

A Multiplicity of Acts, Acting and Caring: The International Sex Industry

Laura Agustín

What's the difference between loving and caring? Or caring and cleaning? What about tending, assisting, listening, advising, explaining, putting at ease? Where does sex begin – with the flirting, the first kiss or the bed? What happens when one of these activities metamorphoses into another – when, for example, the carer offers caresses or the prostitute wraps a warm towel around a spent penis? In recent years, research on emotional labour, caring work and commercial sex demonstrate the limitations of labelling and classification of occupations – perhaps especially within an already slippery category called 'services'. A great variety of sexual jobs involve not only acting out care but actually caring, and many caring jobs promise, allude or lead to sex. The self-descriptions of tea-sellers, karaoke performers, tourist guides, hostesses, providers of the Girlfriend Experience, *enjo kosai*, sex surrogates, contract-workers in sex clubs, qualified masseurs, erotic dancers of many traditions, migrants offering quasi-domestic services in their homes and prostitutes who sell from the street all describe situations in which a positive feeling for a customer can appear at any moment and result in a less mechanised, more affectionate and intimate encounter. This evidence cuts across social class, cultures, gender identities and the site where contacts are made.

Neither is the concept of sex transparent, nor sex acts always the same, the terms penetration, sucking, spanking being poor describers of experiences that can vary spectacularly. The myriad ways people practise sex, mixing perceptions of the purely physical with ideas about tenderness, skill, respect, sophistication, perversity, animality are not done justice by references to 'good' and 'bad' sex. Professionals master techniques but know that the success of the sexual encounter also depends on elements of personal sympathy and antipathy.

A cultural study of the possibilities emerging from such grounded approaches to caring and sex make it impossible to reduce them to a single imaginary moment when sex and feelings are exchanged for money – which better reflects what the subjects involved say themselves, wherever they are on the commercial-sex spectrum.