

SPECIAL FEATURE

Gender and the Displaced Worker in Contemporary France: Women, Mobility, and Economic Restructuring Beyond the Industrial Heartlands*

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Abstract

A considerable proportion of the research conducted within the developing field of deindustrialisation studies has focused on the loss of work in industrial closures, and on the attachments that long-serving workers feel to their former workplace. This article focuses instead on the phenomenon of constrained mobility which often occurs as companies restructure and workers are offered a choice between redundancy or relocation to another site. Steven High (2003) has examined the ‘transplanted identities’ of male workers who had moved repeatedly as plants downsized and closed across the American rust belt, highlighting a group who styled themselves as the ‘I-75 gypsies’ (after the interstate highway that runs through Michigan and Ohio). Forging a new identity articulated in terms of mobility rather than place, these men constructed a new version of heroic working-class masculinity as they moved from site to site. This article draws on a case study of the Moulinex domestic appliance company in north western France to examine how such mobility has been experienced by women workers in a region beyond the industrial heartlands. In doing so, it considers the particular relationship to place that was constructed as companies like Moulinex established factories in rural regions of France after the Second World War and the implications of this for work-based identities. The article highlights the intersecting effects of age and gender, the significance of the gendered division of labour for women’s experiences of mobility, and the extent to which identities were reshaped as women moved to stay in work.

Introduction

On June 28, 1997, the management of Moulinex, the well-known French domestic appliance company, took two coachloads of female workers and their families to Bayeux. Internationally renowned for its tapestry recounting the epic tale of the

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Norman Conquest, Bayeux was also home to Moulinex's most modern production site. "They showed us round the factory," recalled Jacqueline Martin, "they bought us lunch in a restaurant. For me it was a day out. It didn't sink in." Jacqueline and her colleagues had worked for Moulinex in Argentan, 90 km away, until the management decided to close their factory. In a deal negotiated with the unions, eligible workers from Argentan were offered the chance to transfer to Bayeux (and other sites) and the trip was intended to facilitate their decision. With little alternative work available in the Argentan area, a number of women took up the offer. Just two days after what had felt like a social outing with colleagues, Jacqueline had left her home and checked into a hotel in Bayeux to start her new job.¹

Transfers to alternative sites are a common feature of economic restructuring processes and yet this phenomenon has attracted relatively little attention in the burgeoning field of deindustrialization studies. Major preoccupations in this literature have included struggles over industrial closures, experiences of losing work, and the long-term impact of deindustrialization on local communities. As titles like *Steeltown USA*, *Coal Country* and *One Job Town* suggest, such histories are often rooted in single towns or regions whose identity is profoundly tied up with particular industries.² Place-based attachments—to the factory or locality—have also been an important theme. Alice Mah, for example, has written of the sense "of devastation, but also home" that characterized the outlook of working-class people living with industrial ruin in their communities.³ Some historians use the term "displaced workers" to describe those who lost their jobs due to plant closures, pointing to the construction of the workplace itself as a kind of (lost) home.⁴ Thus, Steven High argues that workers who have not been "physically and emotionally reintegrated" into another workplace, find themselves in a liminal space.⁵ Used in this sense, the category of the "displaced worker" does not necessarily imply geographical relocation, but rather the experience of being uprooted from one's job. In this article, we consider the particular kind of displacement that occurs when long-serving workers are transferred from one site to another as factories close.

One of the few examinations of this phenomenon in the deindustrialization literature can be found in High's analysis of a group of male workers who moved from site to site across the growing American "rust belt," trying to outrun the threat of unemployment as successive plants slashed jobs and closed. Here, the loss of the home plant was combined with the experience of geographical displacement. Strikingly, these men referred to themselves as "gypsies." As Gabriel Solano put it, "we call ourselves the I-75 gypsies [after the interstate highway that links the great industrial centres of Michigan and Ohio]. We have no home plants. We are very hardened people... we've been at all the battles in the war called the automotive industry."⁶ In this way, High argues, repeatedly transplanted workers forged a new identity for themselves, articulated in terms of mobility rather than place or home.⁷ In casting the I-75 Gypsies as battle-hardened strong men of deindustrialization, Solano also drew on the valorization of toughness and hard labor—not to mention the gallows humor—that were often characteristic of physically demanding, masculine working environments in heavy industry.⁸ Forging a displaced worker identity thus involved a rearticulation of class and gender.

"Heartlands" of male-dominated heavy industry such as the American "Rust Belt" have occupied a privileged place in scholarship on the impact of deindustrialization. While this field is well-developed in the anglophone world, it is only recently that

deindustrialization has emerged as a fully-fledged object of historical research in France.⁹ Here too the decline of industries such as coal and steel looms large, but deindustrialization is increasingly being understood as a more geographically dispersed phenomenon that takes place well beyond the “heartlands.”¹⁰ Recent studies have begun to consider the impact of industrial closures in small towns and semi-rural areas in the west and center of the country, where factories manufacturing clothing, shoes, or electrical goods employed often heavily feminized workforces.¹¹ This opens up a rather different social and geographical terrain in which to explore how place, work, and gender identities are intertwined and to assess the implications of job displacement.

In the contemporary labor market, a willingness to be mobile tends to be valorized as an attribute of the flexible worker.¹² However, employees are not equal in the face of these expectations.¹³ The prospect of a job transfer is not only potentially disruptive of place and work-based attachments and identities, but often brings with it a choice between commuting or residential relocation, which in turn has implications for the organization of personal and family life. The meanings of mobility, the ways in which it can be managed, and the lived experiences that accompany it are thus profoundly intertwined with class and gender. How, we might ask, has the experience of job relocation been shaped by the gendered division of labor, notably the fact that women continue to have primary responsibility for domestic and caring work, as well as being disproportionately confined to lower status roles in the industrial workplace? How and to what extent are the identities and solidarities of women workers reconfigured as they move from one factory to another?

This article opens up this research agenda by examining experiences of restructuring at the Moulinex domestic appliance company in France. The interest of Moulinex as a case study is threefold. Firstly, specializing in small appliances—from mixers to microwave ovens—Moulinex employed thousands of women in semi-skilled jobs as assemblers and machine operators. This was a long-serving workforce, in which a significant proportion of women had been employed for twenty years or more, prompting us to reflect on how age intersects with class and gender in the experiences and narratives that will be discussed. Secondly, Moulinex was a business that had an emblematic status in France: a symbol of the postwar economic model and the consumer boom of the 1950s and 1960s, its restructuring under new ownership in the 1990s and eventual financial collapse in 2001 dramatized in the French public imagination the transformations taking place in contemporary capitalism and their impact on the world of work. The story of the Moulinex workers therefore took on a particular resonance as a “story of our times,” prompting a wide range of media coverage and cultural production, which serve as part of the source base for our study. Thirdly, Moulinex exemplifies the phenomenon of contracting industrial employment beyond the industrial heartlands. Its manufacturing sites were dotted across the region of Lower Normandy and the neighboring *départements* of Sarthe and Mayenne, areas that were historically more readily identified with agriculture and with food products (butter, cheese, and cider) than with industrial production. Thus, by moving beyond the typical sectors and geographies of deindustrialization studies, and bringing women workers more clearly into view, we aim to offer a new perspective on gender, place, and displacement in an age of deindustrialization. We tease out these themes by drawing notably on interviews conducted by the authors or held at the Municipal Archives in Alençon, as well as press and documentary sources.

Gender, Generation, and Space at Moulinex

Moulinex had its origins in a company called Moulin-Légumes, which was founded in the Paris region in 1932, but within five years had moved its production from the Communist-led suburb of Bagnolet to Alençon, a market town and administrative center in one of the more rural areas of Lower Normandy (Orne). There the company found a ready supply of first-generation industrial workers and pursued a policy of recruiting young women to Taylorized production jobs as machine operators and assemblers. This gendered division of labor, in which semi-skilled production jobs were done by women, while managerial and skilled jobs were the preserve of men, would remain in place with only minor adjustments until the company's demise in 2001. The Moulinex brand emerged in 1957 as the business, which had previously produced manual kitchen gadgets, moved into the production of electrical appliances. Over the next two decades as sales of household electrical goods soared, a network of twelve Moulinex factories developed, mostly in small rural towns (with the exception of one site in Cormelles-Le-Royal on the outskirts of the city of Caen). Owned by inventor and entrepreneur Jean Mantelet, the company remained in family ownership until 1987, but following a brief period of partial ownership by the staff, the controlling interest passed into the hands of banks and private equity firms from 1993. A series of restructuring plans followed as a succession of managing directors sought to return the struggling business to profitability and generate value for shareholders.

Opportunities for transfer between sites would be a feature of the plans put in place in this period as the management sought to shed jobs. In 1996, newly appointed managing director Pierre Blayau announced the closure of the factories in Argentan (260 employees) and Mamers (411 employees), where the majority of shopfloor workers (82 percent and 67 percent respectively) were women.¹⁴ In a settlement negotiated with the unions, early retirement packages, compensation schemes for historic exposure to asbestos, and offers of transfers to other sites were deployed to minimize compulsory redundancies. Indeed, similar measures were being used across the group to reduce numbers. At the end of 1996, the company employed 7,476 people but in the year that followed, 600 had taken early retirement or other age-related packages (such as the asbestos scheme) and 515 had accepted a transfer.¹⁵ Following a change of leadership, further restructuring plans were proposed and contested in 2000 and 2001, before the company was declared insolvent in September 2001. This led to the closure of a further four sites in the Lower Normandy region, where Moulinex was the largest private employer (Alençon, Cormelles-Le-Royal, Falaise, Bayeux). While around 3,000 jobs were lost in the 2001 closures, a partial buy out by rival appliance company Seb, which acquired the Moulinex brand and took over three production sites (Fresnay-sur-Sarthe, Vilaines-La-Juhel, Mayenne), meant that some workers from Alençon were offered the option of a transfer to what was now Seb-Moulinex in Fresnay. Thus, as Moulinex contracted, collapsed, and was partially reborn, transfers between sites took place across varying distances: the trip from Alençon to Fresnay was 22 km, from Mamers to Mayenne 83 km, and Argentan to Bayeux 99 km.

The age and gender profile of the Moulinex workforce would have significant implications for experiences of mobility. A large-scale survey of those who lost

their jobs in 2001 showed that the average length of service was twenty-six years and the average age forty-nine.¹⁶ Similarly, when the Argentan and Mamers sites had closed four years earlier, a significant proportion of the workforce was in mid-life, with long service, but too young for early retirement. Jacqueline Martin's profile was typical—she was forty-five years old when she made the move from Argentan to Bayeux.¹⁷ Many of those in post in the 1990s had been hired in the late 1960s or 1970s: Having joined Moulinex as young women at a time when it was still expanding, they had remained there as the company's fortunes changed and as the alternative prospects for stable industrial jobs stagnated. The majority of Moulinex workers had grown up in the region and the stability of this workforce was further reinforced by the growth of working-class property ownership among this generation of workers.¹⁸ The age profile of this group meant that although few had very young children, some still had sons and daughters living at home, while others assisted with care for their grandchildren or elderly parents. As these caring roles fell disproportionately on women, who were socialized more than men to prioritize such duties, women tended to be more reluctant than men to move for work.¹⁹ The question of how to reconcile family and professional life would loom large in the concerns of women who faced the decision of whether to accept a transfer to another site or seek alternative employment closer to home.

The gendered division of labor, combined with the organization of production at Moulinex and the location of the factories in largely rural areas, produced a particular set of social and spatial relations. Rather than being concentrated in a factory town whose identity was closely tied to industry, much of the workforce at the Moulinex sites discussed here was residentially dispersed across small- and medium-sized rural towns and villages. As the Alençon factory had expanded from the late 1950s, it had run a growing fleet of coaches which brought workers from the surrounding area: by 1965, thirty-two coaches transported workers from within a radius of 35 km.²⁰ The opening of network of satellite factories, grouped around the hubs of Alençon in the south and Caen (or more precisely the suburb of Cormelles) in the north, was intended to reduce travelling distance and bring the factories closer to a dispersed population. By the 1970s, each factory specialized in particular appliances and although there were some variations in the product ranges and their locations over time, there was considerable stability in the types of products manufactured at each site: Alençon was the home of the coffee machine, for example, Argentan the home of the hairdryer and later the deep fat fryer, and Mamers the home of grinders and mixers.²¹ Thus, while the towns where Moulinex was located typically did not have a rich industrial tradition or identity, for Moulinex workers, each factory had a clear identity, aligned with particular products.

While the occupational identities of male skilled workers tend to draw on craft traditions, notions of skill, and technical competence and/or a certain pride in hard physical labor, female production workers often articulate their attachment to their work in terms of pride in the product.²² At Moulinex, the link between place and product added a spatial dimension to these work-based identities. Thus, when Jacqueline Martin moved to Bayeux, she was fortunate that the product she worked on was also being relocated to that site, allowing her to retain some sense of continuity: "I'm following my fryers," she told a journalist, her use of the possessive

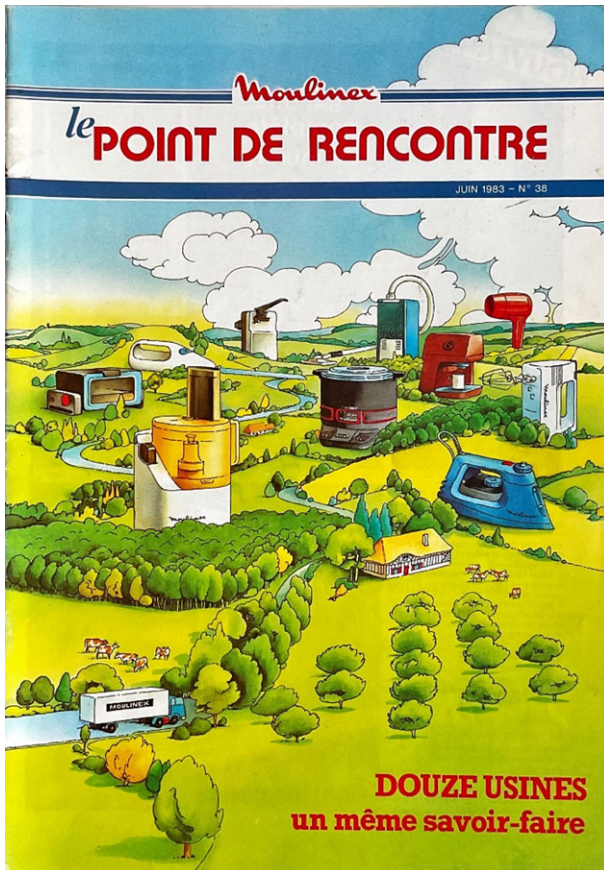


Figure 1. Cover image, *Le Point de Rencontre*, June 1983 (Courtesy of Direction des Archives du Calvados).

encapsulating the link between product and identity.²³ The identification of sites with products was actively promoted by Moulinex, notably through the company magazine *Le Point de Rencontre*: for example, a 1977 issue included a “who makes what?” feature, while the cover image for a 1983 issue represented factories as giant appliances nestling in the green landscape associated with Lower Normandy (Figure 1).²⁴

Pride in the brand’s products even turned into a form of competition between factories, as former shop steward, Claude Renault explained:

CR: It’s kind of, we defend our products because we’re surrounded by them, there was a bit of competition between sites, in relation to...even among workers in relation to their products.

FG: What do you mean?

CR: Each time there was a site that closed, Mamers, Argentan, people said: “but we don’t understand, we’re the best, we’re the ones who increased output,

productivity, we're the best, we're better than Alençon which isn't closing." Because in reaction people said, "why are we closing when we're the best, it's always the same, I do a good job and the others over there don't."

FG: So, there was also competition in relation to the product...

CR: Yes, there was a bit of that. At one point, there was the idea that the reason it went under was because the microwaves were too expensive, we made nothing on microwaves so it would have made more sense to stop making them, from an outside point of view. You couldn't say that in Caen. They should have stopped the microwaves much earlier and that would have saved Moulinex. Well even if the microwaves made little or no money, that wouldn't have changed much.²⁵

While there is generally a strong sense of attachment to the Moulinex brand among ex-Moulinex workers, Renault's remarks highlight not just the way in which this was articulated in terms of local attachments to "our product" and "our factory," but the extent to which successive restructuring plans exacerbated rivalries. This would have implications for experiences of transfer to other sites.

Choices and Constraints

While those Moulinex workers who were over fifty-two years old were typically eligible either for early retirement or for an asbestos-related pension, their colleagues faced a choice between trying to find alternative employment locally or accepting a transfer, in some cases a long way from home. Employment opportunities for those with few formal qualifications were limited, particularly in more rural areas, and from the beginning of the 1980s, many women workers whose factories closed moved into the personal care sector.²⁶ This pattern continued during the wave of factory closures in France in the late 1990s and early 2000s: Elisabetta Pernigotti's research has suggested that most employers in Lower Normandy were reluctant to take on women who were over thirty-five, and that this was a significant factor in the decision of women in this age group to enter the booming domestic care sector.²⁷ Such work not only tends to be low-paid but is frequently part-time and associated with informal practices such as hours paid "off the books" (without related social benefits). Indeed, among those workers who were in employment two years after losing their jobs at Moulinex in the closures of 2001, only 21 percent of semi-skilled production workers (a group that consisted almost entirely of women) had stable full-time work, the remainder being employed in various forms of precarious and/or part-time roles; in contrast 80 percent of the (predominantly male) skilled workers who had found alternative employment were on stable, full-time contracts.²⁸

Despite the drawbacks of employment in the care sector, some roles offered certain advantages, the profession of childminder being the most coveted.²⁹ As Roupnel-Fuentes has noted, a move into childminding allowed these women, who had come through the bruising experience of factory closure, to prove their worth as workers by "putting their experience as a mother to the test" in a professional setting.³⁰ Although the skills required for this work were economically and socially undervalued, they were valorized by gender norms. Moreover, compared to the

option of transferring to another production site, local childminding jobs saved women not only a lengthy commute, but also the effort of integrating into a new factory environment. This local work could offer a way to reconcile personal life, family life, and professional life—something that had long been a strain on women workers.

While some Moulinex workers turned down the offer of a transfer, those who accepted generally felt they had no choice. Jacqueline Martin had been at Moulinex for twenty-four years when she agreed to take a post 100 km from home. “I made a snap decision,” she told a journalist. “At my age [45], with the job situation as it is, I’d take anything, even night shifts if I had to.”³¹ The risk of not finding any other work thus played a significant part in her decision. A few years later, after Moulinex went bust, Monique Guéranger, who had worked at the Alençon factory, found herself facing the same situation: “I accepted because I was pushing 50 and I said to myself, I’m never gonna find another job. Also, I was in the limelight for I don’t know how long. I thought no one’s going to want me, everyone knows who I am.”³² Monique was a trade union rep involved in the struggle over the factory closure, and her visibility in this capacity was liable to prove a disadvantage in the local labor market.

While these women articulated their sense of insecurity about their job prospects in terms of age, the latter was just one of several intersecting factors that put them at a disadvantage in the labor market and contributed to anxiety about being too old. All other things being equal (including age), women were twice as likely as men to be unemployed two years after the company’s collapse. Female workers blamed this on a lack of “women’s jobs” and on a negative reputation that clung to the women of Moulinex, whose long years of service in one company now became a liability as they were reproached for their lack of skills and versatility.³³ Mireille Jouvin, who had spent thirty-three years at Moulinex and turned fifty in 2001, only a few weeks after learning that her factory would close, hinted at the way in which gender, class, and age converged to limit the opportunities for women like herself who had reached mid-life with few formal qualifications: “even younger women than me couldn’t find anything and they were told that they were older, that they were too old,” she lamented. She had attended the unemployment office, but concluded “well, given my age—me and so many others—cleaning people’s houses was all they thought we were good for!”³⁴ The fact that Moulinex factories drew on a rural population (especially one of a certain age) and the belief that the company was dated—associated in the public imagination with the postwar boom years rather than the cutting edge of French industry in the twenty-first century—may also have contributed to a negative perception of Moulinex workers: according to an employment advisor in Alençon, it took months to convince employers that they weren’t “savages.”³⁵ In this sense class, gender, and rurality intersected with age to place these women in an unfavorable position in the labor market. When women like Jacqueline and Monique said they had little option but to accept a transfer, they spoke with the weight of these factors bearing down on them.

Adaptation and Integration

Moving to a new workplace implied a process of adaptation to local working practices and integration into a new group of colleagues. These processes could also have

implications for the ways in which gender, class, and place-based identities were negotiated. Indeed, integration was complicated in some cases by the strong identity of each Moulinex site and the history of competition between them. When Julie Duprès was transferred to Mayenne, she did not feel comfortable in her new factory because some “girls from Mayenne” told the workers from Villaines-la-Juhel, on their arrival, that “they could have fired you”—to which Julie replied that if Mayenne continued to function, it was because the work from Villaines-la-Juhel had been transferred there.³⁶ While this anecdote suggests that identification with the old factory and the colleagues one had known there remained strong, at least initially, for Julie, it also conveys a very clear sense of no longer being at home at work. Indeed, Marie-Gisèle Chevalier, a former trade union representative at Moulinex who moved from Argentan to Bayeux, has described herself as a “*déracinée*”—an uprooted person—observing that she and her colleagues from Argentan were never really accepted in Bayeux.³⁷

Differences in both the official and unofficial organization of work also complicated the transition for some, notably at Bayeux, where a new method of product assembly was introduced. In Argentan, Jacqueline Martin had worked on an assembly line and remarked that: “With the line, there were constraints, because you had to always be there next to the conveyer belt. But they couldn’t accelerate it.” At Bayeux, lines had been replaced by so-called “islands” which had no conveyor belt to determine the pace of work. Jacqueline’s description of the island assembly stations makes clear that this was much more than a technical change. It had significant implications for social and psychological relations at work:

In the workshop we’re arranged in a U shape. Five people do everything, welding..., cabling, packaging. Three stations where you stand and two where you sit. With a changeover every hour. You have to know the deep fat fryer by heart and I’ve never learned that. Also, we set the pace ourselves. If you’ve not finished the girl next to you is left waiting. It’s stressful. I’m with young ones, they’re 30 years old so they go really fast. And I get stressed out.³⁸

According to its proponents, the “island” method offered a means of enriching the tasks undertaken by workers and giving them greater autonomy. However, workers’ accounts of life in this factory tend to highlight not autonomy but individualism, suggesting an “every woman for herself” mentality which meant that faster workers exercised pressure on those who were slower. The Bayeux factory is also associated with an intensification of work in these accounts. Josette Gosselin, who was transferred to Bayeux from Caen in the late 1990s, explained:

...all the time we were in Caen, we worked how we wanted. But at Bayeux, it had to be like this, you couldn’t do it any other way. And in any case, in Bayeux in the last three years, there was a productivity push.³⁹

Josette’s perception that she and her colleagues had more control over how they worked in Caen may be partly attributable to the fact that she spent most of her career on an individual work-station rather than an assembly line. Yet her remarks also

point to what Danièle Linhart has called the “clandestine management” of the constraints imposed by the organization of work, i.e., the ways in which workers appropriate their task and establish informal working practices.⁴⁰ For Linhart, such codes and practices play an important part in workers’ sense of ownership of their work and of feeling “at home” in the workplace.⁴¹ Moving to another factory meant leaving this informal community of practice and encountering a new set of expectations: for Josette, the pace of work and prescriptiveness of the management culture at Bayeux made it difficult to develop the sense of ownership of the work that she had built up in Caen; for Jacqueline, the organization of work there served to undermine solidarity among workers, contributing to her sense of isolation. It is perhaps not surprising then that Jacqueline turned to her old networks to find a solution—she approached a foreman she knew from Argentan and asked him to reassign her to a different role.⁴²

It is notable that when Jacqueline articulated her sense of being out of place in her new work environment, she alluded to the age gap between herself and her immediate colleagues (“I’m with young ones, they’re 30 years old so they go really fast”). Being younger was associated in the testimony cited above not just with being faster but implicitly with being more individualistic. Looking back on their working lives after the closures, long-serving Moulinex workers whose careers had begun in the 1960s and 1970s often evoked the camaraderie of their former workplace. Women workers in particular recalled practices that domesticated the environment of the shopfloor, such as birthday celebrations on the assembly line.⁴³ These acts of making a home in the factory were remembered fondly in part because they were contrasted with stories about difficult working conditions and intense pressure on productivity: it was the “good atmosphere” among the “girls” on the line that made the demanding aspects of the job more bearable. While not all memories were positive, particular value was attached to experiences of mutual aid in the workplace.⁴⁴ The 1970s were also years in which women workers at Moulinex mobilized collectively in a series of strikes that protested against their working conditions, including productivity targets.⁴⁵ In contrast, younger workers who had begun their working lives more recently were differently socialized, their expectations more informed by the employment practices of the latter period, which emphasized flexibility and autonomy—the new organization of assembly work at Bayeux being a case in point. Such generational shifts within the working class have also been noted by Béaud and Pialoux in their study of workers in the automobile industry.⁴⁶ These cross-generational encounters were clearly not exclusive to situations where workers joined new workplaces, but restructuring plans and job relocation certainly created a context in which workers were more likely to find themselves in new work situations that affected their sense of self and relationship to work: feeling old was one manifestation of this. Moreover, in an environment where the ability to work at pace was a defining feature of “women’s work,” where longer serving workers had developed gendered forms of workplace solidarity that were less familiar to younger workers, and where age was particularly penalizing for women in the labor market, “feeling old” should itself be understood as a gendered phenomenon.⁴⁷

Other differences in factory cultures also became visible as a result of workers being transferred to new sites, including divergences in the ways gender identities

were expressed in workplace practices. In particular, we find this articulated as a gap between “town girls” and “country girls.” Monique Guéranger recounts that when she moved to the factory in the village of Fresnay, it was like going back in time. Asked why, she replied:

Well because, not at all, I don't mean to say [we were] ‘more advanced’, but not the same, uhm... An example: when I went to work, I wore my coat. I dressed like I'm dressed now. I take care of my appearance, that's just how it is, that's life. *There*, they come into work in their overalls, they leave in their overalls. Everyone. We used to see them all in a line in their overalls... because it's very down to earth there, they're country folk. It's not very sophisticated. Different from us. The girls from Fresnay used to say, ‘oh look, town girls’ because we took care of our appearance or whatever, they found that...there was a gap.⁴⁸

The town in question here is Alençon—not a metropolitan center, but rather a modestly-sized provincial town of less than thirty thousand people, which drew part of its workforce from the surrounding rural area. Nonetheless, Monique Guéranger, found that things in Alençon had “evolved,” as she put it, whereas “the Fresnay girls hadn't evolved”:

They used to go “shh ! the boss is coming, we mustn't speak.” I'd say “stop, hang on a minute, we're not in 1950 anymore!” They were still in that system, as if we were back in the first years when I was in Alençon. That was what it felt like. So we spoke about it, the Alençon girls, who were still in the same system, not the Fresnay system, the Alençon system, they didn't let themselves be pushed around. I said to the girls, “it's funny, these Fresnay girls, it's like going back 15 years”: “that's what we thought too when we arrived, exactly that. We'll teach them a thing or two!”

Here, place-based identities—expressed as an opposition between town and country—were associated with a gap in gender norms, whether at the level of dress habits or attitudes to hierarchy. Transferring to another factory meant encountering these different embodiments of what it was to be a working-class woman. In this case, it appears that the encounter allowed transplanted workers to feel affirmed in their own class and gender identity as they navigated the transition to a new workplace.

On the Road

As Fresnay was only 22 km (or a half hour drive) from Alençon, it was within reasonable commuting distance for many who had worked at Alençon, and this may have facilitated the relatively smooth transition experienced by Monique Guéranger, though it still meant getting up at 4am to be at work for the early shift.⁴⁹ In contrast, for those who accepted transfers to sites that were further afield, the distances involved created additional complications. Interviewed about her experiences for a news bulletin in 2001, Brigitte, who had previously worked at Moulinex Argentan, explained that she now had to travel 50 km to work and was working

nights as the bonus pay helped to cover her transport costs. As a divorced mother, apparently managing without significant parenting input from her former partner, she had to arrange bed and board for her children during the working week.⁵⁰ Dominique Oriot, who had worked at Moulinex Mamers for twenty-nine years, was forced to move home when she accepted a transfer to Mayenne, 100 km away. Having initially tried to sell her house in Mamers, she eventually rented it to her adult son (with an agreement that he would eventually buy it). However, her sixteen-year-old daughter refused to move with her as planned and Dominique found herself parted not only from her former factory and colleagues, but also from her children. These experiences crystallize the complexities of reconciling personal life, family life, and professional life when mobility appears to be the only option.

Dominique's story features in the documentary *Ex-Moulinex: mon travail, c'est capital*, which explores the trajectories of several workers in the aftermath of the closure of their factory.⁵¹ The film renders particularly evocatively the sense of dislocation that came with mobility in Dominique's case. The first scenes of the documentary show her outside her former home in Mamers, on a street where she had lived for almost her whole life until the factory closed. Significantly, we never see her inside the house. The camera follows her as she walks up the street and arrives at the now closed Moulinex factory, retracing the route she used to take to go to work. Just as she had looked at her house from the outside, we now see her standing in front of the factory looking in, estranged from these spaces she previously inhabited. The film then cuts to a shot of Dominique inside the factory, showing where the production lines used to be. Gesturing toward empty spaces she explains that one line is now in Limerick (Ireland), a second in Thurles (Ireland), and a third in Mexico. At one point a smile flashes across her face as she approaches a pillar that stands next to the old work-station where she used to keep what she calls "my little supplies," which included items such as her ashtray. For a moment we have a sense of how workers like her appropriated the space of the factory as their own, and we see the pleasure she takes in this fleeting sense of homecoming. But there are no supplies hidden in the pillar anymore. At the end of the sequence, we see Dominique leave the factory by climbing through the window, an intruder in a space where she once belonged.

The above scene conveys the extent to which, for Dominique, leaving Mamers meant breaking with a way of life built on local roots, geographical proximity, and stable employment. The decision to accept a transfer to Mayenne also had a profound impact on the conditions in which she carried out her caring work as a mother, particularly given her daughter's decision not to join her. Although her daughter was old enough to make her own decision about moving, she still needed parental care. This meant that in order to fulfil her maternal role and maintain her family life, Dominique made a 200 km round trip every weekend. As well as being an emotional strain, these domestic arrangements implied an additional financial burden (the cost of travel and supporting two households) that was well beyond Dominique's means, leading her to seek short-term assistance from an emergency fund run by the town council.⁵²

Indeed, the challenges of managing the double burden of professional and domestic labor, and of reconciling mobility with family life, were particularly stark for

Dominique as she was a lone parent. In this respect, her situation (like that of Brigitte) was by no means unique. Indeed, an article in the national press in 1996 reported that politicians were particularly concerned about the number of lone parents with children still in education among the women due to be made redundant at Moulinex in Argentan and Mamers.⁵³ Such a state of affairs was of course symptomatic of the way in which gender norms have shaped the distribution of care work and child custody arrangements: the vast majority of single parent families in France are headed by women.⁵⁴

Throughout the documentary, Dominique is frequently filmed in her car, suggesting that her life is now characterized by being perpetually on the road: the settled life she once had appears to have been replaced by one defined by mobility. In one scene, filmed as she drove between Mayenne and Mamers to see her children, the filmmaker asks whether she might have considered buying a house in Mayenne if her daughter had been willing to join her. Dominique's reply is definitive: "there's no point" she says, indicating that she sees no prospect of being able to put down roots again. Already, she notes, there was talk of workers from Mayenne being transferred to another Moulinex site at Carpiquet (near Caen): "Now that I've lost my house, my family, my family life. Well, if I have to move, I'll move again. Here or elsewhere, the main thing is I need to work." Given that Dominique had previously spent her whole life in one town and belonged to a generation of working-class people for whom home ownership had been an important social aspiration, this statement suggests that job relocation and the disruption of domestic life that came with it had brought about a significant shift both in her expectations for the future and her relationship to place. If Dominique appeared to accept rootlessness here in some sense, she did so with none of the bravado expressed by High's "interstate gypsies."⁵⁵ She spoke with a kind of resignation and perseverance as she contemplated another move that would take her even further from her family.

Like those American autoworkers interviewed by High, Dominique too went through a series of restructuring plans. After *Ex-Moulinex, mon travail c'est capital* was filmed, she was indeed transferred to Carpiquet. By May 2004, this factory, which had survived the collapse of Moulinex in 2001, thanks to a management buy-out, was supplying motors to what was now the Seb-Moulinex group. Entirely dependent on this outsourced work, it was again under threat of closure. Dominique appeared in the news coverage, described as a closure "veteran." Unlike the "I75 Gypsies," however, she turned to the metaphor of family rather than that of the road to express her relationship to work: Moulinex is "kind of my family," she told the reporter. "I've lived with them as much as I have with my children."⁵⁶ Here, Dominique articulated an attachment to the brand that transcended the old rivalries between Moulinex sites. Indeed, since Moulinex had gone bust in 2001 and the Carpiquet factory was not even formally part of the Seb group, which acquired the Moulinex brand name, the "family" that she evoked was not co-terminous with the legal entity known as Moulinex. Moreover, much of what characterized earlier ideas of the "Moulinex family," including longstanding relationships with colleagues and accompanying practices of sociability, had gone. The language of "family" seems rather hollow in this context. All that allowed Dominique to cling to a sense of

belonging in her work was the fact that she and her Carpiquet colleagues were still involved in the manufacture of Moulinex-branded products.

Conclusion

In her study of young women and girls in rural France, the sociologist Yaelle Amsellem-Mainguy observes that “mobility is at the heart of all narratives,” as access to education, services, work, and social contacts depends on having a means of transportation.⁵⁷ For middle-aged women in such areas, whose manufacturing jobs came under threat in redundancy plans and factory closures at the end of the twentieth century, the question of mobility likewise came into sharp focus; in this case, however, what defined their experience was the imperative of finding a professional activity in the absence of any other meaningful prospect of stable employment or retraining.

Existing studies of workers affected by industrial restructuring have often centered on the local impact of workplace closure, the experience of unemployment, or the transition to employment in new sectors. As Cédric Lombas notes in his study of “permanent restructuring” in the Belgian steel industry, shifting the perspective to those who remain in employment as firms shed workers can provide fresh insights into the implications of restructuring as a longer-term process, rather than a single moment of rupture.⁵⁸ Experiences of mobility between plants are a key part of this story. The transitions involved in staying in work may be less dramatic than those involved in losing one’s livelihood but the everyday nature of these challenges and adaptations speaks to the ways in which working life was quietly transformed for those who worked in businesses undergoing such changes.

Gender is essential to our understanding of this process. The challenges faced by Moulinex workers were the product of a particular form of geographical and gendered divisions of labor. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, there was a significant expansion of light manufacturing in predominantly rural areas of western France, creating large numbers of semi-skilled jobs in these regions, while company headquarters and more highly skilled jobs remained concentrated in the Paris region. Girls and young women with few qualifications were actively recruited to these jobs, providing a cheap source of labor. In this sense, Moulinex was typical. As these jobs increasingly disappeared in the 1990s and 2000s, a population of middle-aged women workers who often had few formal qualifications and little experience outside industry faced a choice between moving to another site or entering precarious forms of work in cleaning and personal care.

To keep working at Moulinex meant negotiating varying levels of disruption to personal and family life through relocation or commuting at unsocial hours. This presented both practical and emotional challenges as women were expected to carry the primary burden of familial labor. The move to a new site also tended to destabilize work-based identities and solidarities that were rooted in particular workplaces. While the encounter with new colleagues and local workplace cultures could sometimes be affirming, it was often isolating and could be demoralizing, especially where new managerial practices fostered an individualist culture at odds with the collective values that formed an important part of the culture of long-serving workers. What is absent in the Moulinex corpus is the valorization of mobility as part of a

battle-hardened displaced worker identity. Marie Gisèle Chevalier comes closest when she describes herself and her colleagues as “uprooted” (*déracinés*). Elsewhere, the language of home and family remained fundamental to the ways in which the relationship to work was understood, even as the metaphor of the workplace family was stretched in some cases to breaking point.

Notes

1. Isabelle Mandrat, “Elle suit ses friteuses. D’une usine à l’autre,” *Libération* July 17, 1997.
2. Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo, *Steeltown USA: Work and Memory in Youngstown* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2002); Ewan Gibbs, *Coal Country: The Meaning and Memory of Deindustrialisation in Postwar Scotland* (London: University of London Press, 2021); Steven High, *One Job Town: Work, Belonging and Betrayal in Northern Ontario* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018); Alice Mah, *Industrial Ruination, Community and Place* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012); Steven High, Lachlan MacKinnon, et al., *The Deindustrialized World: Confronting Ruination in Postindustrial Places* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018).
3. Mah, *Industrial Ruination*, 153.
4. Steven High, *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America’s Rust Belt, 1969-1984* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 41–53.
5. High, *Industrial Sunset*, 43.
6. High, *Industrial Sunset*, 69.
7. Steven High, *Industrial Sunset*, 64–71.
8. Arthur McIvor and R. Johnston, “Dangerous Work, Hard Men and Broken Bodies: Masculinity in the Clyde-side Heavy Industries,” *Labour History Review* 69 (2004): 135–52.
9. For an account of these historiographical developments, see Marion Fontaine and Xavier Vigna, “La Désindustrialisation, une histoire en cours,” *20 et 21. Revue d’histoire* 144 (2019): 7–9.
10. On the French coal and steel industries, see, for example, Donald Reid, *The Miners of Decazeville: A Genealogy of Deindustrialization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985); Pascal Raggi, *La Désindustrialisation de la Lorraine du fer* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2019); Marion Fontaine, “Moderniser, convertir... désindustrialiser? Le cas des mines françaises (fin des années fin des années 1940-début des années 1960)” *20 et 21. Revue d’histoire* 144 (2019): 81–96.
11. See, for example, Jackie Clarke, “Closing Time: Deindustrialisation and Nostalgia in Contemporary France,” *History Workshop Journal* 79 (2015): 107–25; Fanny Gallot, *En Découdre: comment les ouvrières ont révolutionné le travail et la société* (Paris, 2015); Romain Castellesi, “‘Ils détruisent notre vie, ils cassent nos usines.’ Désindustrialisation et démobilisations dans deux villes moyennes françaises. Romans et Autun (1949-2017)” *20 et 21. Revue d’histoire*, 144 (2019): 115–29; Amandine Tabutaud, “À la croisée de la Seine-Saint-Denis et de la Haute-Vienne. Les ouvrières aux prises avec la désindustrialisation (1970-1980),” *20 et 21. Revue d’histoire* 144 (2019): 131–44 ; Romain Castellesi, “‘Les Armes des faibles et la faiblesse des armes,’ Actions et réactions ouvrière en situation de désindustrialisation en France (1945-2012),” Doctoral thesis, Université Bourgogne-Franche Comté, 2021.
12. This is not to suggest that the valorization of worker mobility is new in itself. Moscovici commented in 1959 on the myth that equated mobility with dynamism and modernity. See Serge Moscovici, “La résistance à la mobilité géographique dans les expériences de reconversion,” *Sociologie du travail* 1 (1959): 25. Nonetheless, the period since the 1980s has seen an ideological shift toward greater valorization of flexibility over security of employment in France. See Dominique Méda, “La flexicurité à la française: un échec avéré,” *Les Politiques sociales* 3–4 (2012): 86–97.
13. Thomas Sigaud, “La grande mobilité géographique domicile-travail: l’inscription spatiale des inégalités entre travailleurs,” *Travail et Emploi* 160 (2019): 75–102; Quentin Ravelli, “Cadres, techniciens et ouvriers: mobilités professionnelles et privilège spatial,” *Espaces et sociétés* 135 (2008): 157–71; Cécile Vignal, “Mobilités, migrations et ancrages face à la délocalisation de l’emploi,” *NETCOM: Réseaux, communication et territoires / Networks and communication studies* 19 (2005): 193–210, Jean-Luc Deshayes, “Mobilité ou mobilisation? Les sidérurgistes du bassin de Longwy et leurs enfants dans les années 1980,” *Les Mondes du Travail* 14 (2014).

14. “Le plan social de Moulinex provoque une vive réaction politique,” *Le Monde*, June 21, 1996; Isabelle Mandrat, “Chonique d’un plan social,” *Libération* June 26, 1996.
15. Frédéric Lemaître, “Les leçons ambiguës d’un plan social,” *Le Monde*, February 12, 1998.
16. Roupnel-Fuentes, *Les Chômeurs de Moulinex* (Paris: PUF, 2011), 24.
17. Mandrat, “Elle suit ses friteuses.”
18. See Fanny Gallot, *En Découdre: comment les ouvrières ont révolutionné le travail et la société* (Paris, 2015), on this generation of women workers in France.
19. Roupnel-Fuentes, *Les Chômeurs de Moulinex*, 176–77.
20. Archives du Calvados (hereafter ADC): 2003 JP 1058 913 “Notre politique régionale concernant la main d’œuvre,” June 30, 1965
21. Archives municipales d’Alençon (hereafter AMA): *Le Point de Rencontre* 12 (March 1977); *Le Point de Rencontre* 38 (June 1983); *Le Point de Rencontre* 49 (September 1986). *Le Point de Rencontre* was the staff magazine at Moulinex.
22. Fanny Gallot, “De l’attachement des ouvrières au produit de leur travail,” *Contretemps* 10 (2011): 81–87; Jackie Clarke, “Work, Consumption and Subjectivity in Postwar France: Moulinex and the Meanings of Domestic Appliances 1950s–1970s,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 47 (2012): 838–59; Romain Castellesi, “Les Armes des faibles et la faiblesse des armes.’ Actions et réactions ouvrière en situation de désindustrialisation en France (1945–2012),” Doctoral thesis, Université Bourgogne-Franche Comté, 2021: 384–94. Amandine Tabutaud also notes briefly how the products of garment workers were mobilized as a symbol of local *savoir-faire* in struggles to maintain jobs in rural areas such as the Limousin in “À la croisée de la Seine-Saint-Denis et de la Haute-Vienne. Les ouvrières aux prises avec la désindustrialisation (1970–1980),” *20 & 21. Revue d’histoire* 144 (2019): 142.
23. Mandrat, “Elle suit ses friteuses”.
24. AMA, *Le Point de Rencontre* 12 (March 1977); *Le Point de Rencontre* 38 (June 1983).
25. Interview with Claude Renault, conducted by Fanny Gallot, January 25, 2011.
26. See Tabutaud, “À la croisée de la Seine-Saint-Denis et de la Haute-Vienne”: 139–40, on the challenges facing women in rural areas; C Trotzier, “L’Avenir inégal. Trajectoires de femmes et d’hommes après un licenciement collectif,” Doctoral thesis, Paris VIII 2008.
27. See Elisabetta Pernigotti, “Domestic work in France and Italy: Comparative Case Studies in the Contemporary Diffusion of Informal Employment,” *Work Organisation, Labour and Globalisation* 6 (2012): 49–61 and Elisabetta Pernigotti, *Désindustrialisation et précarisation au féminin en France et en Italie* (Paris 2018), 23.
28. Roupnel-Fuentes, *Les Chômeurs de Moulinex*, 198.
29. Roupnel-Fuentes, *Les Chômeurs de Moulinex*, 202.
30. Roupnel-Fuentes, *Les Chômeurs de Moulinex*, 174.
31. Mandrat, “Elle suit ses friteuses.”
32. Monique Guéranger, interviewed by Fanny Gallot, January 25, 2011. Monique also discusses her experiences in the documentary *Moulinex: Vivre après la faillite* by Mouhcine El Ghomri, screened on Arte October 11, 2005.
33. Roupnel-Fuentes, *Les Chômeurs de Moulinex*, 191.
34. Interview with Mireille Jouvin, conducted by Jackie Clarke, June 25, 2010.
35. Julie Joly, “Vivre sans Moulinex,” *L’Express*, November 14, 2002
36. Interview with Julie Duprès, conducted by Fanny Gallot, July 5, 2010.
37. Interview with Marie Gisèle Chevalier, conducted by Fanny Gallot, May 20, 2011. Romain Castellesi has found similar integration issues when garment workers were transferred between sites by the French underwear manufacturer Dim in 1974–1975. See Castellesi, “Les Armes des faibles et la faiblesse des armes,” 366–67.
38. Mandrat, “Elle suit ses friteuses”.
39. Interview with Josette Gosselin, conducted by Jackie Clarke June 29, 2010.
40. Danièle Linhart, *Travailler sans les autres?* (Paris 2009), 47.
41. Linhart, *Travailler sans les autres?*, 47–65.
42. Mandrat, “Elle suit ses friteuses.”
43. E.g., Interview with Jocelyne Rouvrais conducted by Jackie Clarke May 18, 2010; Interview with Josseline Berthame conducted by Jackie Clarke May 11, 2010; Gallot, *En Découdre*, 120.

44. See Clarke, “Closing Time: Deindustrialisation and Nostalgia in Contemporary France,” *History Workshop Journal* 79 (Spring 2015): 112, 115.
45. Gallot, *En Découdre*, 212–15.
46. Stéphane Beaud and Michel Pialoux, *Retour sur la condition ouvrière : enquête aux usines Peugeot de Sochaux-Montbéliard* (Paris 2012, 1st ed.1999).
47. This is not to suggest that men might not experience similar feelings in their own work settings, but rather to acknowledge women workers’ subjective sense of ageing was shaped by the gendered division of labor and by norms and practices that were classed, gendered, and generational.
48. Interview with Monique Guéranger, conducted by Fanny Gallot, January 25, 2011.
49. *Moulinex: Vivre après la faillite* by Mouhcine El Ghomri, screened on Arte October 11, 2005.
50. *19-20 Édition nationale*, France 3, April 25, 2001.
51. *Ex-Moulinex: mon travail, c’est capital* (Maria-Pierre Brêtas, Raphaël Girardot, and Laurent Salters, 2000). At the time of writing, the film is available to stream on Vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/channels/618776/121654112>.
52. *Ex-Moulinex: mon travail, c’est capital* (Maria-Pierre Brêtas, Raphaël Girardot, and Laurent Salters, 2000).
53. Isabelle Mandrat, “Chonique d’un plan social” *Libération*, June 26, 1996.
54. INSEE. See http://www.insee.fr/fr/themes/document.asp?ref_id=ip1195#inter3.
55. High, *Industrial Sunset*, 64–71.
56. France Télévision, *Journal Télévisé*, May 19, 2004.
57. Yaëlle Amsellem-Mainguy, *Les filles du coin. Vivre et grandir en milieu rural* (Paris 2021), 250.
58. Cédric Lombas, *La Restructuration permanente de la condition ouvrière. De Cockerill à ArcelorMittal* (Vulaines sur Seine, 2018).