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## Introduction

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**ONE OF THE MOST STRIKING FEATURES** of contemporary global capitalism is the heightened commodification of intimacy that pervades social life.<sup>1</sup> We not only seek to buy love, but also express devotion through goods and depend on services to fulfill obligations or display closeness to others. So did nineteenth-century Victorians in Britain, the United States, and throughout the British Empire. Our historical moment is distinguished by both the intensification of commodification and the subsequent crowding out of indigenous and alternative ways of being. But the monetization of daily life and the privatization of public goods still generate resistance in the broadest sense. People seek solace and joy on their own terms and develop collective challenges to their understanding of the good life.

Against the colonization of the intimate, this volume focuses on the proliferation of labors, both paid and unpaid, that sustains the day-to-day work that individuals and societies require to survive—and flourish. It moves us through the expanding service economy into the crevices of what appears as most private and thus most hidden, even if such locations reflect cultural definitions of the shameful or personal. It reveals acts of love and work for money to be interconnected. That is, the essays in this collection examine the social construction of commodified intimacies, or, more precisely, the intersections of money and intimacy in everyday life, by looking at the ways that intimacy as a material, affective, psychological, and embodied state characterizes such labors. Intimacy occurs in a social context; it is accordingly shaped by, even as it shapes, relations of race, class, gender, and sexuality. And the work of intimacy constitutes intimate labors.

But what intellectual work does the linking of *intimate* and *labor* perform? The joining of such terms denies the separation of home from work, work from labor, and productive from nonproductive labor that has characterized capitalist globalization. Intimate labor encompasses a range of activities, including bodily and household upkeep, personal and family maintenance, and sexual contact or liaison. It entails touch, whether of children or customers; bodily or emotional closeness or personal familiarity, such as sexual intercourse and bathing another; or close observation of another and knowledge of personal information, such as watching elderly people or advising trainees. Such work occurs in homes, hospitals, hotels, streets, and other public as well as private locations. It exists along a continuum of service and caring labor, from high-end nursing to low-end housekeeping, and includes sex, domestic, and care work. Against a scholarship that considers nurses, nannies, home aides, cleaners, prostitutes, and hostesses apart from each other, we explore intimate labor as a useful category of analysis to understand gender, racial, class, and other power relations in the context of global economic transformations.

Through the category of “intimate labor,” we consider various occupations—usually subsumed under the often discretely examined categories of care, domestic, and sex work—as sharing common attributes. Each of these labors forges interdependent relations, represents work assumed to be the unpaid responsibility of women, and, consequently, is usually considered to be a non-market activity or an activity of low economic value that should be done by lower classes or racial outsiders. These activities promote the physical, intellectual, affective, and other emotional needs of strangers, friends, family, sex partners, children, and elderly, ill, or disabled people. They comprise tasks for daily life, including household maintenance (cooking, cleaning, washing, shopping) and personal existence (bathing, feeding, turning over, ambulation). They rely on clean sheets and swept rooms. They involve bodily and psychic intimacy: manipulating genitalia, wiping noses, lifting torsos, and feeding mouths, but also listening, talking, holding, and just being there. The presence of dirt, bodies, and intimacy, however, helps to stigmatize such work and those who perform it.<sup>2</sup>

Characteristics that sociologist Paula England and economist Nancy Folbre attribute to care work apply to the broader arena of intimate labor: “The worker provides a service to someone with whom he or she is in personal (usually face-to-face) contact”; “the worker responds to a need or desire that is directly expressed by the recipient”; and, perhaps to a lesser extent, the service

“develops the human capabilities of the recipient.”<sup>3</sup> These criteria seemingly exclude hotel housekeepers and private household servants, but the lines between tending people and tending their homes are fluid. Home health aides spend a good portion of their time cleaning, cooking, and straightening up, tasks that are essential to enabling an elderly or disabled person to remain at home in dignity. The hotel housekeeper, who has “to get on my knees to clean the bathroom” and provide additional “creature comforts” for guests, produces pleasure and comfort even if she works when the receiver is not present and provides indirect care.<sup>4</sup> In sum, the labors of cleaners and housekeepers revolve around the intimate and the bodily, belonging to those intimate labors associated with unpaid tasks done for the household and its members by wives, mothers, daughters, and previously slaves.

### What Is Intimate Labor?

These chapters capture a wide range of intimate labors and complicate the space-time continuum under which such work occurs. They include fleeting encounters and durable ties. Regardless of temporality, these labors all rely on the maintenance of precise social relations between employers and employees or customers and providers. Brief encounters under the rubric of intimate labor might comprise nail manicuring, bill collection, street prostitution, and sperm donation. Intimate labors that depend on durable relations might include various forms of sex work, such as bar hostessing and escort service; child and elderly care; domestic work; and various forms of health care. Through ethnography and history, scholars are determining if a job is a form of intimate labor rather than merely drawing a line without considering case studies of actual labor.

The category “intimate labor” places in a continuum the discretely examined categories of care, sex, and domestic work. These forms of labor are quite varied and diverse. In our discussion, care work entails not only the tending of the elderly or the sick as described by María de la Luz Ibarra or the watching of children as discussed by Ellen Reese but also the care of transgender subjects. As Jane Ward illuminates, care work can embrace the “gender labor” of feminine partners who bolster the masculinity of their transgender female-to-male partners with their performances of femininity. Likewise, sex work comes in diverse forms and would include the labor of sexually titillating customers in hostess clubs, as seen by Rhacel Salazar Parreñas; the street work of transgender sex workers, as presented by Becki Ross; fleeting encounters between

working-class prostitutes and their customers, as recorded by Kimberly Kay Hoang and Elizabeth Bernstein; but also the purchase of the girlfriend experience, also analyzed by Bernstein. Lastly, domestic work entails not only cleaning but also various forms of care work that are performed inside the home, as Ibarra and Eileen Boris and Jennifer Klein suggest. Even domestic labor makes social relations that involve forms of intimacy, as Seemin Qayum and Raka Ray found for Kolkata and New York and Premilla Nadasen, for Atlanta. Notably, there are porous boundaries between these various work categories. Sex workers do a great deal of care work, and likewise domestic workers provide care.

Attentiveness appears as a key to understanding intimate labor, but this does not necessarily entail face-to-face interactions. The work of tending encompasses a wide range of activities from taking care of one's reproductive needs—for instance, the provision of children through adoption or the giving of an orgasm via sex—to tending to bodily care—from the provision of a manicure by a working professional, as Millann Kang shows here, to the giving of a sponge bath to an elderly patient. It includes the upkeep of homes as well as people. Tending need not entail face-to-face encounters because technological advancements facilitate communication across time and space. Attentiveness could entail tending to the materials and objects that improve the quality of our lives. Ariel Ducey magnificently points to this in her description of the ways hospital workers ensure the comfort of their patients by adjusting equipment, regulating the hot water tap, and supplying them with adequate toiletries.

Intimate labor stands alongside other conceptions. In this volume, Dorothy Sue Cobble speaks about “personal service workers” interchangeably with “intimate workers.” Intimate labor might not involve face-to-face interaction, though many types of personal service work do entail intimate labor. At the same time, not all types of interactive service occupations would fall under the rubric of what we mean by “intimate labor.” A fast-food worker, a stamp dispenser at a post office, or a concierge in a hotel need not do intimate labor. However, bill collectors could arguably be categorized as intimate laborers because their work requires them to know intimate details about another person that could be embarrassing to that person if known to others. Building from Viviana Zelizer's theorizations on the purchase of intimacy, intimate labor would lead to “knowledge and attention that are not widely available to third persons.”<sup>5</sup> The knowledge generated by intimate labor would include “such elements as shared secrets, interpersonal rituals, bodily information, awareness of personal vulnerability and shared memory of embarrassing situations.”<sup>6</sup>

Some forms of labor clearly fall under the rubric of intimate labor more than others. Why would a bill collector in India, as described by Kalindi Vora in this volume, engage in intimate labor while, let us say, a concierge in a five-star hotel in San Francisco, as described by sociologist Rachel Sherman, would not necessarily do so? A sex worker is clearly an intimate laborer because, after all, intimacy is a euphemism for sexual intercourse.<sup>8</sup> Likewise, a domestic worker because of access to the intimate space of the home and knowledge of its inhabitants' habits would be an intimate laborer. But what makes a nail salon worker an intimate laborer? And how do the labor of foreign adoption and the construction of good and bad motherhood, as considered by Laura Briggs, advance the formulation of intimate labor?

Intimate labor involves tending to the intimate needs of individuals inside and outside their home. Our intimate needs would include not just sexual gratification but also our bodily upkeep, care for loved ones, creating and sustaining social and emotional ties, and health and hygiene maintenance. Meeting one's intimate needs would include not only child care but also the bearing of children for others, as Briggs astutely points out in this volume. Under this definition, work that is as wide ranging as prostitution, nail salon work, surrogate mothering, and housecleaning would be considered intimate labor. Intimate labor also refers to work that exposes personal information that would leave one vulnerable if others had access to such knowledge. Such work would arguably include bill collection, domestic work, elder care, various forms of therapy, and prostitution.

### **Doing Intimate Labor**

Our formulation of intimate labor builds from a rich feminist literature on women's work. Enhancing our conception of intimate labor are previous discussions on the labor processes of reproductive labor and emotional labor.<sup>9</sup> In this section, we situate our discussion of intimate labor in feminist discussions of women's work. We wish to distinguish what we mean by intimate labor from emotional labor, a concept that many of our contributors draw from when explaining specific intimate labor processes, and reproductive labor, a category that one would argue also encompasses the provision of sex, care, and domestic work, which are the three types of discretely examined occupational categories that we wish to bring together in this volume. By distinguishing intimate labor from these other forms of labor identified in the literature, we wish to further contain our definition of intimate labor. Moreover, we wish to

clarify that not all forms of interactive service occupations would be forms of intimate labor.

The process of intimate labor is not uniform. As we noted earlier, intimate labor in some cases entails face-to-face labor, and in other cases it does not. In this volume, our contributors introduce various labors constituted as intimate labor including for example the work of “gender labor” identified by Ward and “entertainment work” highlighted by Parreñas, which refers to the labor of sexually titillating customers via song, dance, and conversation in hostess clubs. These examples show that intimate labor manifests in different forms, requires different labor responsibilities, and entails diverse labor processes.

In many situations, intimate labor would entail emotional labor but not always. Coined by the sociologist Arlie Hochschild, the term *emotional labor* refers to a form of face-to-face labor in which one displays certain emotions to induce particular feelings in the client or customer.<sup>10</sup> Emotional labor relies on the manipulation of one’s emotions. Various intimate laborers do emotional labor, including bill collectors who must act stern or empathetic so as to pressure customers to pay their bills, hostesses and high-class prostitutes who must display emotions of joy and love to heighten feelings of specialness among customers, and domestic workers who must suppress their emotions so as not to make their employers uncomfortable.

In explaining the process of performing emotional labor, Hochschild draws from the work of Konstantin Stanislavski to distinguish “surface acting” and “deep acting.” In “surface acting,” one merely pretends to be the character. For instance, a domestic worker would pretend to feel grateful that her employer offered a hand-me-down of furniture instead of a raise at the end of the year. In contrast, in “deep acting,” one embodies the traits and emotions of his or her character, becoming the actual character. In this scenario, the domestic worker would feel genuinely happy to have received old furniture instead of a salary increase. According to Hochschild, emotional labor often results in “emotional dissonance” for workers unable to feel the emotions they must display but who have no choice but to feign them.<sup>11</sup> Those suffering from emotional dissonance are more likely to be persons in low-status occupations who are without “status shields” against the poor treatment they may experience at work from those with greater access to money, power, authority, or status in society. Thus, domestic workers, street prostitutes, and bill collectors are those more likely to suffer from emotional dissonance. Hochschild’s notion and discussion of emotional labor gleans insight into the labor process of intimate

workers, as their performance of their work often relies on the manipulation and control of their emotions. However, emotional labor is not a prerequisite or requirement in intimate labor. In many cases, intimate laborers need not regulate their emotions. Sperm donors, considered by Rene Almeling in this volume, and surrogate mothers do not engage in emotional labor, though their jobs may involve emotional labor that would occur in private and not public spaces. Lastly, emotional labor is not always the central marker that defines the experience of intimate laborers. Emotional labor may be an aspect of the job for, let us say, a housecleaner or a nail salon worker, but it need not be a significant aspect that defines the job.

Another way to characterize intimate labor is to define it as work that involves embodied and affective interactions in the service of social reproduction. According to sociologist Evelyn Nakano Glenn, social reproduction encompasses the “array of activities and relationships involved in maintaining people both on a daily basis and intergenerationally.” She defines reproductive labor to include “activities such as purchasing household goods, preparing and serving food, laundering and repairing clothing, maintaining furnishings and appliances, socializing children, providing care and emotional support for adults, and maintaining kin and community ties.”<sup>12</sup> Political economist Isabella Bakker provides an even more expansive definition that includes the biological, including “the conditions and social constructions of motherhood”; labor force replication, including “subsistence, education and training”; and “provisioning of caring needs,” including aspects “wholly privatized within families and kinship networks or socialized to some degree through state supports.”<sup>13</sup> Not all of this work entails relation and emotional labor, closeness or touch, but a considerable amount does. Social reproduction refers not only to the care of others but also to the care of the self.

Care and domestic work are clearly included in the wide definition offered by Glenn, but not sex work. Bernstein (in this volume) would expand our understanding of reproductive labor to include sex work. After all, reproductive labor refers to the labor needed to sustain the productive labor force.<sup>14</sup> In this age of late capitalism, Bernstein argues that overworked professionals now pursue paid sexual liaisons not only for human connection but also for emotional satisfaction. What distinguishes reproductive labor from intimate labor? The idea of reproductive labor comes out of a political economic and Marxist tradition that calls attention to the behind-the-scenes labor of women and the poor that became defined as unproductive of exchange value.

Such is hardly the case when the more affluent pay for children, as Briggs shows, or those on welfare pay for child care, as Reese discusses. The idea of intimate labor more often focuses on the personal or the daily praxis of intimacy, which, as we underscore in this book, is increasingly commodified in late capitalism.

### Commodification of Intimacy

Intimate labor remains a primary source of livelihood, which women increasingly gain by being paid for it in the marketplace rather than through performing it within a heterosexual marriage in exchange for support. The commodification of intimate labor raises feminist contentions over the relationship of “care” and the economy. Some bemoan an increasing commodification of the intimate. Others, including the authors in this volume, insist that relations of intimacy already involve the exchange of money. Contributors interrogate the intersections of commerce and intimacy from multiple perspectives, mapping historical shifts in and the changing nature of women’s work; social meanings of gender, race/ethnicity, class, and sexuality in intimate labor; implications of intimate labor for worker empowerment and self-organization; and the porous boundaries between the paid and unpaid labor of women.

This volume goes beyond the usual debates on intimate labor. We seek to avoid the binary trap of exploitation versus agency that plagues discussions on sex work and reject the dualistic formulation of domestic work as either viable employment or an antiquated relation of servitude better relegated to precapitalist societies or noncapitalist social relations. Some view the responsibilities of care work as belonging in the private sphere and best performed by family, especially women. Others argue care work is a potentially rewarding occupation for women. A similar split over the view of sex work as viable employment or its labeling as only oppression characterizes conversations regarding a range of sexual labors. It is perhaps even more contentious than contentions over paid and unpaid domestic work.

A split between radical feminists and sex-positive feminists distinguishes the scholarship on sex work.<sup>15</sup> Radical feminists view prostitution as a form of violence against women; the commodification of the female body becomes the ultimate symbol of patriarchal masculinity.<sup>16</sup> They argue that either economic coercion or psychological damage from rape or sexual abuse underlies the entrance of women into prostitution.<sup>17</sup> Liberal feminists and/or sex-positive feminists question the obliteration of agency by radical feminists as well as their



conflation of sex with love, that is, the view that commodification contaminates the purity of sex. In contrast, these activists and scholars acknowledge multiple meanings in sex work. Above all else, sex work becomes a form of labor in which the worker sells not her body but her service.<sup>18</sup> Some may disdain the job of servicing sex, but others may find it rewarding. As Laura Agustín describes such reactions, some view that “they perform an art, a therapy or a rite” when performing sex work, while others “feel selling sex is analogous to typing or running a machine and see benefits from being called sex workers.”<sup>19</sup>

Avoiding these usual dichotomies, the essays in this volume see intimate labor as work situated in the labor market—both formal and informal—and subject to market forces and ideological views on gender, ethnicity, race, and sexuality, and structural constraints. Two central themes underlie our cross-disciplinary discussion. One underscores the significance of the social, cultural, political, and economic structures that shape the characteristics and dynamics of intimate labor. These essays chart the history of intimate labors in light of the rise and devolution of welfare states, women’s labor force participation, family formation, the expansion of sex work into new industries, and development of institutions for young, elderly, ill, and disabled people. Intimate labor thus serves as a springboard not only for understanding women’s labor market activities but also as a key lens for examining the impact of macrostructural forces of economic globalization and the neoliberal state. By using the term *neoliberalism*, we refer to the rise of unfettered markets brought by the deregulation of corporations and financial institutions, privatization and the concomitant decline of social welfare, and the imposition of free trade policies. Cast in the name of individualism, neoliberalism has resulted in the curbing of labor unions, the diminishment of social programs, and the loss of social democratic policies. As a number of these chapters underscore, it has also intensified the responsibilities of women at home and on the job, particularly through the compounding of their intimate labor.

Simultaneously, larger macroeconomic processes spur the formation of “new” forms of intimate labor. The advent of “time-space compression” heightens the sex tourism industry, and business travel forces the transfer of care from unpaid work within to paid work outside the home. Hence, this collection situates intimate labor processes in globalization. It asks: what types of intimate labor does the global circulation of goods, ideas, and peoples encourage? What forms of inequalities do the practices and processes of intimate labor engender and maintain? How do practices of intimate labor reflect larger

structural inequalities and cultural processes in national and transnational contexts? Intimate labor emerges as a mechanism that maintains and reflects socioeconomic inequalities. These inequalities are displayed and negotiated in social interactions in private spaces as well as public settings that are central to the operation of global capitalism, for instance airports and business hotels. How does the performance of services in these settings reflect inequities of race, class, ethnicity, and gender? How are such inequities negotiated, resisted, and maintained in the performance of intimate labor?

Second, the essays in this volume advance the debate among feminist theorists over the relationship between “care” and “economy.” For some, these terms stand in for the “hostile worlds” of love and money, an inscription of separate sphere ideology with gendered attributes repackaged: Women give care, men earn money. These theorists lament an increasing commodification of aspects of life that normatively they contend should be beyond the market, such as tending to dependents, usually defined as the frail, ill, and young.<sup>20</sup> Philosopher Virginia Held typifies such argument in regarding “caring work as enabling those cared for to know that someone values them” and for “expressing social connectedness, . . . contributing to children’s development and family satisfaction, and . . . enabling social cohesion and well-being,” all outside of market norms. Likewise economist Susan Himmelweit defends caring labor as a special kind of work involving relationship and emotional attachment so that “much of the quality of our lives would be lost if the imposition of inappropriate forms of market rationality turned such work into mere labor.” By such criteria, the attentiveness of a flight attendant, the touch of a sex worker, or the comfort making of a maid would fall outside caring labor, leaving the field to nursing and related health occupations, child and elder care, and personal support services.<sup>21</sup>

Others—and here we place ourselves—claim that commodification already has entered into relations of care, while still others point out that relations of intimacy already involve the exchange of money. The wages of intimate labor suffer from social expectations about what women should undertake out of love, kinship, or obligation. As England and others have found, most “interactive service work” occupations with care at their core pay less than jobs with equivalent skill, sex composition, and educational requirements, and care work that evokes mothering has an even greater wage penalty. Additional factors also lessen the wages of intimacy: “the labor intensive nature of the work, the inability of recipients to pay, and the intrinsic motivation of some workers.”<sup>22</sup>

To express their findings in another way, when intimacy becomes employment, it loses status as a labor of love and becomes regarded as unskilled work that anyone can perform because women have undertaken such activities without payment. Call this the devaluation thesis: double devaluation because of the lack of pay and the “nature” of the doers. Those who have performed such paid jobs are of lower status, often men and women of color and/or recent immigrants. Though such jobs need not be women’s or black or immigrant women’s work, historically they have been; indeed, men who engage in them experience the costs of racialized feminization. Characteristics of the worker have continued to define the skill and value of the work.<sup>23</sup>

To navigate these debates, the authors in this volume seek to understand what happens when intimate labor enters the marketplace and becomes paid both in terms of working conditions and the value of the worker herself. The collection as a whole brings together research on racialized and gendered labors not usually thought about together, creating an interdisciplinary dialogue among scholars from women’s studies, ethnic studies, history, and humanistic sociology. This interdisciplinary approach helps unpack the social, cultural, political, ideological, and representational definitions of work and worker and shows how embodied identities based on gender, race, nation, and class shape the meaning of intimate labor. The following chapters define intimate labor; interrogate its significance and the meanings of the experience vis-à-vis market participation and global economic processes; evaluate relations of race, class, gender, sexuality, and citizenship; consider popular representations; and analyze challenges and struggles in organizing those who make their livings through touch, closeness, and personal attentiveness, another name for care.

## Notes

1. Hochschild, 2003.
2. Palmer, 1989.
3. England and Folbre, 1999, 40; England, Budig, and Folbre, 2002, 455.
4. Cleeland, 2004.
5. Zelizer, 2005, 14.
6. Ibid.
7. Sherman, 2007.
8. Zelizer, 2005, 14. She enumerates the definition of intimacy as provided by the *Oxford English Dictionary*.
9. Brenner and Laslett, 1989; Glenn, 1992; Hochschild, 1983.

10. Hochschild, 1983.
11. Ibid, 90.
12. Glenn, 1992, 1.
13. Bakker, 2007, 541.
14. Parreñas, 2000.
15. Laura Agustín describes this divide when she states: “Under some circumstances, a worker’s control may be so radically diminished as to approximate slavery or indentured servitude. For abolitionist critics of prostitution, such cases serve as compelling evidence that the commercialization of sex is an inherently abusive transaction. From the perspective of prostitutes’ rights advocates, on the other hand, what makes prostitution abusive in some but not all instances is a question of the conditions under which the *work* takes place (the relations of production) rather than the terms under which the *sex* takes place (for money, love, or pleasure). These two very different perspectives have produced opposing strategic responses” (Agustín, 2007, 131).
16. Pateman, 1988.
17. Barry, 1995: 9.
18. Chapkis, 1997.
19. Agustín, 2007, 73.
20. England, 2005; Hochschild, 2003; Williams and Zeltzer, 2005, 362–363; Zeltzer, 2005, 20–26.
21. Held, 2002, 21–22; Himmelweit, 1999, 37.
22. England, 2005, 383; England, Budig, and Folbre, 1999, 460.
23. Glenn, 2000, 84–86; Glenn, 1992; MacDonald and Merrill, 2002, 75.