job had been after she started at the freezing works, which was picking up the hind shanks off the belt, weighing, capping, and bagging them. She said they had been going full tally (or full speed). At her plant, this meant nine and a half

carcasses going through the main saw a minute. Nicole talked openly about how stressful this is:

It's quite an odd place. What I learned during that time on shanks was pretty much a- it's either feast or famine. You get help when you need it or you're like harassed and belittled because you can't keep up, and generally, when you're getting harassed and belittled for it, the room's running just that fast everybody's getting snowed under and nobody has time, so they get stressed out from having to leave what they're doing to come and help you.

In this context being harassed would involve having missed meat thrown back up the belt and getting yelled at and sworn at. Throwing meat back up the belt is usually done for a specific purpose. Everyone along the line has specific pieces of meat or bones they need to pick off the belt and pack into bags, but if some of this is missed it has the potential to make the jobs of those further down the line more difficult. The missed meat will always come back to you, in a large tub filled with the missed meat. This will have to be packed while also still picking the meat off the belt, which is very difficult as your attention is split between picking and packing, making it more likely that you will miss meat on the belt. It is easier if the specific meat that was missed is thrown back up the belt to be picked up by the relevant person, but sometimes particularly frustrated workers end up throwing the meat with some force or aim it directly at the back of the worker, sometimes shouting "pick up your shit" or "pick up your fuckin meat". Nicole does not spend a lot of time talking about how much this may or may not have hurt or offended her. She mentions it as being a memorable moment for her, but that it is an inevitable part of being a meat packer in the freezing works. Joanna also theorised stress as being a contributing factor to the harassment and belittling that Nicole discussed:

Just breathe you know. It's the stress I think that gets people. Me and Ana, our thing is you know sometimes it can be really stressful and Ana will yell out "one box at a time Joanna!" ... [People] getting shitty, trying to push the boxes on to the scale and you're trying to push them back because you can't weigh one box when two boxes are on [the scale]. And then you hear this "one box at a time" and you just sort of think 'yeah, that's all you can do'... And it just sort of like calms me down little bit... well I can't do any more than what I'm doing now.

Joanna has around six more years of experience in the freezing works than Nicole. While they both understand that people will yell or throw things or so on due to their own stress, Joanna finds it easier to ignore this and has found the reassurance from Ana to be a comforting coping mechanism.

### Grubby Banter

Similarly, these potentially aggressive acts can be performed as pranks or joking around, which also helps with camaraderie building. Working on the line is a shit job: it is boring and monotonous, repetitive, and stressful, and there is significant pressure to keep up the pace and quality. Workers have a multitude of strategies to deal with this. Pranks and joking around are daily occurrences that help create bonds between workers as a reaffirmation of friendship. These bonds make the job less shit and therefore sticky, to the point that if people do not have these bonds with co-workers, they are more likely to become unstuck.

Not every worker is included in the banter and pranks that create camaraderie. Chloe was somewhat of an outcast. Generally, she kept to herself at work, was not part of any friendship groups that extended past work hours, and did not enjoy their workplace gossip. She said that the workers are not on the same wavelength as her and had different goals and reasons for being there than she did. Chloe mainly worked scanning tickets, which are barcodes that are hung around the legs of the carcasses by the graders on the slaughterboard, and need to be scanned before any processing happens, in order to know the precise number and type of carcasses that have been processed and when, as this is how certain pay bonuses are calculated. She was therefore working in the chillers, right between the packers and boners in a side hallway, which is a part of the boning room that gives more opportunity to avoid co-workers (or fewer opportunities to participate in pranks and banter). Due to the order of operations on the line, she started and finished fifteen minutes before everyone else and went out to their breaks before everyone else. Therefore, the people in this position are not able to interact with the rest of the workers at smoko breaks. A clear sign of Chloe's distance from the camaraderie that might have made the job stickier for her was that when she quit, she was not hosed down on her last day (an experience I also had on my last day). Hosing down is a long-standing tradition in the freezing works, where people will hose another worker down with large hoses in and around the room which are typically used for cleaning the rooms. This is a common farewell or sometimes birthday ritual or prank that has existed for decades in the industry (Boraman, 2019), and usually, workers spend the whole day talking about how excited they are to hose their outgoing colleague down. Chloe was more than happy to avoid this custom: "nah I just left, I was out of there". The fact that people like Chloe do not get pranked at all demonstrates pranks are reaffirmations of friendship that help make and maintain bonds between co-workers.

Yvonne (a day shift boner/sawman) told me that pranks and banter are vital aspects of making working such long hours bearable. I asked her about Rick who has worked at Yvonne's plant for many years and who is known for pulling 'childish' pranks. One that I remember was that he had made a rude sign which he put up in full view of the whole room, on the wall in the middle of the room for a sawman that was switching shifts that read "male on male, cheap rates, call Lucas for a really good time". When he got bored, he would dangle fishhooks made from cut-up cardboard with a little meat on the end from the upstairs box room. I did not think anything of it at the time but later realised this could be signalling a sexist attitude towards the women on the floor below. Yvonne refers to her and Rick as being grubby in the sense that both of them have a dirty sense of humour.

[He has] got a good sense of humour. Grubby. I'm grubby too so I get along with him quite well... You [need something to lift your spirits]. Can't be dreary all the time.

She discusses how camaraderie makes the day-to-day work life bearable, which is something that Boraman (2019) mentions as being commonplace as a way to make the job more bearable in the freezing works in the 1970s. This is a further example of the freezing works being a site that lacks the 'lookism' of many customer service roles, as grubby humour goes against the politeness that many employers want to curate for their businesses. As well as breaking the monotony, these pranks gave the women in the boning room a common enemy to bond against as they would complain of his pranks being annoying at best and disruptive at worst.

Yvonne demonstrates that while people may get frustrated, this is expressed within the bonds of camaraderie. Whenever the pack-end would go under (meaning they are unable to keep up), packers would usually blame the sawman – it is when you look up the belt and see the person pushing carcasses through the saw at a certain speed that you put the blame on them for going so fast as the speed the sawman is going will dictate how fast the rest of the room needs to go to keep up. During a shift, the sawmen will be told how fast to go, or "where to go to", as in what number of carcasses they have to process. The sawman might be told "go to six-hundred" which would mean "in this two-hour run, you need to get 600 carcasses through the main saw". As the sawman have the skills and knowledge required for that position, they know how fast the room is capable of processing that number, but also generally must go as fast as the supervisor has indicated despite what is going on along the rest of the line. Yvonne, who started her job in the freezing works as a packer, and later became a sawman, has experienced the frustration from both ends:

Nobody very rarely yells at me though, I must say. They know better. I've had it a couple of times, 'if you do not like what I'm doing, you go sort it out with the cunt upstairs, because she, [the supervisor], is the one that told me where to go. So, you go see her, don't yell at me!' ... It happens to all the sawmen, and I've even done it while I'm boning: 'what the fuck are you doing dickhead?' You know, you gotta use your brain sometimes. They may have told you to go somewhere, but I mean if you can see everybody's under you know to slow down.

Yvonne here called her immediate supervisor "the cunt upstairs" which shows an example of the camaraderie that is common at the freezing works. Also, even though people might get frustrated they will typically not direct this towards Yvonne, probably because she is well-liked, she has been there for over a decade, and her jovial, assertive, and maternal personality, demonstrates how social bonds and camaraderie between peers can make the job less frustrating and stickier.

Yvonne noted that sometimes workers go too fast in order to put others under, but that because she has a healthy fear of the machine when working on the saw, would never deliberately overload the other two sawmen down the line from her. In Yvonne's plant, the primary saw is for sawing the whole carcass into the primal cuts, followed by two other main saws, one for breaking down the forequarters, and the other for the hindquarters:

Don't get me wrong you can do it on purpose, especially if someone's pissed you off, I'll make sure you get your set a lot faster than what you normally would, and we've all done that... I won't do it as a sawman, that's just stupid. I wouldn't want any of my mates to lose any of their digits or have a real bad accident, that'd be awful.

While there is irritation and bickering, care is still taken not to cause actual physical harm to co-workers. Yvonne making a boner further down the line work faster than normal seems to be a way of demonstrating to her co-workers her annoyance rather than an act of malice. When directed at someone you feel close to, as with Yvonne and the boners and sawmen, these sorts of encounters can reinforce camaraderie and set boundaries for expected behaviour.

Aggression, which can be inferred from some of the pranks and banter pulled by freezing workers, can be gotten away with when done by those with high status such as Yvonne. In fact, many of the women I interviewed could be included in this list of high-status women who could get away with this type of aggression, for example, Frances, Denise, Joanna, and of course Jen as a 2IC (second in charge). While seemingly counterintuitive, this aggression works to create a good working environment at times by reducing stress and allowing the workers to regulate themselves and those around them. Especially when done by people with status it is a

safer way to not only express irritation but also serves to correct out-of-line behaviour that can be at times dangerous helping to make the place run more smoothly by not causing mountains of meat piling up which adds to interpersonal stress. These pranks, banter, and aggression help to reinforce camaraderie and the structure of the work environment typical of freezing works both past and present, which in turn enable or sometimes hinder the creation of interpersonal bonds between co-workers. Another dimension to this is the grubby humour mentioned by Yvonne, which is not usually found in customer service roles, and is another aspect of the freezing works, the camaraderie and behaviour regulation, that makes it easy to get stuck due to the bonds formed in the process. These bonds traditionally worked to increase worker unity, agency and power.

### **Worker Power and Agency**

Unions, and the history of union activism, has had a direct result on the state of working conditions today, whether workers directly engage in union activism or not. Unions and more broadly collective action shaped and continue to shape work life in the freezing works, and is one of the key factors in what makes freezing works a sticky job. Ultimately, while there are valid complaints about the physicality and materiality of the work (it being ‘shit but not bullshit’), many see it as it is worth sticking at as the union gains resolve many bullshit aspects of the jobs. Despite the importance of union action for creating and defending the conditions that make this job a good job, unions were not generally a topic of daily discussion and only came up when I asked in interviews. Even when union representatives came to talk to workers during their breaks, the women either ignored them entirely and continued talking with their colleagues, or listened politely and then continued with their prior conversations. By contrast men were more likely to pay attention to the union representative and engage in the issue under discussion. Moreover, as with discussions of gender, older women were more likely to talk about unions than younger women.

The literature presents freezing workers as a family or team, but the women I spoke to also highlighted divisions among the workers. There is also a division between workers and the company. The most significant division between workers was by pay grade, the A-, B-, and C-grades, often referred to as an A-grader, a B-grader, or a C-grader. A is the highest pay grade and is typically only earned by those at the very beginning of the production line because of how dangerous and how much skill is needed to operate the saws and other machinery. While A-graders answer to the supervisors just like the other workers at lower pay grades, in addition

to the higher income, this pay grade signals status and the ability to affect the day-to-day running of a room. In the boning room, for example, only sawmen are A-graders. Yvonne, for example, wishes everyone acted more like a team, however, Yvonne being a sawman and therefore an A-grader means she is in the privileged position:

You've always got top end, the A graders, fighting with the C graders, and there's no point doing that cause we're a team, we're supposed to be a team from the top to the bottom.

[...]

I know it's quite shocking... because the boning room is split. You've got the A graders, the B graders are always in between, and you got the C graders, so you got that war going on. And that's why they've never worked with the union in our room. They're all looking out for themselves instead of each other. It's about all of us, not just one person, and that's what I don't get.

In our interview above, Yvonne and I had been discussing the situation about Waitangi Day of that year. The company was pressuring employees to work on the public holiday and Yvonne and I were speculating about why men on the slaughterboard were the ones to collectively respond to this pressure rather than women in the boning room. That year Waitangi Day fell on a Saturday. According to Mondayisation<sup>8</sup>, employees should have been given the Monday off, but they were instead notified that they would be working on the Monday and would instead have the previous Saturday off. The workers were unhappy about this because although working Saturdays was very common it is not a part of the usual working week and the shifts were usually much shorter than other days. This means that the plant would be made to work on the public holiday for a potentially ten-hour shift, whereas they would only have the four-hour Saturday shift off. The workers preferred to work on Saturday and have Monday off. Much of the concern, from what I observed, was a fear that the company was trying to set a precedent of working on public holidays from then on. The company told workers that if they wanted to have that Monday off then they would need to apply for annual leave. So, the slaughterboard workers took them at their word and applied for leave en masse. If the slaughterboard does not process it means there will be no carcasses for the rest of the plant to process, so the slaughter board workers were essentially forcing the company to give the plant the observed Monday Waitangi Day. What this story signals is that the different statuses of the workers shape the resistance they can perform. In the case of resisting working on Waitangi

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<sup>8</sup> If a statutory public holiday falls on the weekend, it will be observed on the following Monday.

Day, it was the men on the slaughterboard that took action. They not only had the position and therefore power to impact everyone else, but they also had the security of being among the most highly skilled as well as being among the longest-term freezing workers. Many of them had been in the industry for many decades, having worked at a number of freezing works including Ocean Beach in the final few decades before it was closed in 1991, giving them direct experience in the historic union action of the 1970s and 1980s. Perhaps due to fears of not being rehired in following seasons (which some companies have attempted) the workers in the boning room, where I worked, would have felt less able to take this risk and likely would have just not shown up to work, or if they did they have done a ‘go-slow’ or other less overt and visible forms of resistance. In this specific example, if a go-slow were to happen this could lead to more division as it is the decision of the head-room supervisor how fast the room goes and it is up to the sawmen and boners to enact this, whereas the pack end has little to no say in the speed of the room. This difference in status and perceptions thereof leads to in-room division and ultimately limited the ability of the boning room to organise formal resistance in the way the slaughterboard had. The example of the collective action of the slaughterboard workers for that particular Waitangi Day shows that workers collective action and agency structures work itself. This example of worker-collective action addressing everyone's concerns lead to a pushback against the company, limiting the ‘bullshit’ aspects of the job, and making being stuck more worthwhile.

Another legal battle fought by the unions while I was working there was about donning and doffing. This is the practice in the freezing works where workers are required to put on and take off their gear for smoko breaks at the start and end of every break. Previously workers were not paid for this time and were made to do this during their break time (unpaid), and the union at the time was arguing that this should not be the case and fought to have this changed, as well as for the workers to be back-paid some number of years for this. Donning and doffing takes up a not insignificant amount of time each day as it needs to be done before and after every run (roughly a two-hour period of time when the boning room is running, between breaks). The fact that this worker-backed union action was successful in allowing workers to get paid as well as back pay for donning and doffing time shows again how collective action shapes and structures day-to-day work life and counteracts bullshit elements of contemporary labour, namely the worsening of work conditions.

Collective action is not the only benefit to workers that unions provide, as there are instances of the unions fighting individual workers’ cases, demonstrating the ability of workers

to control and improve their working conditions. Through the union, Denise was able to get back wages after an injury, but she only bothered going to them on an off chance:

At the moment I'm going through a court case with them [the company] in the union. They owe me 12 weeks wages.

*They're not gonna give that up easily.*

No, they are not, they are fighting me. I had a work injury [and] I was off for twelve weeks with surgery and rehab and all that stuff, and they didn't pay me and they were supposed to pay me and they didn't. So I was gonna let it go because I just couldn't be bothered with the drama

*It's not worth the headache.*

But when I took the paperwork in, my medical report and everything, and the health and safety lady said [in a condescending voice] 'don't come crawling in here thinking I'm gonna organise pay for you because I'm not'. And if she'd been nice and said nothing [... she] didn't even say hello, that's the first thing she said. So I thought 'right, you bitch, we'll see'. And so I rang up the union ... and they said 'leave it with us'.

[... ]

[The company] turned up in groups. I know they did that to intimidate me and they did! I thought 'all them and *me?*' But it was stopped. My lawyer stopped it because none of them had registered to say that they would be there, so we have to do it all over again. So each ... group, might be [there] was a lady, two ladies from [out of town] they all have a support person each, and there was Noah from work with Willow and Eva, there was another group from [the company]. You know and I just thought oh my god, and me? and me! I had no support person, just me and the lawyer. ... Then all of a sudden, he turned around and said, 'well these people, who are they?' You know and to me the union did a wonderful job they still do a wonderful job in some areas, but because kids of today aren't brought up by parents that belong in the union, they don't belong in a union and they have quite a negative attitude about it.

Although she had to work for it, the union allowed Denise to be compensated for her injury. This in turn made the job worth sticking at as it allowed her to get backpay and keep her job despite the intimidation she felt from the company. However, a counterpoint to this is that

perhaps her injury is a factor that would prevent other employers from hiring her, so she is also stuck in her job.

Union action is one of the major discussion points in the literature discussing the history of the freezing works in Aotearoa New Zealand. While union membership has fallen dramatically in the twenty-first century, worker agency, expressed as collective action, and supported by unions, structures daily work life and continues to shape the work experience of freezing workers. This collective action continues to defend and improve working conditions and pay, thereby making the job less shit and more sticky, providing security.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

It is the small facts of freezing work life that dominate women's work lives and how they speak about their time at work. Due to the nature of chain processing, workers' lives are inextricably linked together in one way or another and so it is this interrelated aspect of the meat works that were discussed in this chapter. While the women I interviewed occupied different positions when I interviewed them, they had all at one point or another been a meat packer, a position which is among the lowest pay grades in the freezing works and that has always largely been comprised of women workers. While these things shape work life, it is arguably the relationships with family, gendered experiences of work relationships, and relationships on the line between co-workers that structure daily work experiences. These relationships are a double-edged sword, making work simultaneously stressful and sticky. These relationship structures are demonstrated by and reinforced through a kind of aggressive banter and pranks, especially when conducted by those with status or between friends. It is the small facts of relationships with co-workers that reinforce working conditions and regulate what is seen as inappropriate or dangerous behaviour by some. This in turn aids in improving working conditions and helps to establish bonds between workers to reinforce the camaraderie that is so often discussed in the literature as being vital to the day-to-day work experience in the freezing works. These factors all come together and make the freezing works an easy place in which to get stuck and a worthwhile place to stick to because of the camaraderie established and the security that comes with it. The small facts of day-to-day work relationships, whether on the basis of family, gender, or between co-workers or with the company, speak to the large issue of financial security.

There is another vital aspect to understanding how the small facts described here can help to understand the large issues for freezing workers as they relate to stuckness which is how stuckness in the freezing works and in certain places in the freezing works is embodied. I mentioned briefly in this chapter how freezing workers wear the stress of industrial meat processing on their bodies and in the next chapter I will explore this in greater depth.

## CHAPTER 7

# FEELING STUCK: PHYSICALITY, MATERIALITY, AND EMBODIMENT

...

*At the centre of the freezing works is meat. Indeed, the smell of rendered meat products punched me in the face when I would get out of my mum's car when we arrived at work each day. Stepping through the boot wash in the ante room, I went to wash my hands and put on a plastic smock when I walked in to start my shift in the boning room. Meat hanging off the gambrels not five feet in front of me was the first thing I would see upon opening the doors.*

*I would be working on the main scales and strapping that day, which is a relatively warm job that involves a lot of moving, lifting, pushing, and pulling cartons. Because the job is stationed further away from the ceiling vents in the room that pumped out air chilled to somewhere between nine and twelve degrees Celsius, and because of the strenuousness of the job, I came to work wearing a short-sleeved thermal t-shirt and sweat pants.*

*I would fidget with the wrist splint under my nitrile gloves. I was injured for a time with what the on-site physiotherapist told me was *De Quervain tenosynovitis*, a condition where the tendon sheath connecting the thumb to the wrist becomes inflamed and painful. This was caused by repetitive lifting of heavy meat – most likely mutton legs. After over-the-counter medication and regular massaging did not work, she ordered a wrist brace for me to use, which wraps around the thumb side of the wrist, restricting movement. When it arrived, she had told me that this particular brace was not adequate to manage the injury, but that she had not ordered the correct brace because it would have immobilised my wrist and I would not be able to work at all. The inadequate brace was the best that I could do, she said, and I needed to rest over the off-season when I got the chance. In fact, the injury did not get better until a couple of weeks into the next season a year later.*

...

## Introduction

In this chapter, I will look at how stuckness is embodied in the freezing works and in particular how the material and physical aspects of the job shape the workers' bodies. The handling of the meat over the course of a shift and season, as well as the temperature of the meat and room, are integral parts of freezing workers' experience. The freezing works are sites that are tailored to meat rather than to humans, and this has noticeable impacts on the bodies of workers over time. After only a short time in the freezing works my body became affected by the physical demands. This is a common experience for freezing workers, with being stuck in the job being embodied as permanent injuries and changes to the way workers carry themselves.

For freezing workers, it is the physical manifestation of being stuck that is one of the most pressing concerns. Stuckness manifests as stresses, injuries and chronic pain caused by both the cold and the repetitive, monotonous work hours. This work can be not only dangerous but also fatal if the industrial machinery is disrespected. A less immediately obvious embodied experience that came up with the women I spoke to, was the chronic pain and injuries sustained. This was discussed in various ways by all the women: the acute injuries when you first start and are using muscles in new ways that no one warns you about; the chronic pain that comes with repetitive, heavy work; the pain of working with chronic injuries due to this repetition and hard work. Another aspect of affective embodiment that I will cover in this chapter is the monotony of factory work. From my very first week to my last (so far) I would always describe it as both incredibly boring and incredibly stressful at the same time. There's a lot riding on the work; there are strict rules to follow in the food industry, as well as the pressure of numbers and making sure you are keeping pace with the rest of the room. However, it is also boring. Most, if not all days, there will be some stations that have been overstaffed. But even if there's only one person there you can feel the slowness of that day, and with not enough to distract you, you become aware of all the aches and pains and chills that come with standing in one place in a cold room for ten hours. And not ten feet away from you is someone that is running around barely keeping up, sweating from the exertion of their job.

However, it remains the case that there is also a kind of freedom in the freezing works that I have never found before. Here lies the dilemma of stuckness. Freezing works work is a job that is both kind of easy and kind of hard in ways that make it easy to stay put. There are mechanisms to cope with the bad side of things but there is no way to replicate the good things

about the job elsewhere. As Joanna explained to me, it is normal to complain about your job as there is no escaping the negative side of working, but there are benefits to this job that seems to be unique to it which make it worthwhile. The embodied affective challenges the women experienced are another factor making the freezing works sticky. Both acute and chronic injuries make it harder or less worthwhile to find other employment, especially when the working conditions are such that employers provide access to services that make sticking to the job worthwhile.

## **Meat Handling**

In this section, I will discuss how the physical nature of meat and meat processing – interacting with meat, and the conditions meat requires – shapes the physical experience of work for the women. In the boning room, the meat looks largely like what you find in the supermarket. The idea that what we were handling was alive yesterday just becomes a part of the background, and we found it easy to forget the unseen aspects of the freezing works that we did not take part in. I worked at the freezing works for almost two seasons and never once saw a sheep or lamb being slaughtered, or any of the “rivers of blood” that I had been told about by my mum whose job involves being on the slaughterboard to conduct various checks. In the interviews with the women, discussions of the slaughterboard typically consisted of talking about how difficult they would find working in those conditions given the heat and the gore of killing and handling newly slaughtered animals. By the time a carcass reaches the boning room the head, pelt, offal, and other bits have already been removed and it no longer really resembles an animal.

The slaughterboard was discussed by a couple of the older women, to illustrate the limits of what they could handle mentally and emotionally. Sawing a carcass or packing is okay, but being up close to or actually engaging in the killing was too visceral. Even seasoned workers were repulsed by the brutal reality of meat processing. For example, Yvonne said,

I wouldn't handle it too well on slaughterboard. Even just looking at my cat. I've been up there, to have a nosy. I didn't want to go and have a look at the gut trays, because I've heard ... you see baby embryos. Yeah nah, I couldn't. [Others might say but] “you're a boner” yeah, I'm a boner, not a butcher mate! There's a big difference. Boning is a fine art, butchering isn't... Once *we've* got it ... it's got no pulse anymore. Except for when you're on bobby's [calves], that's a totally different ball game. Getting them when they're warm

oh it's terrible. And some of them look so tiny, you know it was a baby, then you get really huge ones.

Yvonne's comments show that in fact many freezing workers have an aversion to the killing aspect of meat production but still cope with working in the freezing works. Yvonne also talks about her work with pride, comparing her job as a boner to fine art, as opposed to being a butcher which connotes destruction. Through this she distances herself from aspects of freezing works work that are psychologically uncomfortable or confronting. There is also a sticky aspect to this as Yvonne has a lot of pride in what she does, and in our conversations, she seemed to genuinely enjoy her job, at least to some degree. This pride that comes along with her high position of being an A-grade sawman is embodied in the way that she carries herself. This is something that my mum pointed out one night about others in similar positions, saying that they have a bounce in their step. While Yvonne primarily narrated her earlier times as a C-grader as painful and repetitive, she narrated her experiences as an A-grader in terms of her relationships with whom she called "her boys", referring to her fellow boner/sawmen, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Denise, who has worked in the freezing works in different roles for around four decades, told me that earlier in her time in the works she was asked to be a meat inspector. This meant she would have to work on the slaughterboard proximate to the killing, so she turned the job down:

I was asked to be a meat inspector, and I thought no I don't want to do that because I didn't want to touch the meat and I didn't want to see them killed [...] I'm in my 50s now and I still don't like seeing them killed [...] A lot of people have a pet lamb as a kid but they don't realise when it goes to the freezing works this is what's gonna happen to it. You do have to have a stomach on the slaughterboard – the smell will get to you before you see anything.

*Oh yeah, I suppose because it's warm up there, the smells [will carry]*

It's warm. It's usually about fifteen, sixteen degrees but with the heat of the animals and the intestines and everything it can go right up to 28 degrees and it's alright at the graders end, but where they get killed it's pretty gory... I personally could not do that to an animal. To me, yes that's really butchering it.

Here Denise is explaining her own perspective of meat processing using language that implies the idea that it is the men that do the more physical and gory aspects of the process. The women

cope with this affective challenge of working in the freezing works with multiple strategies, namely working in the boning room and not working on the slaughterboard proximate to the killing. While this gendered element to the freezing works means that women get paid less, it is not a deterrent to the job being sticky as the women expressed that they did not want these other jobs in the first place. This in turn largely means working more closely with a larger group of women and is, therefore, more enjoyable, which makes it stickier, despite being one of the lower-paying jobs.

The physical nature of the meat itself shapes the women's day-to-day working lives so it is necessary to describe what the meat is like in further detail to understand what the women interact with daily. There are many different cuts of meats that are processed, and they differ from day to day depending on the customer's (i.e. overseas supermarket chains) order. The boners and sawmen break down the carcasses into forequarters (two shoulders), two legs, loins (or the cuts of meat in/on/around the spine), and flaps. These areas can be broken down further, for example, the legs can be packaged whole, or cut up into the legs, chumps (the top part of the leg) and shanks (the bottom of the leg). The knuckle is usually also sawn off and packaged with other knuckles. Loin is a term that is used for a variety of different cuts of meat, sirloin steak, tenderloins, short loins, and bone-in loin. Including racks, these cuts are usually done on lamb and sold to European countries. After the boners get the carcasses down to these cuts, the packers will tidy the loins by pulling any excess fat off the tenderloins for example, separating the good quality meat and bones from the waste. Some cuts then get vacuum sealed, some get wrapped in cling wrap, some get put onto trays and then in bags, and others just get put into cartons with plastic liners in them.

For the purposes of this thesis, the important detail is that these cuts of meat are cold to the touch. Meat that has been vacuum sealed needs to be put through a secondary machine that runs the product under hot water. This means that those who weigh and sticker have to hold cold meat while hot water runs off it up their arms. The meat is also sometimes light (the bones for example weigh virtually nothing on their own), but much of it is very heavy. A leg of lamb on its own weighs on average two or three kilograms. This, multiplied over thousands of carcasses for an eight to ten-hour shift, in addition to the cold of the meat, leads to an experience that not only shapes the women's daily work experience but also shapes their work experience over time.

## Hot and Cold

Being in contact with the meat, and the conditions required by the meat, means that extremes of temperature are experienced by the workers. There are regulations in place that dictate what temperatures different processing rooms can be kept at, to prevent the meat from going off or growing dangerous bacteria. While varying slightly across plants and companies, the boning room cannot go outside the range of eight and twelve degrees or production needs to cease immediately. The regulations in place are for the benefit of the meat and its export. While union gains in the 1970s put an end to workers being forced to work in very extreme temperature ranges, the conditions are still more suited to meat than to humans. From my own experience, one of the most immediate things I noticed in the boning room was the chill. Insidiously, the cold is easy to ignore at first, especially if you are used to living in chilly Invercargill. Although the temperature remains within regulation, the specific jobs that people do will change how they experience this temperature. The experience of being hot or cold depends on what specific job a person is doing, whether it is more stationary and with little physical work, or very active with heavy lifting. People on strenuous, hot jobs would wear singlets and shorts. Women on the slaughterboard just wear underwear under their whites. People in less strenuous jobs would wear thermals, hoodies, and sweatpants. This extreme temperature range is embodied by the women in the short and long term, exacerbating joint pain and injury, which shapes how the women can move their bodies, in that some kinds of receptive movements may exacerbate this pain and so are avoided.

Yvonne discussed temperature in relation to the slaughterboard:

It's gotta be stinking hot up there. I think I prefer the cold. [I] can see why they pass out upstairs because it gets too hot up there.

*Does it happen a lot?*

Yeah, oh heck yeah! Especially when... we have those summers that are really hot outside, it is way worse on slaughterboard... It's real bad up there, and if the air conditioning isn't going, fuck, poor buggers. If I went from the boning room upstairs, I'm sweating within two minutes cause I've just come... from a fridge to a sauna more or less. And this is why half the girls are only in their undies and bras.

By contrast, the cold of the boning room can lead to significant pain. If you are doing a job that requires you to be static and in near-constant contact with the meat, your hands get painfully cold. I remember sometimes people needing to wear two or three pairs of woollen gloves under

their blue, nitrile gloves; I remember at least one occasion when the QC (quality control person) filled a nitrile glove with hot water from one of the sinks in the room and tied it off for someone on a particularly cold job, to use as a hand warmer. Nicole talked about how being hit in the hand with a piece of meat hurts when your hands are cold:

It's really terrible like your hands are so cold and they're throwing it as you're turning around to pick up something and it smacks you hand and you just like 'fuck my life, what am I doing?'

Unlike Yvonne, Denise prefers being too hot to being too cold:

I hate being cold for one. That's one thing about the boning room I hate being cold, cause once you get cold you can't get warm again, and so that's why I like the racks down the back because it has its moments where it's fast and you're sweating, but most of the time it's consistent so you don't get cold.

If you get stuck on a particularly cold job, Denise explained, it is almost impossible to warm up again, which is especially challenging when the shift can last up to ten hours, affecting how effective you might be at that job. Alternatively, being stuck in a particular place can be a good thing, and even may be desired, specifically to avoid being too cold or too hot. People try to stick to a certain job that is comfortable and that they like. This is one strategy for dealing with the embodied challenges of the job.

There is a wide range of temperature extremes that freezing workers have to deal with depending on their job and this allowed for bonding with co-workers over the mutual experience. While the small facts of temperature extremes can make the freezing works a shit job, the bonds the women build with each other make it okay.

### **Aches, Injuries, and Pain Relief**

The experience of pain and injury is perhaps the most common embodied experience of freezing works work. I noticed when I was working in the works that it was common for almost all workers to have some type of injury at work, with some needing to get on-site physiotherapy during processing hours every so often. All my participants discussed their experiences of injury and pain. This demonstrates just how profound an impact this has on their day-to-day experience of work and how normalised it is to be dealing with chronic pain in this line of work. It also demonstrates how, due in part to working conditions won by striking workers in the 1970s and 1980s, the job is sticky in both positive (workers helping each other out) and negative (injured workers struggle with finding employment in other industries) ways.

### **Short Term and New-Comers**

While many of the women I interviewed had many years of experience as freezing workers, I did speak to some workers with roughly as much experience as I had who discussed with me their experiences of the pain involved in first entering this work. Nicole had not expected the level of pain when she first started. She explains one of the jobs she did in her first week was bagging legs, which involves putting legs of lamb (which can be anywhere from just over a kilogram to just over three kilograms) into their bags to prepare them to be vacuum sealed.

Nobody tells you the pain that you're gonna go through like when you first start ae? I think it was my first few days and they put me with this woman who'd been there forever bagging legs. Oh my lord I thought my knuckles were going to explode, I had swelling on parts of my wrist I didn't know could swell or hurt,

*It's like 'is it sprained? what is this?'*

Like what is this pain? It's right in your joints it feels like your whole thumb's gonna explode. As your body gets used to this new way of moving the pain fades into the background, and there is a realisation that being in pain or injured in some way, however minor or major, is simply par for the course. Freezing workers normalise their aches and pains as part of the job and this is perhaps one reason they do not mention it to new workers.

### **Lack of Rotation and Variety**

There is a point, however, after having worked for an extended period of time, especially on the same job, without rotation, when the pain and aches come back. Joanna, who has been a freezing worker for around eight seasons, is usually found on main scales (labelling and strapping the packed boxes for export) or packing shoulders (which involves packing the wrapped forequarters of both lamb and mutton, typically around four in a box, depending on the size of the cuts). She explained to me that despite her enjoying 'being on shoulders', after this many years of being on that station as well as her age (late forties), it is beginning to take its toll.

I don't mind being [on main scales] a lot, sort of liking it more than shoulders sometimes cause it [shoulders] used to be my favourite job but I think I'm getting a bit old in the joints for the shoulders cause it's not the fastness of it, its' the heaviness of the shoulders... It's like the farmers keep them till they're real big, more money.

Joanna's experience shows that it is the physical nature of the meat that leads to pain and injury. In the case of main scales versus packing shoulders, main scales involves pushing and pulling cartons of meat weighing between twenty and thirty kilograms. Packing shoulders involves lifting each shoulder as it comes out of a heat tunnel (to shrink the plastic film) and twisting to put it into a carton and pushing the carton down a belt when it is full. Both jobs are physically demanding, but the latter involves more repetitive lifting and twisting.

Another aspect of the physicality of meat packing contributing to pain is the variety of work between different shifts, such as the day or night shifts. Many night-shift freezing workers will work both the day shift as well as night shift, depending on their seniority and work skills, as the night shift season is usually shorter by a few weeks than day shift. Five of my participants have experience on both shifts, and Denise explained to me that the different shifts have different cutting plans. This means that on any given day the production planner will provide a cutting plan determining how many carcasses need to be processed by both shifts that day, as well as the cuts of meat that need to be done to fill in the customers' orders.

I must admit the jobs I do sometimes are hard but I don't go home as sore as I do when I was on day shift [...] The work on dayshift is so much harder because the cutting plan is harder, the cuts are quite more gourmet than basic but you're still stuck, you know like you could be in a two-person job doing it by yourself [...] a season on day shift, you do go home sore, you go home, especially in your back and shoulders you got home really sore week after week after week. You get a day and a half off and it's not long enough.

Different cuts of meat mean that the workers move in different ways, which impacts how their bodies are affected. As discussed in the previous chapter, lack of rotation can signal skill and trust from the supervisor. However, a lack of rotation is also embodied in the shoulders and back, a pain that does not easily go away, especially with constant six-day work weeks. This leads to chronic pain.

Job rotation is one of the key preventative measures in place to deal with injuries in the freezing works. As Yvonne explained, it used to be not uncommon to be stuck on one station for months on end. In this instance, she is talking about being stuck on the bumper cutters, which is a piece of equipment with a large roll of film on rollers. A section of the film is pulled through the handle and cut. This is used to wrap mutton legs, forequarters, and other cuts of mutton and lamb. It must be noted here that each of these cuts can be well over three kilograms, and in this plant, they easily do 600 carcasses in a two-hour span.

You hear them at work “I’ve been on this for a week” ... a week babe?! Try six months or a year! Then you’ll have something to moan about.

Yvonne’s response to newer workers complaining about being stuck in particular jobs demonstrates how rapidly the industry still changes. The time Yvonne is talking about was a little under two decades ago, and in the time since workers rarely work without any rotation for such extreme lengths of time.

### **Just Deal With it**

The injuries workers are prone to actually make the job sticky in that the company provides various forms of assistance, financial and otherwise, a win from union activism in the twentieth century. Companies are motivated to keep employees as training costs a lot of time, especially for the A- and B-graders. Therefore, workers have access to things such as on-site physiotherapy, or in the case of injury, all supervisors are first-aid qualified. In the case of more serious injuries, light duties are an option frequently used. This is where the injured worker will be moved to a job or task that is less physically demanding until they heal. These formal strategies of dealing with injuries mean that employees are inclined to stick with the job. Finding other employment with injuries that affect movement or the body is difficult, and injured workers are enabled to keep working in the freezing works, which makes the job sticky, despite its embodied challenges.

Another common way of dealing with pain from minor aches to severe long-term injuries was simply to keep going with the help of over-the-counter (or stronger prescription) painkillers. The freezing works are also a site at which you can informally access prescription painkillers to enable you to work through your pain and injury. I heard workers say that “it’s a pharmacy down there at work”. I recall a number of incidents in the dining room when someone mentioned that they had a headache or other random pain, to be greeted by six other nearby co-workers offering them some tramadol, which is a prescription painkiller. This availability of strong medication can also lead to stuckness as it allows workers to keep working despite their injuries, particularly more chronic injuries such as RSI which is difficult to get ACC<sup>9</sup> coverage for. Another example of the benefits of the camaraderie in the freezing works is that workers

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<sup>9</sup> Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) is a government organisation that, among other functions, assists with financial cover after a work injury, helping to recover lost wages (Accident Compensation Corporation, 2022)

are willing to informally exchange prescription medication with each other, allowing them to continue to work despite potentially income-threatening injuries.

Rotation, medicinal pain management, and improved working conditions are some of the strategies that workers have access to cope with the pain and injuries. However, there are more strategies that workers use on-line during processing to deal with other affective challenges of long working hours.

### **Long Hours and Night Shift**

Another challenge of freezing works work that is embodied by the workers is exhaustion brought on by the long working hours to keep up with international demand and staff shortages. Out of my participants, Yvonne and Nicole only worked on day shift, I only worked on night shift, and the rest had experience on both shifts but primarily worked night shift. At the plant where I worked, we would generally work ten-hour shifts from Monday to Friday (from 4:30 pm to around 3:15 am) as well as four hours on Saturdays (from midday to four in the afternoon). The long work hours and continued working late at night and early morning becomes embodied. Without a full weekend off for months on end, I never felt truly rested emotionally or physically, which made the days I found myself stuck on certain boring jobs even more draining. Night shift workers need to adjust to an unnatural sleeping schedule, needing to fit in other obligations and errands around this. As an example, I recall when talking to some co-workers during lunches, they would discuss how difficult it was to take care of or spend time with their children and families due to the hours and related exhaustion. The strategies workers would use to deal with this would vary, but for on-site strategies might include things that were against the rules such as eating and sharing lollies, which in turn forms and maintains bonds as discussed in Chapter Six. This practice is well known among virtually all freezing workers (in fact we were told on multiple occasions by our supervisor not to do this), and occasionally overlooked, as Jen told me many of those in higher positions may turn the other way if they see it because it gives people the necessary energy boost to see them through until three in the morning.

Joanna, a night shift worker who generally works day shift for a few weeks at the start and end of the season, explains how the exhaustion that night shift workers go through may be embodied and how they deal with it by eating lollies and fooling around.

You get to that stage [at night], you know, especially if it's quieted down and you've had too much lollies and you get a bit over the top, then everyone starts playing up – in a good way.

This insight into the atmosphere of night shift frames hyperactivity as a bonding and coping strategy for exhaustion. Joanna explained, that as the week wears on and people get more exhausted, tensions rise, and people have shorter tempers, leading to conflict:

The drama actually at work? Sometimes it's just stress - it's always been like that. Usually see on a Thursday or Friday it was starting to get a bit more tetchier than on Monday. So, long hours and getting tired and some people just get easily frustrated, you know? Although there hasn't been too many like actual arguments with people who've had to leave... although this season [laughs]... I think it's just tiredness.

This shows just how much physical and mental exhaustion can affect people and consequently their work environment. This tiredness that Joanna is explaining is a repetitive cycle, every week all season long, the tiredness getting harder to ignore and emotions running higher, leading to small, and occasionally large, conflicts.

Tiredness is something that does not go away when you clock out at the end of a shift, and so it has consequences on the other parts of your life. Denise explains that when she had worked on day shift the embodied exhaustion was much more severe due to differences in time of day as well as how the shift was run.

I don't go home exhausted [on night]. Because on day shift, you're ... getting up at what half past four, five o'clock, you're not finishing work till quarter past four. So, there's a long day you go home exhausted, tired, sore and then by the time you do your basics that you need to do you go to bed earlier: you've got no social life.

Denise explained that on day shift her life consisted of going to work, coming home and running the necessary errands she had with the little energy she had left, and then having to go to bed to prepare for the next workday.

Reiterating this point, Jen explained that tiredness was perhaps the main reason she had for wanting to quit and find a job closer to where she lived.

*So, are you excited about leaving?*

Fuck yeah, just to have a life. The only reason I don't like that job anymore is the hours, it's too many hours. It probably wouldn't be so bad if I lived closer to town. But yeah nah, it's just too many hours, too tired. I'm there 11 and a half hours a day, not counting lunch because you don't get paid, so twelve hours I'm there.

*And that's not including driving, which for you is two hours?*

Aw, about an hour and a half the way I drive [laughs] but should be two hours.

The tiredness the women talked about as well as the use of humour also addresses a deeper issue that impacts freezing workers and consequently their working conditions, which is the psychological consequences of long working hours. These stresses can lead to stickiness due to not having the time or energy to find other employment, but in the case of Jen it lead her to becoming unstuck.

## **Dealing With Monotony and Danger**

A topic that comes up in the literature regarding the freezing works throughout the 1970s and 1980s is the monotony of the freezing works, and the effects this has on the workers (Boraman, 2019; Webb, 2015; Webb, 2019). The women I talked to also brought up monotony and how this significantly affected their days and work experience. The women that have been freezing workers for a longer time had coping mechanisms and insightful mindset shifts that they employed in order to break up the boredom of work, some of which I remember seeing in action. Having to work in close proximity to dangerous machinery, especially in a job that is notoriously monotonous and boring can be unsafe at best, and fatal at worst. Specific ways of interacting with the machinery can lead to the embodiment of either good or bad practice; having a healthy fear can lead to a more relaxed posture and temperament, and indifference to the danger can lead to injuries which in turn may require time on light duties or other coping strategies discussed above.

Yvonne mentioned one sawmen who had moved from the night shift with us to dayshift with her who exhibited blasé disregard of the danger of being a sawman:

He was dangerous on the saw. I didn't even like sawing with him, he scared the shit out of me that fulla. He goes "I'm not scared," I said, "well you should be! Every time you use the saw". If you're not scared, you shouldn't be on that thing... I'm thinking about it constantly when I'm sawing, and I usually don't take my eyes off the blade, even when I'm picking up [meat]. You know where your meat is. Got your three-way vision if you choose to use it or not, especially if we're going full tit, you know it's gonna be there, it's not gonna be anywhere else.

The saw that Yvonne is talking about is around one metre in diameter and is used to saw through chilled carcasses into primal cuts and the danger of these saws cannot be understated.

Yvonne explored her reaction to someone not feeling the fear she believed was sensible when operating the machinery, and how she as a long-term sawman does it. She also explained that just as she believes it is important to have a healthy fear, it is also necessary to not to work faster than you are comfortable with:

I ain't gonna run after my meat, cause it's all gonna come back if it's not done. So, I don't stress if I miss anything like I used to when I first started, it's like 'oh well it'll come back', I ain't a robot mate sorry... "The best advice I can give you. Is that you need to relax". That's what I was told when I first started boning, cause of course I was really stressed out when I first started because you can't keep up... Robin was the one that taught me you just gotta relax; the more you relax the better it is.

Older workers will pass down knowledge about how to cope safely with the job to newer workers. Relaxing is something I also came to realise was very helpful when I was working in my second season. When I would be struggling to keep up it would be increasingly stressful, which leads to messier work, and then people further down the production line would have their work and flow messed up, and then get angry at you, and the cycle continues until the next break. The next season I learned to relax and not be so emotionally invested in my failure, for lack of a better word. Chloe and I would often tell each other "it's only meat", as a way of reaffirming the mindset that it is not worth getting stressed if things do not go quite right.

The experience of monotony is also reflected in the stuckness of everyday manning (what each worker is doing on any given day). I had told Tracey that I thought being a boner/sawman would be a boring job, because it seemed, at least from my place in the room packing, that there was significantly less possible variety in their jobs. She agreed with me, saying:

I [think boning/sawing would be boring] too, that's why I couldn't deal with it because it's the same job every day, whereas at least the pack end, [you] might be on the same job a couple days a week, or a couple days in a row, but it's something different, and depending on what you're cutting too.

*Because there are [at least] 15 different jobs down pack end total! What's top end? Sawing and boning?*

Yeah, pretty much. That and pre-trim. And who wants to stand there looking at shit, well, trying to find shit.

This shows that even if you are stuck on the same two jobs, simply knowing that there are a multitude of possible jobs is great for morale and this knowledge goes a long way to lowering the feeling of monotony.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

In this chapter, I looked at how the freezing works work becomes embodied, and contributes to the ways in which the job is sticky and women get stuck. The physicality of meat calls for very particular working conditions and ways of holding oneself, moving, and so on, all of which are embodied by the women. Meat is the centre focus of the meat processing industry and the physical nature thereof shapes women's working lives. The conditions of freezing works plants are centred around what is best for the meat, and for this reason, it places particular stress on the women's bodies overtime. This can lead to permanent injuries that make people undesirable for other employers, but also makes the freezing works a desirable place to continue to work, because of the care the work place provides, leading to women becoming stuck in the freezing works.

In Chapter Five I discussed how it is that women come to be in the freezing works and how they come to find themselves stuck therein, in Chapter Six I looked at how the various relationships make the freezing works a stickier job, and in this chapter I explored how stuckness becomes embodied. Having analysed the ethnography, in the following chapter I will conclude by showing how the small facts of the working lives of women freezing workers can speak to the larger issues of work these days.



## CHAPTER 8

# CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

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Frances summed up the ambiguities of working in the freezing works past and present and the ways in which people get stuck there when she said:

[Freezing workers] are a harder breed of person... They've probably been through more in their life... It's usually the sort of job that people will take because no one else will take them... I mean I've visited a lot of different meat works too, North Island, South Island, and they're all pretty much the same... It's a hard life, a hard job, and hard people... It'll either make you or break you, more than you make or break it.

This thesis has been a case study on the experiences of women stuck in the freezing works. When I first began to work there, I was horrified at the idea of getting stuck, and not moving on to a more desirable career. However, as I near the end of this thesis, I have found that I have thoughts of returning to the freezing works. The prospect of finding a job that pays as much as the freezing works are low. *I will only go back for one season before I move on to a PhD* hearkens back to my prior thoughts of *I will only work there over the summer break before I start my MA*. My first impressions of the freezing works were that it was a place that I never wanted to become stuck in, but now my understanding is more complex. I think back on Tracey's words, "just don't get stuck in it". While I admit that although it is still not my dream job, I have been tempted to return for the quick money just as many of my participants did. This shows how easy it is to become stuck and how quickly it can happen without you noticing.

This thesis has shown that women's understandings of being stuck in their jobs, or more broadly in their lives in the lower South Island, are complex. Freezing works jobs which provided financial security and a freedom from lookism are a stark contrast to the precarious and bullshit jobs typically found in the ruins of capitalism. Such secure jobs are not easily found elsewhere. This case study shows how the small facts of freezing work life, such as the working conditions and relationships, and the larger issue of financial security of the industry can lead to stickiness for women. These women who are stuck in the industry, and those young girls who did not want to become stuck, started with the same intentions of just going there for

one season to get money, then leaving to do something else. The difference is that the older women stayed, and the girls, as far as I am aware as yet, did not.

## **Methods**

I could not have gained the insight I did without having spoken to and interviewed the nine women that I did. The experience of autoethnographically recording my own embodied experiences working as a meat packer in the boning room allowed me to dive deep into the nooks and crannies of the quotidian experiences of freezing workers, especially what their bodies are put through working on the line. It gave me a vital insider perspective into a job that comparatively few have experienced. Additionally, the women's breadth of experience gave me insight that I could not possibly have on my own as they have many decades of cumulative experience in virtually all areas of meat processing. Spanning decades, their experiences contributed not only to our understanding of contemporary work in Aotearoa New Zealand but fills the gap in the literature about this industry which has a noticeable lack of ethnography, especially of the experiences of women in the meat processing industry.

## **The Literature**

This research contributes to the literature on contemporary work by showing that, despite widespread precarity, vulnerability, and irregularity, of the kind described by Tsing (2015) and Graeber (2013, 2019), there are still jobs more comparable to the labour of the 1970s and 1980s. Specifically, there are still some regular, stable jobs with good wages and predictable hours and conditions, although these jobs are difficult in many ways. Stability remains an integral reason for what makes them good jobs despite their hardships. Freezing works could be described as being a backwater of sorts. The negative neoliberal view of backwaters as places for desperate no-hopers to go when no one else will take them places capitalism as a monolith, framing certain labour as jobs that are bad and other labour as careers that are good. This research has demonstrated that capitalism is not a monolith and in fact, this kind of industrial workplace is as much of a secure haven as it is a backwater.

While I have tried not to argue that the job is easy (I and my research participants would argue the opposite in fact), it is by nature less precarious, irregular, and performative than the hospitality jobs I had previously worked at. The wages were good, the hours were predictable, I didn't have to put on a presentable façade, the people were straightforward, and there was

usually good morale and company. Lookism, therefore, was not a major contributing factor to how the small facts of daily work life were experienced. By this, I mean that the freezing works are a job where the women and myself reported not needing to perform the kinds of lookist femininity we had had to in other jobs. Further, when they discussed work, their personal identities did not dominate the conversation and in reverse, when discussing topics relating to identity, work rarely featured. This was *just* a job for the women, nothing more and nothing less. While there was a gendered understanding of labour, there was not a need to perform a particular type of neoliberal and mobile femininity to make a living, in contrast to most bullshit jobs.

This thesis shows that the working conditions the unions fought for in the 1970s and 1980s have remained to this day in the industry, and have only been added to with international shipping regulations requiring more strictly observed working conditions prioritising the health and safety of the workers and the product. While the literature on this time period was useful for framing the historic and contemporary context in which the meat industry in Aotearoa New Zealand is situated, the research questions I had would not be answered adequately by these frames. The literature I looked at that examined the state of the meat industry in Aotearoa New Zealand in the latter half of the twentieth century depicted an industry with deep roots in union activism, with the explicit and implicit exclusion of women. While unions were rarely a topic at the forefront of women's stories about work, this thesis demonstrates that the stable work conditions women experience were shaped by the action of unions.

### **Small Facts, Large Issues**

This thesis followed the lead of Gibson-Graham (2014) by using thick description and allowing the small facts of the lives of women in the lower South Island to speak to the large issues of work in the ruins of capitalism. The idea of stuckness or being stuck can be easily mapped onto Gibson-Grahams' phrasing of small facts and large issues, in terms of being stuck on specific stations or jobs at work overtime as well as being stuck in the industry. The concept of stuckness is used in multiple ways by my participants and myself. Stuckness can be understood as a lack of mobility between positions on the line, jobs within the industry, or at the widest scale, between industries. The small facts of stuckness, such as the embodied experiences that women have, can illuminate why they often choose or feel they are forced to stay in these positions. The financial security afforded by the small facts of stuckness compound and lead to women becoming stuck in these regular, stable jobs. Stuckness speaks

to the large issue of financial security, in that it is stuckness that ensures financial security in these precarious times. Being able to become stuck to a job and achieve security is actually increasingly rare in the ruins of capitalism.

### **Final Thoughts**

From the very beginning to the very end of my time (so far?) in the freezing works, I maintained that I would not get stuck. I have very lofty dreams, after all, of what I want to do with my education and vague career aspirations to chase. I had written and thought a lot about stuckness as if it is something that does not strictly apply to me, which would be disingenuous to say. Regardless of what I *want* to do with my life, I am still a student, I still pay rent, and I still have all those other expenses that never seem to end that speak to the larger issue of the challenge of achieving financial stability and security. Even though I plan to not get stuck in the works, it is still the best and easiest access to an income that would actually provide me with a genuine sense of financial stability. It is a job where I do not have to re-write my budget every week, but can actually afford to live and thrive and enjoy having access to nice things. I always tell my partner that when I finish my MA I will try to get back into the works “in the meantime” while I look for other work that I would take more pride in. My analysis of women’s experiences of stuckness has shown me firsthand how easy it is to become stuck in the works and how unplanned becoming stuck usually is. It has shown me firsthand what it means that freezing works jobs are very sticky. It is a stickiness that is most apparent in hindsight, which might be why the older women insisted that young women “better themselves” and not get stuck.

This research started with me working in a job I thought of as “just a job”, and somehow has come full circle back to freezing works jobs being just jobs. The difference between the beginning and end is that my understanding of what it means for something to be “just a job” has become more nuanced. What I thought was a bad life choice to be avoided at all costs, has become transformed in my mind throughout my work on this thesis to a holdover of labour of a kind common in the latter half of the twentieth century, marked by its financial security and decided lack of precarity. Being stuck in the backwater of Invercargill, working at the freezing works season after season turns out to be not such a bad way of making a living  $\sphericalangle(\sphericalangle)\sphericalangle$ .

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