

SEX WORK MAKES YOU “MAD”: A CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS OF THE COMMODIFICATION AND EMBODIMENT OF THE BODY-SELVES OF SEX WORKERS

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ABSTRACT

The bodies of sex workers have long been “black-boxed” by anthropological scholarship. Moreover, the lived experiences of sex workers have been silenced and highly under-theorized in academia; instead, framing the experiences and bodies of sex workers as “deviant”, “at risk”, or “in need of regulation”. However, as cultural anthropology endeavours to study the theoretically rich concept of embodiment in terms of the “violences of everyday life”, this paper will argue that the bodies of sex workers are deserving of rigorous theoretical inquiry as their everyday experiences epitomize the paradigm of precarity and are, in fact, bodies that exemplify this notion of “becoming”. Drawing data from three different ethnographies in three different countries, this essay serves as a starting point for further anthropological inquiry into the bodies and lived experiences of sex workers in terms of merging the loaded theoretical concepts of embodiment, precarity, and becoming.

INTRODUCTION

Margaret Lock (2013) has argued that during the second half of the twentieth century, the material body was largely “black boxed” by cultural anthropologists, as the contents of which were ruled as “irrelevant” in social science research endeavours. Similarly, current anthropological research on sex work has “black boxed” the bodies of sex workers from theoretical discussion. Recent scholarship on the act of selling sex has somewhat abandoned the limiting term ‘prostitution’ as it simply denotes the sale of sex (Brennan 2004; Edelman 2011; Garcia 2010; Kelly 2008; McDowell 2009; Zheng 2009) whereas “sex work” encompasses “a continuum of activities from selling sex itself, through work in massage parlours and escort agencies, to all sorts of services based on the commodification and sexualization of men’s and

women's bodies" (McDowell 2009:102). While this essay recognizes this definition of sex work, it will argue that McDowell's definition is still problematic as not all sex workers necessarily view their bodies as 'objects' or 'commodities'.

Scholarship on sex work and sex workers have focused on the events and the forms of violence women have experienced in their lives that either led them to voluntarily or forcefully enter the sex trade (Gysels *et al.* 2002; Hughes 2000; Raymond 2013). Such literature has focused on the risks, associated with sex work most notably in its connection to HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (Huang *et al.* 2004; Spittal *et al.* 2003). In these studies, the bodies of sex workers are seemingly 'black-boxed'—that is, they are largely untroubled by thoughtful critique (Lock 2013)—or, they are mentioned either in passing or in terms of targets of risk and/or violence. While a lot of present research on sex work is completed in order to establish preventative strategies for contracting HIV/AIDS under the current biomedical paradigm of prevention (Choudhry 2010; Maher *et al.* 2011; Scambler and Paoli 2008), more work needs to be done around the lived experiences of sex workers in various cultural contexts in order to identify the "violences of their everyday life" (Scheper-Hughes 1993) that inevitably impact the physical and mental health and well-being of individuals involved in sexual labour. Moreover, another major concern of current research on sex workers pertains to the contested relationship between sex work and the state, which subsequently labels the discursive bodies of sex workers as "deviant", "unworthy", and in need of constant surveillance and regulation (Hughes 2000; Tambiah 2005; Lorway 2009; McDowell 2009; Garcia 2010; Edelman 2011; Hoang 2011).

As a result of the multiplicity of negative discourses surrounding sex work, including discourses of harm, danger, risk, and larger discourses of governmentality and neoliberalism, sex workers are consequently lumped together and collectively viewed as 'bad and unhealthy citizens'. Arguably, these discourses force sex workers into deeper structural and political inequalities and as a result, their lived experiences and everyday violences often get overlooked as policy makers and governmental officials 'know better' and have a 'better' idea on how to 'manage' them. This could have contributed to the reasons for which anthropologists and other social scientists have neglected the bodies of sex workers in their theoretical analyses and

have effectively worked to the ‘black-box’ and silence sex workers’ experiences in sexual labour. The politicization and medicalization of sex work in popular and current discourses on sexual labour could also have contributed to the under-theorization of the bodies of sex workers in anthropological and other social scientific research.

As cultural anthropology endeavours to study the theoretically rich concept of embodiment in terms of the ‘violences of everyday life’, this paper will argue that the bodies of sex workers are deserving of theoretical inquiry as their everyday experiences epitomize the paradigm of precarity and are, in fact bodies that exemplify this notion of ‘becoming’. By principally focusing on female sex workers from Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and China, this essay will argue the above by addressing the following questions: (1) *How are the bodies of sex workers – including emotions and sexuality – commodified?* and (2) *How is sexual labour embodied?* In addressing the commodification of sex workers’ bodies and the embodiment of sexual labour, this paper’s ultimate goal is to serve as a starting point for future anthropological research on the becoming and precarious bodies of sex workers in various cross-cultural contexts.

COMMODYING BODY-SELVES

The commodification of the body and body parts is a troubling theme within anthropology (Sharp 2000). This subject is particularly troubled when discussed in the framework of embodiment, as embodiment theories regularly question and problematize the Cartesian mind-body dualism, maintaining that body, self, and personhood emerge as inextricably linked (Sharp 2000). However, anthropological theories that have reworked their epistemological frameworks and ontologies of the body from thinking of the body as ‘thing-like’ to ‘process-like’ reconciles commodification with embodiment theories. The most notable reconceptualization of the body for the purposes of this paper is the work by Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock (1987). In their paper, they argue that one’s body is actually comprised of three bodies—the individual body, the social body, and the body politic—where emotions serve as a nexus for the three distinct bodies. The three bodies that comprise one’s body are neither static, nor do they act independent of one another; instead, the individual body, the social body, and the body politic interact

together in society as a highly emotive subject (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987). Conceptualizing the body as three distinct, yet one interrelated subject allows anthropologists to contribute to other disciplines' discussions on commodification as it frequently focuses on rights of control or ownership of one's own body (Sharp 2000). However, as Turner (1994) rightly asserts, danger lies in the tendency both to depoliticize the body and to deny its sociality (Sharp 2000). The body-self is then, not only inherently socialized—as it is recognized as an active entity completely integrated within and a crucial part of society—but it is also deeply historicized and contextualized (Nguyen and Peschard 2003). Moreover, the body-self or the 'mindful body' is a highly affective body that experiences and senses the world through emotions, which thus, make the mind and body inseparable in everyday experiences (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987).

The inseparability of the mind and body and conceptualizing material bodies as 'body-subjects' or 'mindful bodies' problematizes the commodification of bodies and body parts. Because objectification is often part of the process of commodification, human body-subjects can be stripped of their humanity, evaluated only in terms of their instrumentality, reduced to their appearance, stripped of autonomy, and more often than not, silenced. In fact, Sharp's historical analysis of commodified bodies demonstrates that the body frequently emerged as a site of production (and reproduction in terms of the female body), where living persons may be valued solely for their labour power (2000:293-295). These bodies, in turn, require regulation. Sex work is one site where production, reproduction, enslavement, and colonization frequently merge (Brownmiller 1975:391-92, Rubin 1975, cited in Sharp 2000:293-294). However, viewing the bodies of sex workers as 'body-selves' problematizes the objectification and commodification of their bodies for sexual consumption and rejects the reduction of their humanity. Further, investigating the lived experiences of sex workers challenges their objectification by un-silencing their experiences and forcing society to recognize them as individuals and not instruments of deviance or pleasure.

CONCEPTUALIZING SEX WORK: WHAT IS BEING COMMODIFIED?

As previously defined, sex work necessarily involves the commodification of one's body for the purposes of consumption. While viewing sex work as a continuum allows for a broad depth of various sexual activities (i.e. intercourse, oral sex, phone sex, pornography, etc.), this view simultaneously leaves the processes of objectification and commodification ambiguous. Moreover, it raises the question of to whom does this definition best serve? Do all sex workers agree with this view of their labour? Do sex workers see their bodies as objects to be sold? If sexuality and emotions are in fact commodified, how does this process unfold? This section will analyze these questions in the contexts of sex workers in Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and China.

Uniform Sex

Patty Kelly, Visiting Assistant Professor in the Department of Anthropology at Haverford College, examined the personal histories and experiences of women who work in Zona Galactica, a state-run brothel in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, the capital city of Chiapas, Mexico. In her 2008 ethnography, *Lydia's Open Door: Inside Mexico's Most Modern Brothel*, she argues for a recognition of sex work as work and contrary to the perspectives of women in Chiapas, she argues that sex work is neither "the easy life", nor "an easy way to make money" (Kelly 2008:151). Her interviews with the female sex workers in Zona Galactia illustrate the same view. The Mexican female sex workers in Kelly's research strongly assert themselves as workers and do not think in terms of "selling their bodies"; rather, they collectively assert that what is for sale is a service and *not* their bodies. Selling the service of sex is a difficult job. In response to male clients who claim sex work is easy, Gabriela, an informant of Kelly's argued:

You think this work is easy? You think this is easy? This is *not* easy! The work is hard, going with man after man. Some think it's easy. Others think that we are women without hearts; that we don't feel [Kelly 2008:152].

Gabriela's argument is consistent with the idea that sex is a service and a job, which, like any other job, necessarily entails stress. Moreover, Gabriela's statement demonstrates that performing sexual

labour involves complex dynamics of negotiation, refusal, and submission (Kelly 2008). Workers must learn to exact the highest price possible for their services and develop the skills to “read” clients for their potential danger and adjust their own behaviours accordingly (2008).

The thousands of men who enter the Zona Galactica are in search of a woman who will provide them with the services they are looking for at a price they are willing to pay. In contrast, the women working in the zone wait in their rooms or doorways for a client who will pay their asking price for the services they are willing to provide. Kelly maintains, “The process of negotiating a sale is riddled with multiple, overlapping, and sometimes surprising power relations: class, gender, age, appearance, experience, and ethnicity of both worker and client may come into play during negotiations” (2008:152). The sex workers working in Zona Galactica offer various sexual services for various prices and Kelly’s statement demonstrates that sex workers have a high degree of agency in regards to both the services they provide, as well as the client they wish to service. This illustrates that the female Mexican sex workers are in fact, in control of their own bodies. In their view, their bodies are not viewed as commodities for consumption—much the opposite. Kelly’s informants are very much in control of their own bodies and the services they provide. Their bodies are not commodified; rather, it is their sexuality that is ultimately commodified. Moreover, their bodies are never objectified because what is being sold is a service and the women make it very clear to all of their potential clients that there are boundaries within the services they choose to provide, and those physical-sexual services are always detached from any sort of emotional labour (Kelly 2008). As another one of Kelly’s informants, Bárbara maintains, “Sex with a client is totally different from sex with a partner, as there is an emotional bond and commitment between you and your partner” (2008:184). Kelly maintains that sex workers delineate this boundary between romantic sex and sex as work in numerous ways: “clients will receive sexual services, while other acts, such as kissing or even the fondling of breasts, will be reserved only for partners” (2008:184). By reserving some sexual acts for romance and other sexual acts as work, women are able to redefine sex as work and are careful neither to objectify, nor commodify their emotions.

Other strategies that create a distinct work identity or “work-self” include the following: workers put on a “uniform” at work, which consists of not only makeup, dress and a changed name, but sometimes of attitude as well (2008). According to Kelly, “They also often leave on some article of clothing, such as a bra, during sex with clients rather than disrobing entirely; in this way they are literally and figuratively not entirely exposing themselves to clients” (2008:184-185). The strategies women used to separate their work life from their sex life or “normal” life outside of the zone demonstrates the fluidity of their body-selves. The need to create a work identity that is separate from their home identity—whether their home identity resembles that of a mother, child, wife, sister, or any combination of that – underscores “how people create or maintain a sense of self and belonging and how this ‘becoming’ is permeated with questions of hegemony and power” (Van Wolputte 2004:261).

While these women enact a certain persona at work through objectifying and commodifying their sexuality, they participate in sexual labour in order to fulfill their role outside of the zone. For instance, Gabriela lived a life of poverty and domestic abuse and saw sex work as a path to freedom (Kelly 2008). Gabriela maintained, “So, I knew about this, that this work existed. It exists everywhere. If I was going to go, I would put myself to work, even if it was in this, in being a prostitute” (2008:124). Gabriela also maintained that she could have become a servant, but the earnings from such work would not have enabled her to pay the rent, send her children to school, and feed them properly (2008). Gabriela’s path to the zone is not unique; Kelly notes that the majority of the zone women are the heads of their households; thus, they choose physical-sexual labour because it is the highest paying job for women with few skills and little education (2008). Nonetheless, for the Mexican sex workers working within the zone, their lived experiences and everyday violences are felt not through the commodification of their bodies, rather through the daily stresses of their work that involves selling sexual services and through the structural inequalities inherent in Neoliberal Mexico.

Sex for Money, Marriage, and Migration

Denise Brennan, Associate Professor and Chair of the Anthropology Department at Georgetown University, examines the

motivations of workers, clients, and others connected to the sex tourism business in Sosúa, Dominican Republic. In her 2004 ethnography, *What's Love Got to do with it?: Transnational Desires and Sex Tourism in the Dominican Republic*, she conceptualizes Sosúa as a “sexscape”, which is to refer to “both a new kind of global sexual landscape and the sites within it” (Brennan 2004:15). She borrows the suffix *-scape*, from Arjun Appadurai to “allow us to point to the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes” (1990:6, cited in Brennan 2004:15). Thus, Brennan reserves Sosúa as “a site within a global economy of commercialized sexual transactions” (2004:16). Through this conceptualization, Brennan is really viewing Sosúa as a “hot-spot” for sex tourism, where women – and to a much lesser extent, men – provide sex tourists with a variety of sexual services in exchange for money, marriage, and migration. Brennan’s conceptualization of Sosúa as a sexscape and a subjective paradise for sex tourists is important as it elucidates how the everyday life experiences are “hypercommodified” (Brennan 2004:50) for those living in Sosúa, which she argues includes the hypercommodification of gendered, racialized, and sexualized bodies (Brennan 2004). According to Brennan, “In the bars and discos in Sosúa, both sex workers and sex tourists know what is for sale—sexual acts, culminating in men’s ‘sexual release’. It is these sexual acts to which women attach a price and for which men pay” (2004:27). She goes on to say,

The commodity here is not just the ‘aesthetic illusion’...on which strip shows are based, but rather one in which women deliver an actual ‘good’ by physically touching—what Wendy Chapkis calls ‘commodified touching’ (1997:6)—and in most cases, sexually arousing and sexually satisfying their male customers. [Brennan 2004:27]

Brennan’s ethnography further complicates the dominant view of sex workers “selling their bodies” in exchange for monetary goods. Moreover, it addresses the question of to whom this definition of sex work best serves. By contextualizing Sosúa as a sexscape, Brennan sets out to understand two things: (1) She seeks to understand why North American and European men come to the sexscape and what exactly they are seeking to find; and (2) to understand why women get involved in sex work and how they navigate their way through the “violences of their everyday lives” by using their body-

selves to “perform love”. Brennan argues that sex tourists coming to Sosúa “desire, demand, and pay for real—not imagined—sex” (2004:27), while at the same time, Sosúan sex workers are simultaneously delivering the expected and agreed upon “sexual goods” and trying to get the men to fall in love with them. Brennan questions why men travel from North America and Europe to Sosúa for sex consumption and contends that part of Sosúa’s appeal to sex tourists lies in the overall experience Sosúa provides as the backdrop for their sexual transactions. She also suggests, “Just as important as cheap prices for sex in Sosúa is the experience that *everything* is cheaper than home; thus foreigners, able to afford nearly anything they desire, can enjoy ‘feeling rich’” (2004:29). Moreover, contextualizing Sosúa as a sexscape implies a dependence on racial differences between sex tourists and sex workers (2004).

Sosúa, therefore, not only serves as an exotic backdrop for sex tourists to “feel rich”, but it also supplies the racial differences that sex tourists have openly sought and fantasized. According to Brennan, in Sosúa it is common for European men to have “fantasies not only of ‘hot and fiery’ sex but also of relationships that reflect more ‘traditional’ understandings of gender roles than they might have in their relationships with European women” (2004:33). Thus, male sex tourists coming to Sosúa are visiting to fulfill a luxurious, sexual fantasy that is partly fueled by their commodification of sexuality and race, which then gets translated to the “erotic” bodies of sex workers. In the eyes of sex tourists, the bodies of sex workers are first racialized, eroticized, and sexualized and are then objectified as “tools” or “instruments” to which they commodify in order to “live out” their sexual fantasies in the Sosúan sexscape.

Conversely, sex workers view their own bodies under a much different light. Much like the sex workers from the Zona Galactica, Sosúan sex workers also viewed sex as work. However, unlike the Mexican workers, Sosúan workers offered their clients “the girlfriend experience”, in an effort to gain “wife status” and migrate off of the island (Brennan 2004). Brennan argues that within the context of Sosúa, many women who engage in sex work do it as an advancement strategy where marriage and migration off the island are the key goals of this strategy (Brennan 2004). According to Brennan, “These women see Sosúa’s sex trade and marriage to foreign tourists as a fast track to economic success—a way not to solve short-term problems but

to change their lives (and their families' lives) through migration overseas, in the long term" (2004:24). Viewing sex work as an advancement strategy for long-term financial gain and stability in order to successfully provide a "better life" for themselves and their families is arguably akin to young students pursuing post-secondary education so that they too, may live a life of long-term financial gain and stability.

The same argument could also be made for immigrants from foreign countries coming to Canada in pursuit of the neoliberal façade of the "American Dream". Both students and foreign immigrants pay money in order to pursue an education or immigrate to Canada in hopes for a "better life". In the case of Sosúan sex workers, however, their advancement strategy dictates they commodify their "hypersexuality" and emotions before, during, and after the act of sex, as they often must continue to "perform love" throughout the duration of their client's stay in order to increase their chances of money, marriage, and migration. In an interview with a Sosúan sex worker, Elena, who was "successful" in marrying a German man, talks about if she was in love with her German husband: "You know how it is. It's not love. My children and I will have more opportunities in Germany" (Brennan 2004:95-96). Elena's statement speaks for many of the Sosúan sex workers in Brennan's ethnography. Clearly, for Sosúan sex workers, choosing to "fall in love" with one man over another is a rational process with serious material consequences, which is contrary to the notion of "falling in love" as a kind of elation that comes from losing control of one's senses.

For Sosúan sex workers, pretending to be in love by "performing love" requires alertness, savvy, and determination (2004). Elena's savvy sex work experience is a subject of both admiration and jealousy for her co-workers. Her co-workers continually asked her advice on how to sustain their pretend relationship with their client once he has left the island. Elena's advice was simple and centered on the performance of love: "You have to write that you *love* him and that you miss him. Write that you cannot wait to see him again. Tell him you think about him every day" (2004:111-112). From this, it is clear that Sosúan sex workers' job/advancement strategy far extends beyond the economic transaction of sexual intercourse. Indeed, "performing love" requires determination, savvy, and an understanding of the wants and desires

of their foreign male clients. Much like the Mexican sex workers in Kelly's ethnography, Sosúan sex workers adopt a "girlfriend-in-love" identity with their clients and revert back to their "regular" selves once their client leaves. From Brennan's ethnography, it is clear that sex work neither begins, nor ends in the bedroom; moreover, it seems to involve a multifaceted commodification of sexuality and emotions, rather than a simple commodification of the body.

Temporal Body-self Assemblages for sale

Tientien Zheng, Professor of Anthropology at SUNY Cortland, highlights the urban karaoke bar as the locus at which the factors of rural-urban migration, the entertainment industry and state power intersect to provide the context for sex work in Dalian, China. In her 2009 ethnography, *Red Lights: The Lives of Sex Workers in Post-Socialist China*, she provides a rich account of the lives of karaoke hostesses in Dalian in Northern China—a career whose name disguises sex work and minimizes the surprising influence these women often have as power brokers. Zheng argues that hostesses "defied the claim of both the state and client on their reproductive and sexual organs by taking an economic view on their bodies" (2009:12). As a kind of synecdoche, a woman's reproductive organs were representative of her body as a whole in Dalian, China. Women's bodies served a singular purpose: to reproduce in order to fulfill their duties to their families and the state. Hostesses, on the other hand, "assumed an absolute entrepreneurial ownership of their bodies and marketed them for their own independent, autonomous, and instrumental uses" (2009:12). Interestingly, Zheng argues,

They viewed their bodies as an assemblage of fragmented parts, attached a price tag to different body parts, and demanded financial rewards from the clients according to the parts that they touched. They also refused the clients' free use of their bodies on the pretext of romance and love, and demanded its quantified monetary gains. In doing so they subverted the gender and social hierarchy and reclaimed the commodification of their bodies as an empowering practice.

Therefore, according to Zheng, Dalian hostesses commodified fragmented parts of their bodies and assigned various

price tags for each part. Moreover, she maintains that hostesses viewed their bodies as an “assemblage of fragmented parts.” Collier and Ong define assemblage as, “domains in which the forms and values of individual and collective existence are problematized or at stake, in the sense that they are subject to technological, political, and ethical reflection and intervention” (2005:4). If hostesses viewed their bodies as assemblages in this sense, then it follows that their bodies are intrinsically problematized because their fragmented commodities contradict the hegemonic role of reproduction women in Northern China are meant to fulfill. While hostesses’ bodies are still somewhat reduced to their reproductive organs (Zheng 2009), these body parts neither share the same meaning, nor purpose as women who are not sex workers. Instead, the purpose of hostesses’ fragmented bodies is, according to Zheng, multifaceted. Dalian sex workers are autonomous entrepreneurs of their own bodies in that they control what they do with their bodies and what they use their bodies for in terms of reproduction. Because of this, hostesses’ fragmented bodies are multifaceted in meaning, purpose, and instrumental use; in a sense, their bodies are sites of precarity.

The precarious nature of the assemblages of sex workers bodies in Dalian, China demonstrates the complexity of body commodification. This complexity is heightened when emotions, sexuality, and identity are also fragmentally commodified. Zheng maintains that hostesses adopt multiple identities and alternate between different characters depending on the client that they are serving. On a busy night, a hostess might accompany as many as seven different clients, each client requiring different character performances or “alternate” identities (2009). According to Zheng, a key feature of the hostesses’ work lives was the distinction between their “onstage” identities—where they are serving clients—and “offstage” identities—which indicates the absence of clients. These onstage and offstage identities are characterized by radically different behaviour patterns, which included changes in character, dress, and attitude (2009). For instance, when clients arrive at the karaoke bar, it is not uncommon for men to select their hostesses based on the womens’ fragmented commodified body parts in an otherwise crude fashion that reduces the hostess’ body-self to eyes, breasts, buttocks, and vagina. Despite the crudeness of their clients, Zheng maintains

that hostesses continue to perform their onstage, alternate identities to gain their customer's favour. Moreover,

To lure clients, hostesses presented a hypersexual and lustful image by winking, wearing revealing clothes, and assuming seductive postures. They purred, laughed, screamed, or moaned when clients preyed on their bodies, and they sang songs to seduce clients and convey their 'devotion'. [Zheng 2009:215]

Onstage, hostesses adopt a hypersexual identity that appears to be fully "devoted" to their clients, obeying their demands; whereas, offstage they return to their "true" identities, as independent, autonomous women who reject the patriarchal society in which they live (Zheng 2009). One of Zheng's informants, Hua, expressed her attitudes towards commodifying her onstage identity:

What good does love do? What's the use of it? Can you eat it or drink it? If a man does not give me money and only says he loves me, I don't want this kind of love. What's the use of such a man? If I want sex, I am not looking for you. So many men are waiting in line. I am still young and have my capital. How can I give it to you without any remuneration? I will not be able to say this when I grow old, but at least at this moment I can choose and select. If you don't give me money, only talk love and try to take advantage of me, I will never let you get me. I will tempt you—I will kiss you and hug you to the extent that you cannot stand it, but I will not allow you to touch me; even if you succeed in touching me, you cannot get me. Until you pay out of your pocket. [Zheng 2009:222]

Thus, Hua rationalizes her presence onstage by juxtaposing that identity against her offstage identity, arguing that she is still young and has her capital and that now is her time to be economically successful. She also talks about how she feigns a closeness to her clients, which implies that she is not only commodifying the physical act of intimacy (i.e. sexual contact), but also the emotional aspects of intimacy, including devotion, care, and love (Zheng 2009). From Hua's statement, she demonstrates that her identity is fragmented, fluxed, and temporal. Both her onstage and offstage identities inform each other and are somewhat governed by time. In saying that she is

young and will not be able to continue sex work when she is older, her onstage and offstage identities effectively have expiry dates and they are bound to temporal constraints. Thus, Hua's body-self will remain in constant flux and her identity will continually be fragmented according to its temporality and contextualization. Finally, her body-capital and fragmentally commodified body parts are directly connected to her fragmented identities and thus, body-selves, in that her emotions and sexuality are also commodified.

Section summary

The above accounts of cross-cultural sex work have demonstrated one pervasive theme; that is, sex work *is* work and what is being commodified is a woman's hypersexual, fragmented "work" identity/body-self. Wendy Chapkis (1997) argues that the construction of "multiple identities" is a general characteristic of all sex workers. This behaviour is rooted in the nature of sex work itself—indeed, Chapkis sees it as a form of "emotional labour". Chapkis maintains that sex workers change between identities to "manage" their emotions in the process of sexual labor, Identity switching allows sex workers to both summon and contain emotions at will (Chapkis 1997). Essentially, Chapkis argues that sex workers' multiple identities function as a defense mechanism to protect themselves from the "psychological ramifications of their work" (Zheng 2009:212). However, sex workers' "chameleon-like capacity" (Chapkis 1997; Zheng 2009) or "schizophrenic identities" (Van Wolputte 2004) are also demonstrative of contemporary Western, industrial society's "incoherent self" (Van Wolputte 2004). Moreover, this contemporary body-self is fragmentary, often incoherent and inconsistent, precisely because it arises from contradictory and paradoxical experiences, social tensions, and conflicts that have one thing in common—they are real and experienced (2004:263). The bodies of the sex workers in the ethnographies by Kelly, Brennan, and Zheng suggest that sex workers' commodified fragmented body-selves have a temporal aspect and can take place along many axes, such as past and present, or public and private (2004). The next section will explore how sex workers from Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and China embody their sexual labour through their body-selves.

EMBODIMENT

Thomas Csordas understands embodiment as “an indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and the mode of presence and engagement in the world” (1993:135). Csordas’ approach to embodiment considers how the activities of the mind—thinking, perception, and interpreting—have a bodily basis; that is, how these activities reside in the body. Moreover, Csordas (1990, 1993) situates his theory of embodiment on the level of lived experience and not on that of discourse; embodiment is about “understanding” or “making sense” in a prereflexive or presymbolic way (Van Wolputte 2004). Van Wolputte maintains, “It [embodiment] precedes objectivation and representation and is intrinsically part of our being-in-the-world. As such, it collapses the difference between subjective and objective, cognition and emotion, or mind and body” (2004:258).

Embodiment is thus meant to describe body-selves’ active participation, engagement, and experience in the social world. Under Csordas’ lens, body-selves are dynamic, fluid, and malleable due to their embodied experience that is simultaneously a part of and situated within the social world. Essentially, his view of embodiment dictates body-selves as active participants in the making and remaking of the social world. Because of the dynamic quality Csordas’ embodiment theory understands body-selves to have, body-selves are thus, in a constant state of flux and fragmentation. This remains true for sex workers who come to embody their sexual labour through various means and under various social, cultural, temporal, and political contexts.

Looking the Part, Losing your ‘Self’

Sex-workers embody their sexual labour by adopting various identities and performing a number of hypersexualized characters while they are at work or “onstage” and then adopt a different identity when they are “offstage”. For instance, many of the sex workers in all three of the ethnographies performed multiple characters and fulfilled a number of diverse sexual roles that were catered towards their clients’ racialized and sexualized fantasies (Brennan 2004; Kelly 2008; Zheng 2009). In order to perform these identities and in order for sex workers to embody their sexual labour, they must first change

or “enhance” their bodily appearance through technology (Hogle 2005).

In Zona Galactica, physical appearance is of great concern to sex workers and fashion in particular offers insights into how workers identify themselves and relate to their work (Kelly 2008). Zone workers often come from the *campo* (countryside) and typically lack the attire of urban women and must learn from others how to dress (Kelly 2008). Kelly maintains that the changes some women make from street clothing to work clothing is extreme: “Gabriela arrives wearing pants and a loose T-shirt and changes into a blue negligee with black lace and high heels” (2008:163). Further, heavy make-up is also a typical bodily alteration in the zone (Kelly 2008). These types of bodily alterations and changes into “uniform” or “costume” for their work personas demonstrate how sex workers in Chiapas, Mexico come to embody their sexual labour. They are actively participating in a social process of sexual labour that encourage their body-selves to adopt to and dynamically change from their “offstage” identities to their “onstage” identities. Bonita, another informant of Kelly’s, notes the difference between her work and home personae:

They have said to me, ‘You don’t look like you work in this place’. Because they see me like a normal person. And when I leave here, I don’t make myself up like I do here. I change everything. I dress more casually, sporty, and only put on a little makeup. On the other hand, here I put on blush, eyeliner, red lipstick, everything. I’m not the same. Even my behaviour is different. Here, I try to walk so that my butt stands out. When I’m in the *centro*, I tie back my hair. And here I leave it loose. [2008:164]

Bonita’s words illustrate how she comes to embody her sexual labour by adopting a work identity different from her “offstage” identity that involves changes in her aesthetic appearance and behaviour and reflects Mexican standards of beauty and sexuality.

In Sosúa, sex workers also alter their physical appearance and change their behaviours when working “onstage”. According to Brennan, “Fashion is one way to discern quickly who works with clients” (2004:143). Sex workers often apply heavy black eyeliner and style their hair into a side ponytail in order to “look the part” (2004). Moreover, in order to maintain this look, sex workers (those that can

afford it) get their hair consistently styled at salons, buy jean-shorts, wear tight Lycra shirts (that resemble sport bras), stay away from loose body-concealing clothing, wear lots of jewelry, but never pantyhose with shorts, and finally, wear flip-flops by day and high heels at night (2004). As one of Brennan's informants, Nora, notes, "I take my time getting dressed, I try to make my makeup look really good, not too much...It's important to dress decently because men treat you the way you carry yourself" (2004:151). Nora's words point towards the meticulous care it takes in order to present oneself as "decent" in order to attract male-clients. As Nora takes her time getting ready, she is not only "getting ready for work", but she is also embodying her sexual labour by prepping and primping for her "onstage" character identity that she will subsequently perform. For sex workers, the time and care it takes to "get ready" is actually their active engagement in their embodied sexual labour, as they are in the process of adopting an alternative, fragmented identity.

In Dalian karaoke bars, hostesses also "enhance" their appearance and sexuality by adopting similar preparation routines to those sex workers in Chiapas and Sosúa. Zheng maintains:

To appear more attractive to male clients and to efface their rural backgrounds, hostesses pursued techniques of body-refashioning and ornamentation. This entailed consuming various forms of body-altering products and surgical services, which included both permanent alterations (plastic surgery) and non- to semipermanent bodily modifications (whitening creams, fake double-eyelids, permanent hair waves). [2009:186]

Thus, just like the sex workers encountered in Kelly and Brennan's ethnographies, hostesses from Dalian karaoke bars also undergo technological aesthetic alterations to their appearances in order to heighten their sexuality, as they are embodying their sexual labour and becoming their "onstage" identities. Moreover, Zheng maintains that hostesses "remake their bodies" in order to transition from "looking like someone from a rural area" to looking like an "urbanite", as hostesses' body practices constitute a highly distinctive style that identify and mark them as sex workers. The bodily enhancements and technological changes made to hostesses' bodies

are demonstrative of how they come to embody their identity as a sex worker and as a woman living in an urban city.

Section summary

Sex workers from the Zona Galactica, Sosúa, and Dalian karaoke bars all come to embody their sexual labour by altering their bodily appearance, changing their behaviours, and shifting between multiple identities that constitute their “onstage” and “offstage” selves. According to Van Wolputte:

...this possibility of moving from one body(-self) to another may cause a more-or-less incoherent sense of self to develop: This very flexibility and fluidity, this indeterminacy or metaphoric character of embodiment, enables the self to engage in a wide variety of contexts and relationships [2004:259].

Therefore, these body-selves are simultaneously seen as an embodied process of self-making and of becoming, which altogether, underscores the precarity of sex-workers body-selves.

CONCLUSION

In questioning how the body-selves of sex workers are commodified and how they embody their sexual labour, the ethnographies by Kelly (2008), Brennan (2004), and Zheng (2009) illustrate the existence of multiple selves. Van Wolputte notes, “in the West multiple selves traditionally have been associated with pathologies such as schizophrenia or multiple personality disorder” (2004:262). The multiple, complex, and multifaceted selves fashioned by sex workers in three very different cultural contexts documents a unique instance where sex workers are more-or-less obligated to promote a multiple self in reconstructing their body-selves in a way that enhances and commodifies their sexuality and emotions. This “schizophrenic” fragmentation of sex workers’ precarious assemblages of body-selves is reflective of the very nature of their work-environments. As they adopt specific identities according to their clients’ individual sexual fantasies and desires, their body-selves are continually becoming and spend a significant amount of time in a

space of liminality, where their multiple fragmented identities are scattered and at times, overlapping. Their work is highly risky, dangerous, and although they are very much in control of their bodies (Brennan 2004; Kelly 2008; Zheng 2009), they are not in control of their clients' precarious actions. At any point in their lived experiences at work, they could be subject to serious harms and risks like rape, physical abuse, and contracting STIs and/or HIV/AIDS. This precarious line of work is projected on the body-selves of sex workers who are constantly in a state of flux and becoming because their body-selves are embodied by larger society.

The lived experiences of sex workers body-selves are particularly deserving as “the anthropology of the body focuses no longer on the abstract or ideal(ized) body, but on those moments during which the body and bodiliness are questioned and on the experience or threat of finiteness, limitation, transience, and vulnerability” (Van Wolputte 2004:263). The everyday, lived experiences of sex workers epitomize the paradigm of precarity as their fragmented body-selves are in a constant state of becoming, as seen in the multiplicity of their “onstage” and “offstage” identities in the ethnographies by Brennan (2004), Kelly (2008) and Zheng (2009). Having to deal with their multiple identities’ “violences of everyday life”—that is, multiple violences everyday, onstage and offstage—underscores the difficulty and complexity of engaging in sexual labour. Thus, sex work *is* work; in fact, sex work makes you “mad.”

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