

The intimacy of the gift in the economy of sex work

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Abstract

This article explores the intersection that exists between the economy and intimacy through an exploration of gift exchanges between Latin American sex workers and regular clients in London. It engages with scholarship on sex work and intimacy to explore the social dimension of gifts embedded in affective commodified relationships. It explores the ways in which gifts create socioeconomic and emotional spheres of speculation that contribute to the achievement of women's migration dreams. Tracing gift exchanges in sex work offers an opportunity to examine the development of relationships that emerge from intimate sexual transactions and to look at the ways in which gift exchanges in sex work constrain or enable women's social, economic, and emotional aspirations for the future.

KEYWORDS

sex work, hope, intimacy, gifts, migration, future

Resumen

Este artículo explora la intersección que existe entre la economía y la intimidad a través del estudio de intercambio de regalos entre sexo trabajadoras de Latino América y sus clientes en Londres. El artículo dialoga con estudios en trabajo sexual e intimidad para explorar las dimensiones sociales del intercambio de regalos que se encuentran localizados en relaciones comerciales sexuales. Principalmente, explora las maneras en las que los regalos crean esferas socio-económicas y emocionales de especulación que contribuyen a la realización de los sueños y aspiraciones de mujeres migrantes. Trazar el intercambio de regalos en el trabajo sexual ofrece oportunidades para examinar el desarrollo de relaciones que surgen de la transacción de intimidad sexual y observar las maneras en las que estos regalos limitan o potencia las aspiraciones sociales, económicas y emocionales de las mujeres. [*trabajo sexual, intimidad, migración, futuro, regalos*]

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"Apart from the possibility of getting the bills paid, you can always get all sorts of gifts, such as plane tickets, jewelry, clothes, expensive shoes, bags, manicures, lingerie, anything really," Sally, from Colombia, told me while talking about her recent relationship with an American client who was slowly becoming a regular. This client, Andrew, was a businessman who often came to London for work and enjoyed spending time with Sally, giving her expensive gifts and paying for her company and services. As a young woman, Sally had come to London to study English as a foreign language and work as a babysitter, a job she found boring and tiresome. More importantly, it did not leave her with free time to live the life she had imagined in London before migrating. After a few months of working as a babysitter, she met a Brazilian woman who introduced her to the world of strip dancing. After working as a stripper and carefully considering the economic benefits of selling sex, Sally briefly worked for a brothel before becoming an escort in London.

As an escort, she was able to maintain various relationships with regular clients who were considered—in her view—a form of insurance that guaranteed a constant flow of cash and gifts that allowed her to live the life she wanted in London. Keeping regular clients was a good financial decision, though Sally reminded herself that these were not personal but business relationships. "Sometimes when clients give you gifts, they think that they can get a discount for sex, or even worse, that they can get it for free. I do not care how many gifts they give me, they are not my partner, so if they want sex, they have to pay for it," she told me. For her, business success resided in the capacity to set up boundaries and avoid falling in love with clients. "We have to be careful, otherwise we run the risk of getting confused, fantasize about the future, lose money, and end up penniless and with a broken heart," she told me.

In this article, I examine the relationship between intimacy and the economy of sexual labor through a close analysis of various ambiguous exchanges—gifts, favors, services, monetary and nonmonetary transactions—between Latin American sex workers and clients in London. This discussion represents part of a larger scholarly debate that explores the intertwining of care, intimacy, and labor in sex work. My analysis encompasses an understanding of gift exchanges embedded in sexual commercial transactions characterized by the supply and demand for authentic intimacy in late capitalism, in which romance and other aspects of intimate life have become objects of consumption (Illouz 2007, 30). Paying attention to the ways in which the commodification of intimacy has transformed sexual work in late capitalism and has increasingly involved actions like gift giving, assertions of love, and claims of bounded authenticity (Constable 2009), I examine how migrant sex workers living under precarious labor locations, liminal legal statuses, and vulnerable socioeconomic conditions negotiate a range of bodily and emotional offerings through gifts and other nonmonetary exchanges with clients. I show how ambiguous gift exchanges are used to ideologically recode the intrinsic inequalities of this form of labor and to transcend the constraints and contradictions of these intimate relations in favor of women's self-making transnational projects and aspirations for the future. Gift exchanges help sex workers to imagine a future in which they would have gained some agency by achieving their migration goals. Gifts, in this regard, add—even if temporarily—some sense of security and hope into their precarious lives.

My interlocutors received a miscellaneous combination of things, most of which were given and branded as gifts. The exchanges, or ambiguous gifts, included: services, money transactions, cash, and all sorts of objects. Gifts, as several studies on sex work have demonstrated, have the capacity to generate desires for transnational romance and maintain long-term relationships between clients and sex workers (Brennan 2004; Cheng 2007, 2010); they can solidify and strengthen affective connections (Cabezas 2009; Salazar Parreñas 2011) and can legitimize relationships between sex workers and clients (Carrier-Moisan 2017; Frank 2003).¹ Studies suggest that in the midst of the delicate and often blurred boundaries between emotions and labor within sex work, gifts have the potential to prolong social relations between clients and sex workers beyond the sexual commercial transactions, and thus mask the capitalist labor transaction.

By the same token, these gift exchanges resonate with classic anthropological discussions on the gift that explore how gift giving in everyday life has the potential to create, maintain, and strengthen social bonds (Gudeman 2001; Laidlaw 2000). Gifts, as Mauss ([1950] 1990, 1) argues, entail a combination of interest and disinterest that nonetheless create a sense of obligation, social ties, and debts (Graeber 2001; Pipyrou 2014; Stan 2012). The new relationships generated by gift exchanges might result in cooperative (Polese 2014), competitive, altruistic, or antagonistic (Scheper-Hughes 2007) relationships, which in turn define the identities of the persons involved in the exchanges. Of key importance is the fact that these exchanges take place between transactors that are circumscribed by the economic, sexual, and emotional dynamics of sexual commerce. I consider here how gift exchanges are embedded in a field of power relations that are not produced by the exchange of gifts, per se, but are rather preceded by the social, economic, and material inequality that exists between clients and sex workers.

Drawing on anthropological discussions, I pursue the notion that gifts have the potential of being instrumental, particularly when the conditions of exchange determine and manipulate the status relationships (Yan 1996, 45). Gifts can also be calculative forms of appropriation rather than expressions of shared altruism (Bourdieu 1994). Their calculative aspect becomes relevant when gifts are indiscriminately and ambiguously used either as payments or gifts. As I will show, it is never entirely clear what the role of gifts is; consequently, people fight over the nature of these relationships. Even the women I worked with find themselves fighting internally and speculating about whether they have attained certain aspirations through these exchanges. In order to understand the ambiguity of gifts and contribute to a theory of gift transactions in which the links between people, objects, and social relations are at the core of the analysis (Carrier 1991, 13; Mauss [1950] 1990), I follow the subjective understanding of the meanings and values that women attach to the ambiguous gifts in parallel to the affective associations established with the men who give them and to new social ties defined or imagined by the exchanges. I take into consideration how sex workers deal with the often-delicate issue of mixing economic activity and intimacy by differentiating meaningful social relations and designating certain sorts of emotional and economic transactions as they deem appropriate for each relation (Zelizer 2012).

The ambiguous nature of these gifts—along with their calculative or instrumental effects—is also generated by the blurred boundaries between work and emotional intimacy in sex work. In this regard, my analysis entails an understanding of the emotional labor that women perform as part of their work with clients and of the emotional investments that they put into these relationships. Contributing to the work of feminist scholars who have argued for attention to the ways that intimacy, labor, and love figure in global processes (Agustin 2006; Bernstein 2007; Brennan 2004; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Faier 2011; Gutiérrez Garza 2019; Wilson 2004), my research considers how sex workers perform love—in particular, what Bernstein (2010, 154) calls “bounded intimacy,” defined as “the sale and purchase of authentic emotional and physical connection,” and perpetuate fantasies of transnational romance that are part of their self-making projects as migrants (Cheng 2010; De Sousa e Santos 2009; Hoang 2010; Piscitelli 2008a, 2008b; Yea 2005; Yeon Choo 2016; Zheng 2009). As a result, long-lasting affective relationships and gift exchanges with clients help sex workers lay a material and emotional foundation to achieve upward mobility, preserve middle-class identities fed by desires for commodities and a certain lifestyle, and pursue romantic aspirations to marry European white men that might help them secure a visa in the United Kingdom.

In the face of precarious labor locations, liminal legal statuses, and vulnerable economic conditions, gifts become important material resources that may result in relations of reciprocity, debt, and obligation between sex workers and clients. Furthermore, gifts can produce spheres of socioeconomic relations characterized by processes of speculation that allow women to orient their present lives toward their migration goals and invest in imaginative futures. Considering speculation as “the social and material means by which particular visions of the future are generated” (Sneath, Holbraad, and Pedersen 2009, 6), I argue that women speculate about their futures through gift exchanges. Through speculation, they are able to draw the future into the gap of uncertainty that intimate relationships with clients represent, a gap that leads to conjecture, to fantasy, and to imagining other possibilities (Bryant and Knight 2019). Gifts provide a veneer of affective entanglement that helps women speculate on their uncertain future. Hope, as Bloch (1986) suggests, opens contemplation to the future by allowing us to see what might be, what is not yet, and whether it is foreseeable and calculable or expected yet postponed (Crapanzano 2007; Guyer 2007). However, this hope is not an indeterminate future orientation, as Miyazaki (2004) argues, but is focused, attached to a specific object with a particular end. In this sense, hope has future-oriented qualities that are related to women’s realizations of their migration dreams. The exchanges of ambiguous gifts with clients helps us understand ethnographically how hope, sutured to the desire for a better future, is constructed through them.

The analysis of gift exchanges between sex workers and clients offers a material and emotional glimpse into the complex relationship between intimacy and the economy in late capitalism. In the following sections, I will show how gifts are used as mechanisms to deal with women’s current predicaments as menial migrant stigmatized labor, as mechanisms to disguise or shift inequalities within the labor relationship, and, more importantly, as objects on which to speculate and base aspirations for the future despite their embeddedness within unequal power relations. The article is based on consecutive fieldwork between August 2009 and April 2011 in London among Latin American women who worked in the domestic and sex industries. My informants were from Colombia, Peru, Brazil, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, Honduras, and Mexico. During fieldwork, I established close relationships with thirty-three women, including their families and friends and the communities that they belonged to. I lived with some of the women in the flats where they worked for periods of time. My long-term fieldwork gave me the opportunity to meet women in a familiar way and become part of their lives and social networks in London. In this article, I follow the trajectories of some of those who were sex workers from Colombia and Brazil and were involved in gift exchanges with regular clients. I draw both on participant observation and on semi-structured interviews conducted in Spanish and Portuguese during fieldwork.² I did not engage in sex work, but I spent time with them at work, when they had free time and when they were with friends and family. Although I met several clients and shared time with them, my analysis of gift exchanges is based on women’s perceptions and experiences of these exchanges. I cannot elucidate the meanings of gift exchanges on the side of the clients because I did not have access to this information, and as a result, I do not intend to presuppose their meanings.

MIGRATION JOURNEYS

My informants are part of a group of people that had recently migrated to the United Kingdom. The increase in Latin American migration to Europe was initially influenced by a series of restrictions that the US government imposed on immigration since the 1990s and then after 9/11. More recently, the global financial crisis in 2008 that provoked an unforeseen rise in unemployment and enormous levels of debt pushed thousands of Latin Americans out of countries like Portugal and Spain in search of work in other parts of Europe.³ For many, London offered a viable alternative thanks to the job opportunities that exist in the city for migrants willing to work in the service sector, which has driven the economic recovery of the United Kingdom since the downturn in 2008.⁴ Today, according to McIlwaine and Bunge (2016, 14), Latin Americans are the eighth-largest non-UK-born population in London, with a total of 145,000 people—and 250,000 in the United Kingdom as a whole. These authors clarify that 51 percent of the migrants are well educated, having attained tertiary level/university education (of which 1 percent are postgraduates).

These findings resonate with my informants’ educational backgrounds and class identifications. Although they came from different countries, women defined themselves as middle class and shared similar ideas regarding home ownership, education, moral values, and consumption as means through which they could symbolically, materially, and emotionally attain and perform class identity (Heiman, Freeman, and Liechty 2012; O’Dougherty 2002). In recent years, however, they were no longer able to improve their social status through education, and therefore found

themselves facing increasing levels of unemployment, debt, and lack of opportunities. They migrated in order to repay various debts and to sustain their families at a distance, but also to achieve class aspirations fed by commodities and a particular lifestyle (Cheng 2010; Parreñas 2011). For most, migration represented the opportunity to gain autonomy and freedom from constraining gender roles back home (Moser and McIlwaine 2004), search for new experiences, and potentially fulfill romantic ideas of transnational love (Faier 2007, 2011; Gutiérrez Garza 2019; Maia 2012; Piscitelli 2008a, 2008b).

Once in London, however, women's dreams and aspirations were severely restricted. For migrants who were undocumented, were not fluent in English, had little social capital, and lacked recognition of their former labor experience and education, opportunities were few and far between (Gutiérrez Garza 2018). Almost inescapably, they became part of the transnational care work industry that has promoted the rise in service sector temporary occupations, such as traditional forms of care work (domestic work, nannies, cleaners, elderly carers), while at the same time has fueled the growth and diversification of a transnational sex market structured by economic inequalities and racialized constructions of desire (Agustín 2006; Kempadoo and Doezema 1999; Padilla et al. 2007; Price-Glynn 2010). Before moving into sex work, my interlocutors worked as cleaners and/or domestic workers, although both occupations represented high levels of de-skilling, contradicted women's class identifications, and produced downward status mobility.⁵ As Parreñas (2001) and Lan (2006) suggest, the main paradox and central dislocation that defines the experiences of middle-class migrant domestic workers is the juxtaposition between economic emancipation and a decline in social status. This dislocation is a concrete effect of larger structural forces of globalization that include a lack of recognition of educational qualifications and work experience of women from the Third World in developed countries, combined with restrictions on social mobility in Latin America. The eventual entry into sex work was a deliberate choice—albeit made within a very limited range of options—in which women were able to, at the very least, double their income as domestic workers (which yields around £300–350 per week) by earning £150–180 a client per hour (Brennan 2004; Lahbabi and Rodriguez 2004; Zheng 2009).

Sex work also offered better chances to pursue socioeconomic aspirations and to find love, romance, and the prospects of marriage. Overall, women's shift from one occupation to the other is directly related to the wider socioeconomic order that favors feminized low-paid service and care sector work or other poorly remunerated part-time jobs (Oso Casas 2010). In this regard, notions of choice become complicated when located within the context of a gender-, race-, and class-stratified unequal global economy.⁶ As Chapkis (1997) reminds us, choosing sex work as a form of employment is severely limited by gender inequality and hierarchical structures of sex, race, and class at a global level. Women's choices are underpinned by a complex set of conditions that combine personal stories, kinship obligations, class identifications, and opportunities. As I will show, women's lives are characterized by a socioeconomic precarity that influenced their choices; still, these structural conditions must be understood within a framework in which agency plays a fundamental role, as they also prove to have the capacity to decide and plan their futures in London (Brennan 2004; Cabezas 2004; Carrier-Moisán 2018).

Women in my research entered sex work via strip dancing, in a move that was underpinned by social and practical circumstances. First of all, strip dancing was not considered sex work because it did not necessarily include sexual intercourse. Second, it was a job that women could combine with other occupations, such as domestic work, nannying, or cleaning during the day, without creating suspicion among friends and family. Third, it was regarded as exciting work in which women could meet potential romantic partners. Strip dancing appeared to be the least morally problematic choice, and for many, it became a gateway to sex work. Moving from one erotic occupation to another in order to increase income and social and business connections varied dramatically, as it depended on opportunity, business skills, dedication, and luck. Similar to the Brazilian middle-class strip dancers studied by Maia (2012) in New York, my informants used their racialized Latino traits as a marketing strategy to attract clients; they used their bodies as “erotic capital” to advance in the business (Hakim 2010; Kempadoo 2001). These racialized bodies were characterized by being brown or having tanned skin, brunette hair color, and, for some, prominent breasts (enhanced by surgery) and big buttocks. They also enhanced their “Latin Americanness” by embodying traditional feminine qualities of nurturance, docility, and passivity through emotional labor that, according to my interlocutors, clients regarded as Latino traits (Piscitelli 2008b). Women used these stereotypes to advance their business and compete in a racially diverse market. As I will show in the following sections, despite their business success (or not), the combination of emotional labor, intimacy, and exchange of gifts with regular clients produced complex forms of economic, social, and emotional entanglements that deeply affected women's subjectivities and their future.

BARGAINING WITH AMBIGUOUS GIFTS

When I first met Carolina, who was from Brazil, she was working sporadically in some brothels and swing parties. By working twice a week at the brothel and attending four or five swing parties during the week, she could earn up to £800—twice as much as what she earned when working as a domestic worker. Moving into sex work represented a real possibility to send remittances to her daughter. Her goal was to become an escort and build up her own clientele, so she started using the swing parties and the brothel to develop relationships with potential regular clients as a way to secure a stable income and be less exposed to violence. Whenever she contacted or was contacted by a client, she would initially set up a straightforward negotiation that included the price, the place, and the rules of the service. After a while, Carolina managed to have several regular clients who besides providing cash also offered company.

I remember meeting her back in 2010, one day before she was going to meet Sam, a regular client who had spent time with her outside of the workplace. He had already given her a few gifts, including flowers, perfume, a coat, and a teddy bear for her daughter in Brazil. She had arranged to meet him at a Brazilian restaurant that she liked and had been wanting to visit for a while. “What was the arrangement after dinner?” I asked. She said Sam was going to pay for a hotel room and would let her know if he wanted her to stay for a few hours or for the whole night. The next day, she explained how not only had Sam complained about the restaurant being expensive, but then at the hotel he started bargaining over the price (£70 per hour), wanting to pay only £140 in total despite having spent more than five hours with her. According to him, he was not obliged to pay for the hours at the restaurant, when she was clearly “not working.” “What did you do?” I asked her. “Well, I took the £140. At the end of the day, he invited me for dinner, brought me a gift, and had already spent money on me,” she replied.

As I eventually learned, this experience was the beginning of a long trail of bad negotiations, particularly when it came to regular clients who demanded time and “bounded intimacy” (Bernstein 2010). Carolina was effectively offering the “girlfriend experience,” characterized by the performance of emotional labor and courtship rituals of conventional romantic relationships, whereby clients can provide entertainment and gifts to sex workers (Carbonero and Garrido 2018; Sanders 2008). Not all women offered this type of service because of its time, attention, and emotional labor demands. When I use the term “emotional labor,” I refer to Hochschild’s (1985) work, which reveals the critical role that emotional labor has had on the service industry and its concomitant feminization. Emotional labor presumes that workers must manage and risk of becoming alienated from their own emotions while inducing feelings of well-being in clients or customers.

Within the sex work literature, there has been extensive discussion regarding the emotional labor and surface acting that women perform without necessarily getting entangled in emotional intimacies with clients (Brennan 2004; Brewis and Linstead 2000; Chapkis 1997; Day 2000; De Sousa e Santos 2009). Some studies, however, have recognized that not all women in sex work find the surface acting or the distancing process easy or even desirable (Carrier-Moisan 2017; Cheng 2007, 2010; Faier 2011, 2014). One of the reasons, according to Bernstein (2010), partly relies on the relocation of sexual labor from the streets to indoor venues where services incorporate more intimate contact and a larger investment of time with each client; but most importantly, it relies on the range of services offered in contemporary forms of sex work, which include the selling of “bounded intimacy.”

As women explained, clients do not only look for sex but also demand intimacy and romance and other aspects of intimate life, including affection, counseling, care, empathy, and other forms of attention (Illouz 2007). “Sometimes I feel more like a therapist than a prostitute. Clients want to talk about their problems, about their lives with us. They are too chatty sometimes, it can be exhausting,” Amanda (Brazil) told me while talking about one of her regular clients. “I can give a blow job or have sex with clients, but do not ask me to spend time with them pretending to be their girlfriend!” Denise (Brazil) told me. While Amanda and Denise rejected and often avoided offering services that required intensive forms of emotional labor, for Carolina, performing love, care, and romance presented her with the possibility to connect on a deeper level with some clients and to develop relationships that looked like relationships between friends, as she liked to say. Developing these relationships allowed her to not only counter the stigmatization of the occupation but also to pursue transnational desires for romance, freedom, and success.

Carolina aspired to meet someone who could help her with her visa and therefore achieve her dream of bringing her daughter to the United Kingdom. Whether gaining respectability or a visa were a “fantasy” or just wishful thinking, the repeated contact with particular clients and the presence of gifts allowed her to speculate on the possibility of a shift in her relationships. In this regard, studies in sex work have discussed how some women make distinctions between clients in the presence of gifts. Kelly (2008, 184) documents how sex workers in Mexico distinguish between clients who pay in cash and possible romantic partners who give gifts. Similarly, in Cuba, Cabezas (2009) shows how gifts signify a type of relationship and level of commitment between clients and sex workers (see also Hoang 2010; Kulick 1998).

For Carolina, a new coat, dinner invitations, or a gold necklace were exchanges that added meaning and, more importantly, defined new relationships with clients like Martin, who besides giving gifts, often invited her for dinner at his restaurant and to his home to spend weekends together. “We had such a great time together this weekend. I think he can turn into a real friend; we seem to have a lot in common. He might be able to help me by giving me a job in his restaurant,” she told me while we were talking about her expectations of her relationship with Martin. In a similar way, her relationship with Charles was turning into a sort of “romantic” relationship that was mediated by sharing time together outside of the realm of the sexual transaction and by gifts. Charles’s gifts of a winter jacket, an orthopedic cushion for her back, an external hard drive for her computer, and a new iPhone seemed appropriate exchanges with someone who, according to her, was treating her like a girlfriend.

In light of these gifts, she was unwilling to profit from these relationships that, according to her, were no longer commercial relationships. As a result, the compensation for her sexual services slowly diminished until it disappeared, or more precisely, was substituted by gifts and other types of exchanges. In her view, the presence of gifts along with the cancelation of cash strengthened the affective connections and legitimized new social ties between them. This rationale was based on the differentiation that she made between the run-of-the-mill clients who paid for the sexual services provided at the swing parties or brothels and those regular clients who engaged in further exchanges with her. By saying this, I am not trying to simplify the complexity of the sexual commercial transaction and therefore pretend that the presence of cash—as compensation—automatically empties and dissolves social relations or, as Graeber (2011, 104) argues, that the presence of cash “allow[s] us to cancel our debts. It gives way to call it even: hence, to end the relationship.” On the contrary, the presence of gifts in combination with the payment favored the maintenance of the relationship. As a result, in the face of commodified intimacy, women like Carolina deeply cared about making distinctions—even if they were not always successful—between the various types of payments and exchanges that occurred within her relationships (Zelizer 2012).

Unfortunately, her distinctions did not correlate with those of her clients, as the exchanges that she believed could normalize the relationships only enhanced the inequality and the power relations that preceded the gift exchanges. Therefore, she was completely disappointed when Abdul (a dentist)—who had introduced her to his kids and had invited her on weekend trips—refused to help her with treatment for a toothache that she was not able to afford, or when Martin refused to help her when she asked him to give her a job at his restaurant and instead, as a way to help her, put her in contact with a group of friends who needed a stripper for a stag party. For Carolina, the refusal of help entailed a lack of reciprocity between her and the clients. Help here is a different aspect of the exchange relationship that was attached to the futural orientation of expectation or hope toward these relationships. In the absence of help and financial need, when she tried to revert the relationships to the original commercial agreement, clients were unwilling to pay for sex and eventually vanished.

One could argue that clients took advantage of the intimacy and that there was a degree of calculation on the economic and emotional benefits that they could obtain from the relationship through gifts. These gifts were highly instrumental, as clients manipulated the status of the relationships and inequality that existed beforehand. While this holds true, for Carolina, gifts and other exchanges—due to their characteristics and the value attached to the relationships in which they were exchanged—allowed her to temporarily speculate on her particular vision of the future. Gifts juxtaposed with the selling of “bounded intimacy” filled the gap of uncertainty that characterized these commercial transactions and bestowed her with a temporary sense of respectability and the hope to fulfill transnational aspirations. However, Carolina’s expectations were not met, and speculating with gifts only produced disappointment. This, as Bryant and Knight (2019, 95) suggest, reflects the uncanniness of speculation, whereby expectations may not turn out as we expect, and as a result, hope gets shattered, and she was left with a sense of betrayal and in a dire economic situation. Nonetheless, ambiguous gifts provided a breadth of agency that helped her speculate on a future in which she would be economically independent and have gained legal status. Although disappointment characterized women’s relationships with clients, there were some women who managed to sustain material, emotional, and sexual exchanges with clients that benefitted them in the long term.

FULFILLING FANTASIES OF TRANSNATIONAL LOVE

Vanessa came to London to study English and to experience living abroad. Like many students back in 2010, she took a part-time job at a cleaning company to have extra cash to enjoy the city. The cleaning job was tiresome, low paying, and too demanding because of the unsociable hours at which she had to work and because it was backbreaking labor. After a few months, she was told by a friend about the opportunity to earn good money as a strip dancer. She was convinced that being a dancer/stripper would come to her more easily than working as a cleaner; it would also give her an opportunity to experience something new, earn money to buy the things she wanted, and, with luck, meet a handsome *mono* (white, blond man, in Colombian slang) that could become a potential romantic partner. Discussions on middle-class sex workers have shown how class identifications and taste influence the types of sex work that women choose and how they think about their work (Bernstein 2007, 78–80). As a young, middle-class woman, Vanessa was more interested in sexual experimentation, freedom, and romance through sex work rather than solving a dire economic situation or sustaining family at a distance. Romance, as Cheng (2010, 6) suggests, operates as a “mode of agency for women to develop their sense of self, pleasure and work, and for the pursuit of an existential mobility toward a better future through migration.” Transnational romance for Vanessa conveyed the possibility of achieving one of her migration goals: finding a husband in London.

Having established contacts at the bar, she moved to a brothel in a rich neighborhood of the city that attracted wealthy regular clients. After a couple of months of working at the flat, she had met two men who were quickly becoming regulars. Giorgio was young, single, and had come from Italy in pursuit of new experiences. By contrast, Mark, from London, was much older than her and married. Mark started visiting the flat two or three times a week and would pay extra money to spend more time with her; he enjoyed talking to her and asking her about her life. This was the first time that Vanessa worked for a client that wanted to talk and be pampered and cared for in an intimate way. He was, according to her, becoming a different type of client, one that she started seeing outside the brothel and with whom she engaged in further exchanges. Sharing time outside the brothel was complemented by a continuous flow of gifts. Mark’s gifts started with the usual things, such as flowers, chocolates, and wine. Then he started giving other things that very much appealed to Vanessa’s taste: “He brought me a Juicy Couture heart-shaped gold necklace, just like that,” she said; afterward, he gave her an expensive bag, a jacket, and a pair of leather boots. It appeared as if Mark was making efforts to usher a relationship from the commercial to the personal realm. Vanessa perceived these gifts as tips and tokens of appreciation for the services and the emotional labor she was providing. She thought that Mark was different from other clients and that the presence of gifts signaled his intentions of wanting to normalize the intimate social relation created by the sexual contract and develop a personal relationship with her.

Along with her relationship with Mark, she started making acquaintances with Giorgio, who also promoted the development of a relationship with Vanessa outside the brothel. Whenever Vanessa was free, they would often go out for dinner or a movie, go to clubs, or spend time with his friends. After a few months, their relationship evolved into what she described as something like a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship within which she no longer charged for sex. In many ways, going out with Giorgio actualized her transnational desire of wanting to marry a European white man and as a result gain social ascension and achieve a better lifestyle (Piscitelli 2008b). She was bringing into her work and personal relationships her migrant dreams and imagined futures, often blurring the boundaries between real and performed love (Cabezas 2009; Cheng 2010; Faier 2007). With Giorgio, she was not performing; she was in love with him and wanted to develop a romantic relationship. However, to achieve that dream, she

needed a visa to stay in London. Documents are “a badge and a sign of hope, which enable one to envision a future” (Piot 2010; cited in Pels 2015, 792), a future that included a husband. With this information in hand, Giorgio offered his help by proposing to marry her in exchange for £5,000. The transaction was not as straightforward as it appeared, however. What complicated matters was her inability to cover the cost of her marriage and Mark’s subsequent offer to pay for it because he wanted her to stay in London.

In addition to the £5,000 gift, Mark provided Vanessa with a flat, where she continued to see Giorgio and work sporadically, but mainly it was the place where she would meet Mark. In this new relationship, where Vanessa played the role of a sex worker and lover, they engaged in a series of exchanges that often blurred the boundaries between payments and gifts. For instance, labeling the money as gifts rather than compensation allowed Mark to make claims about their relationship—that he was no longer a client but her lover giving her money for household expenses. There were other exchanges that entailed an affective dimension: a plane ticket to go to Colombia for Christmas and money for the annual fees for English classes, the gym, and the dress and ring for her wedding. These were, in her view, exchanges that looked more like gifts and not payments. These gifts were much like the gifts analyzed by Yunxiang Yan (1996), whereby Chinese cadres give gifts to their clients as a way to maintain their loyalty and support. In many ways, these gifts were instrumental, as they kept Vanessa under the financial control of Mark and his personal interest in keeping an intimate relationship with her. It was Vanessa’s provision of bounded intimacy that functioned as a way of reciprocating Mark’s gifts and, as a result, guarantee, even if temporarily, the material and financial security that she had not had since she arrived in London. Cultivating the relationship with Mark and providing bounded intimacy was her own way of negotiating her subordination, recoding the intrinsic inequalities of sex work, dealing with her precarious legal status, and pursuing her romantic aspirations.

Her relationship with Giorgio, defined now by the payment that Mark had offered, was uncomfortably located in the middle of a commercial transaction and an intimate relationship. However, Vanessa was in love with Giorgio. “He is the type of guy I was looking for. He is adventurous, funny, and handsome. I really want to make this work,” she told me. Love, for Vanessa, not only represented a way to justify the marriage with him and therefore conform to rules of conduct; as Faier (2007, 149) argues, love is also a fundamental part of women’s transnational self-making projects. As a way to demonstrate her love and interest in maintaining a long-term relationship with Giorgio, Vanessa initiated an exchange of gifts with him that in her view could personalize the monetary transaction. By giving gifts (clothes, trips, invitations) and offering care and attention to her husband, she attempted to normalize their relationship and with luck transform it into a romantic one (Kulick 1998). Exchanging gifts and speculating on the possible future that these exchanges could offer legitimated notions of respectability and romance that she expected from her migration journey. However, Vanessa’s intent to solidify her relationship with Giorgio failed when he refused to reciprocate the affect that she had invested in the relationship. The socioeconomic relations produced by intimate gifts with Mark were also terminated when he decided to cancel the rent payment of the flat and end the flow of gifts. The gifts that had allowed her to speculate on a better future by anticipating the success of her romantic relationship with Giorgio became symbols of a present that remained precarious and of the commercial relations that preceded the ambiguous gift transactions. Still, not all was lost and dire; after all, she had gained a visa that provided her with a future in the United Kingdom and allowed her to keep searching for the romantic relationship she was looking for—to find what she defined as “a better deal.”

NEGOTIATING INTIMATE BONDS

Not all women wanted to find love within sex work. For women like Sabrina (from Brazil), the idea of falling in love with a client represented a bad financial decision. Sabrina, who had migrated to support her family back in Brazil, was adamant about maintaining her focus on the economic goal—to earn one million reais before going back to Brazil (£300,000 at the time)—as it represented the opportunity to offer a new life for her son and secure her future. She initially moved to London with her adopted son (then aged nine) and had expected migration to be temporary so that she could make a fresh start. She was initially employed as a domestic worker, earning a salary that made it impossible to pay the bills, save money, and spend time with her son. After one year, she decided to combine her day work with a night job as a dancer in a nightclub managed by a Brazilian friend. With both jobs, she was finally making good money but had limited time to be with her son; avoiding the risk of neglecting him, Sabrina decided to send him back to her mother in Brazil. As with other women in my research, she slowly moved from strip dancing to sex work, but in contrast with others, Sabrina used some of her savings to invest in a private flat where she could make more money. She initially worked in a flat with Amanda (also from Brazil), and they managed to get a constant flow of clients. After five months of working together, they were caught by the police and were accused of, but not prosecuted for, working in a brothel. Fortunately, on this occasion, they only received a warning and were asked to move to separate locations.⁷

She then moved to a new flat and established her new business with the help of Robert, one of her regular clients, who signed the tenancy agreement and paid the deposit for the new flat. After a while of going to Sabrina’s, I started recognizing when Robert was calling. “Hello my love, how are you? How was your day? [the conversation would continue]. Yes, precious, you can come, of course, you can come anytime you want, you know that, you are my delicious,” she would tell Robert over the phone. On one occasion, I asked her if she saw Robert every time he wanted, to which she replied, “Yes, I have to! He helped me with the flat. I owe him so much.” She thought of him as a decent man who helped her when she was most in need. However, despite Robert’s good intentions and favors, she could not help but think that nothing was for free—“ay amiga, nada é gratis”—and said that she knew she would eventually need to repay Robert’s help.

Robert did not explicitly demand any form of payment. Still, Sabrina felt compelled to repay what she saw as a debt. Given the context and the circumstances of their relationship, in which sex was no longer a commercial transaction between them, she decided that the best way to repay him was by giving him time. Time was an expensive commodity for Sabrina because she habitually worked eight to ten hours a day, seven days a week. The fact that she dedicated most of her days off (which were very few) to Robert was a sign of her willingness to pay the moral debt that she thought she had with him. This form of reciprocity could be understood as what Sahlins (1972) defines as “balanced reciprocity”—that is, a form of reciprocity that prevails between people who are close enough to feel obliged to deal with each other on a moral basis. The sense of obligation is tacit, unspoken, and occurs between two people who appear as free and autonomous. The exchanges between them created a link that may not ever need reciprocating, but one in which the potential of obligation hung over the relationship (Piprou 2014).

This tit-for-tat exchange helped create an ongoing mutual support relationship, but still Sabrina was well aware of the power imbalance that existed between them regarding the signing of the lease of the flat, her precarious undocumented status, and the romantic expectations that he might have of their relationship. In contrast with Carolina and Vanessa, Sabrina was unable to see how relationships with clients could ever surpass the original sexual transaction. Her motivations were economic and not romantic; she was careful to not develop romantic feelings for regular clients because, she argued, they could become oppressive and subordinating. Hence, despite the intimacy that she and Robert shared, she would always make efforts to obtain something from him, such as groceries, cigarettes, dinners out, weekends away, or even have him fix things around her flat, which represented a form of payment for her time and sexual services. Although this may appear as calculative and instrumental on her part, it was Sabrina’s own way to gain some ground in the relationship, to keep a delicate balance of the accounts that would allow her to remain independent, and, more importantly, to be free to fulfill her economic goals and return to her country.

However, her relationship with Robert was far from instrumental. Sabrina had allowed Robert to meet her mother and son when they visited London; he had gained a new status and was a real friend. Their relationship was now marked by an intimacy that looked like kinship relationships in which gift exchanges were extended to Sabrina’s son. For instance, before Sabrina went back to Brazil in December 2010, Robert bought several gifts for her son Ronaldo; these were things that he knew Ronaldo wanted, such as games for the Nintendo XL, a Nike jacket, and a pair of trainers. These gifts, as Gregory (1982) explains, are “transactions that are meant to create or effect ‘qualitative’ relations between persons; they take place within a preexisting web of personal relations; therefore, even the objects involved have a tendency to take on the qualities of people” (cited in Graeber 2001, 36). We were having dinner together at Sabrina’s flat when Robert gave her the items. I could see how her face completely transformed: she was pleasantly surprised at Robert’s gesture. These gifts were neither instrumental nor a form of payment. Rather, they were, as Sabrina put it, “real gifts” because they were highly personal. They contained the intimacy and friendship that she had developed with Robert and were intended to please the most important person in her life: her son. In some ways, she was still receiving gifts from Robert, but this time it was via her son. More importantly, these gifts were desexualized, and as a result, they helped normalize a relationship that Sabrina thought was impossible to move away from the sexual commercial transaction.

As Zelizer (1996, 491) explains, gifts and payments in the sexual economy “maintain distinctions that matter morally, sentimentally and personally.” For Sabrina, to label these exchanges as “real gifts” was to make claims about the relationship with Robert. These claims legitimated his status as a friend and the time that she had invested in the relationship while trying to repay Robert’s help. Although she did not have any hopes or intentions of finding love in London, she was entangled in an emotional relationship with Robert that could potentially affect her business or could lead to other benefits. The genuine friendship that she established with Robert led her to speculate on the possibility of—with his help—establishing her legal status in the country. Sabrina’s case shows how in situations of uncertainty and insecure legal statuses, women had the agency to make important distinctions between the gifts and other exchanges that they received from clients. These exchanges opened spheres of speculation and the possibility to keep hoping for a better future.

CONCLUSION

The exchange of gifts between Latin American sex workers and clients in London illuminates the complex relationship that exists between the market and economies of intimacy in late capitalism. This relationship is characterized by an increasing commodification of intimacy and its accompanying contradictions, dilemmas, and inequalities. Through an analysis of the intimate relationships of sex workers and their regular clients, I have shown how, as illustrated by Zelizer (2000), the commodification of intimacy is rarely simply given, unambiguous, or complete; it is not devoid of countervailing personalized processes, assumptions, and anxieties. The relationships that women established with regular clients, though assumed to remain within the limits of the sexual commercial transaction, proved to involve complex forms of intimacy, love, and emotion, on the one hand, and relations of power that maintained sex workers in precarious and uncertain working conditions, on the other hand.

For my interlocutors, the choice of selling sex within a global market of care that increasingly constrains women’s opportunities for better forms of employment represented the fulfillment of personal economic dreams and aspirations associated with their migration projects. In some cases, their emotional labor and the selling of authentic love is not uniquely linked to the demands of the sexual market but rather to their self-making transnational projects regarding ideas and desires of transnational romance and love with white European men. As a result, in their relationships with regular clients, women have to find ways to mediate and negotiate the ambiguity and inequality that characterizes the commodification of

intimacy. These negotiations, I argue, become complicated when the sexual commercial transactions with clients are accompanied by the exchange of ambiguous gifts that have the potential to create debts, various forms of reciprocity, and other social relations.

The social relationships in which gifts are offered are embedded in unequal power relations defined first by the sexual commercial transaction and second by the precarity—legal, economic, and social—that defined women's lives as migrants in London. Still, these relationships and exchanges are colored by peoples' expectations, desires, and hopes for intimacy and love. As a result, on occasion, gifts are used as instruments for gaining power and as calculative transactions used to manipulate payments and take advantage of the commodification of intimacy. However, gifts are also expressions of intimacy that helped women legitimize their stigmatized labor and migration projects. The various exchanges that women have with regular clients at times normalized the intimate social relations created by the sexually commodified relationships, and as result disguised or temporarily shifted the inequalities that existed within the labor relationships. The materiality and meanings attached to gifts are manifestations of the consequences of the extent to which the commodification of intimacy in late capitalism has expanded into the realms of love and aspiration.

Furthermore, because of their embeddedness in commoditized intimate relations and the concomitant link that this created between persons and things, gifts have the possibility to function as the material foundation from which women could speculate on emotional universes beyond the sexual market and orient imaginative futures. Through gifts, women are able to speculate and therefore make present and materialize their uncertain futures (Bear 2015, 387). Still, this process of speculation contains a certain uncanniness when women's expectations are not met, but rather shattered. In this regard, gifts are not always resources that sustain relationships with clients and materialize desires for love, economic success, and social ascension. The gifts also contain, in their ambiguity, the possibility that what the women had expected had not, in fact, happened. Gifts that might have represented the promise of a better future or of love and economic success can easily turn into broken promises and dreams. Nonetheless, gifts help women evoke hopes for the future; they are promises of a future agency in which they will no longer be sex workers and they will be economically independent. The ways in which sex workers and clients engaged and negotiated a diverse range of gift exchanges ideologically recode the intrinsic inequalities of this form of labor and help women to transcend the constraints and contradictions of these intimate relations in favor of women's self-making projects, desires, and aspirations.

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NOTES

¹ Most studies that explore the intertwinement of gifts and sexual relations have been referred to as "transactional sex" whereby people "exchange money or gifts for sexual favours" (Hunter 2002). These studies albeit focusing on the role that gifts play in fuelling everyday sexual relations, do not differentiate different types of exchanges or explore the symbolic meanings that people assign to those transactions and to the things exchanged.

² Since the beginning of my research, I disclosed my role as a researcher, explained the nature of the work, and was given consent by my informants. All of the names in this article are pseudonyms.

³ As an illustration of this recent migration flow Cathy McIlwaine and Diego Bunge (2016, 13) point out that from 2012 to 2014, there were approximately 15,600 migrants moving to London from Spain.

⁴ This sector in the United Kingdom dominates 91 percent of London's economy, it provides plenty of job opportunities for migrants. A quarter of all Latin Americans in London work in service sector occupations (McIlwaine and Bunge 2016, 20). According to Agustín (2006, 53), the service sector economy includes jobs like cleaning, cooking, and housekeeping in private houses, and caring for people and providing sex in a wide variety of locales.

⁵ The scholarship on the feminization of migration shows how, although migration confers a degree of economic independence that improves women's status in the family and achieves the goal of upward mobility back home, it is outweighed by the exploitative features of care work and the downward status mobility that women experience (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002).

⁶ Kempadoo (2001, 46; 2004) describes how, in Cartagena and in the Dominican Republic, the humiliations, abuse, and hunger experienced as domestic workers were reasons for the women to "prefer" sex work. Likewise, Lahbabi and Rodriguez (2004) explain how migrant women in Spain switched from domestic work to sex work due to economic reasons and issues related to their lack of documents.

⁷ It is an offence for a person to keep, or to manage, or act or assist in the management of a brothel to which people resort for practices involving prostitution. This offence is created by section 33A of the Sexual Offences Act 1956, which was inserted by the Sexual Offences Act 2003. The premises that are frequented by men for intercourse with only one woman are not considered a brothel, and this is also related to whether she is a tenant or not.

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