03/02 Reading Response 3 - Working (Class) Bodies

In this week’s readings, there was a specific quote that stuck out to me in Ava Baron and Eileen Boris’s article, *“The Body” as a Useful Category for Working-Class History*. It reads;

“By assuming that all women were appropriate targets of men’s sexual desire, harassment also reinforced norms of heterosexuality. Laboring men constituted their identities through the repetition of gendered acts, such as swearing, drinking, gambling, cursing, and sexually harassing women. Yet an exclusive focus on male harassment of women workers shifts attention from men’s sexuality back to women’s.”

I found this quote to be particularly interesting because from my own experience it proves true. Although the identity of a laboring man is tied to the display of gender through actions that qualify him as manly through the way in which he partakes in labor, these actions of performance are often-times dependent on learned behaviors of masculinity and the conclusion of women’s labor as inadequate or insubstantial. Due to this fact, it verifies the statement that the workplace is always a sexualized environment. We see this further in the lack of inclusion of women in the pride-bearing of labor in the steel and glass industries in Pittsburg. The civic image of women as laborers is not included in the public display of boosters, nor in the grievances of reformists. It is almost as though not acknowledging these laborers further adds to their unwelcomed presence in the factory and industry at large.

I think that the comparison of man to machine, especially in the rhetorical practices of Pittsburg boosters causes masculinity to take on a machine-like quality. Phrasing such as, “The workers arm was ‘like a billet of steel,’ his stomach, thick and firm ‘like a sheet of broiler iron’.” Produces this dichotomy of man as machine, and through booster tactics of promotion taught young men and children that to become the machine is emblematic of their strength as men. Ironically enough, in the Jessica Kuskey’s “*The Working Body*”, the young woman literally gets caught in the machine. She is more a part of the machine than the man that fainted when trying to rush to her avail. Although this is a witty metaphor, I think it speaks to the idea that although ignored, labor, the performance of labor, and the performance of gender are all learned behaviors that in a capitalist society all have ties to production.