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Street Sex Workers' Discourse

Realizing Material Change
Through Agential Choice

Jill McCracken



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Street Sex Workers' Discourse

Incorporating the voices and insights of street sex workers through personal interviews, this monograph argues that the material conditions of people involved in street economies—the physical environments they live in and their effects on their bodies, identities, and spirits—are represented, reproduced, and entrenched in the language surrounding their work. As an ethnographic case study of a local system that can be extrapolated to other subcultures and the construction of identities, this book disrupts some of the more prevalent academic and lay understandings about street prostitution by providing a thorough analysis of the material conditions surrounding street work and their connection to discourse. McCracken offers an explanation of how constructions can be made differently in order to achieve representations that are generated by the marginalized populations themselves, while examining more closely society's role in this marginalization.

Jill McCracken is an Assistant Professor at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg where she researches and teaches the rhetoric of marginalized communities, in particular that of sex work/trafficking; public policy; gender studies; civic engagement; and communication across the curriculum. Her research appears in *Wagadu* (2011) and the *Community Literacy Journal* (2010).

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Theorizing Connections
Seema Arora-Jonsson
- 34 Street Sex Workers' Discourse**
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In memory of T . . . thank you for sharing yourself with us. I will never forget you.

And for all my participants . . . thank you for trusting me and sharing your stories.

Note on the Transcriptions

The following conventions are used in the transcripts presented throughout this book:

- ... Indicates either a short pause (when occurring within utterances) or a lengthened sound (when occurring at the end of a turn)
- [] Author's explanatory comments, contextual notes, and nonverbal actions
- () Material not audible on the tape
- [. . .] A break in or material omitted from the transcript

Preface

Telling Our Stories: Street-Based Sex Work

My story is only told when it's needed to be told, because of people looking down on me. [. . .] I want to help somebody. And if one of my words, one thing that I share with somebody will be planted in their brain or their memory, then maybe they'll always remember it and they'll always come back, then what I've done is okay, by sharing my story.

—Sandy¹

[W]e need to develop the capacity to listen to these stories without reducing them to competitors for the status of Truth. We need to listen for meaning rather than just “fact,” to ask why a story is told in this way, how the location of the speaker shapes the tale, how the position of the audience affects what is heard, and to carefully consider what is at stake politically, personally, and strategically in invoking this particular version at this moment in this context.

—Wendy Chapkis, *Live Sex Acts*, 1997

So when you are listening to somebody, completely, attentively, then you are listening not only to the words, but also to the feeling of what is being conveyed, to the whole of it, not part of it.

—Jiddu Krishnamurti, Theosophist Philosopher

We all tell stories in order to make sense of our lives. They are often comprised of problems created by antagonists, or villains, and solved by protagonists, or heroes. The way a problem is conceptualized directly impacts what solutions become available and how they are implemented. The storyteller may even find herself shaping reality into these preconceived categories because they make “sense” to the reader. My participants—women who participate in exchanges of sex for money on or near the street—told me their stories. Most mentioned they enjoyed sharing their lives with me, even though it was, at times, painful and difficult. Many hoped if, by telling their stories, more information about street-based sex work were made available, specifically about individual women's lives, then circumstances

could be different for others. Their stories create the framework for this book, manifesting its depth and direction.

From 2005 through 2007, I researched street-based sex work in an undisclosed city in the southwest United States, referred to as Nemez in this text.² In order to examine a broad range of language use related to street-based sex work and its influence on surrounding material conditions, I focused on three distinct sites of analysis: (1) The language used by women who exchange sex for money in heterosexual work environments; (2) The language used by people in leadership roles, or public figures, who work with women participating in these exchanges; and (3) Newspaper articles about street-based sex work over a ten-year period.³ Material conditions include the physical environments in which women who exchange sex for money or drugs live and the potential effects on their bodies, identities, and spirits. Current perceptions contribute to the constructions of problems and solutions surrounding street-based sex work and therefore influence the material conditions surrounding people who participate in these exchanges. Therefore, when the “problem” of street-based sex work is understood differently, different material conditions can and do emerge.

Drawing on the three primary newspapers in the Nemez community—*The Nemez Daily*, *The Nemez Weekly*, and *The State's Daily News*—I analyzed a decade of newspaper articles (1997–2006, the time period immediately preceding and during my ethnographic research) in order to offer the most comprehensive viewpoint of how sex work is framed and represented. My initial library search for terms commonly associated with sex work—sex work, sex worker(s), prostitute(s), and prostitution—led me to scan/read approximately thirteen hundred (1,300) articles. Because my goal was to examine how local sex work, specifically street-based sex work, is represented and discussed in the community, throughout my searches and subsequent analysis I included only the articles that specifically mentioned local sex work and issues related to sex work in the community. Within my corpus there were a total of 490 articles that mentioned or were specifically about local sex work. The newspaper articles related specifically to sex work include articles, news stories, commentaries, and letters to the editor.

The second site of my analysis includes interviews with twenty people in leadership roles, what I term *public figures*, who are directly involved with street-based sex work in Nemez. These participants include police officers, social service agents, sex worker rights activists, neighborhood association leaders, medical professionals, and academics.

I then incorporated this information into my interviews with seventeen women who identified as current or recent participants in exchanging sex for money or drugs. I intentionally waited to interview the women until I had completed the analysis of the newspaper articles and interviews with public figures in order to triangulate my analysis of these two sites with my participants. By triangulation, I mean I made this information central to

my conversations and interviews with the women in order to better understand how they identify themselves and understand and explain the material conditions of their lives. This triangulation allowed for an analysis of “outsider” discourse about street-based sex work, i.e., the public figure and newspaper discourse, from the perspectives of those most closely associated with it. I chose this progression in order to create a proximal analysis whereby I focused on the layer furthest from the women who exchange sex for money or drugs (presented in the newspapers) and then moved toward the center by analyzing the language used to talk about street-based sex work by the people with the most intimate knowledge of this work.⁴ As Sociologist Stéphanie Wahab (2004) emphasizes in “Tricks of the Trade,” “Because sex workers have so frequently been denied the validity of their statements by researchers and service providers, the intention is for the narratives to speak by themselves, for themselves” (p. 145). I include the women’s stories as well as extensive excerpts of the interviews to contextualize their lives and perspectives.⁵

In addition to the newspaper analysis and interviews with public figures and women who exchange sex, my multi-sited ethnography also consisted of participant observation in a variety of sex industry environments. I spent substantial time with the people I interviewed, integrating myself into their discursive circles and communities in order to understand the language used to describe their lives.

As I present information about the women’s positionality in society throughout my analysis, let me first offer my own “situated knowledge” (Haraway 1988) as a white, feminist, middle-class, single mother in her early forties. When I began this research, I was a single, graduate student in her mid-thirties, and although well versed in theory, I knew much less about the practical realities of sex work at any level. I do not pretend I was not viewed as an outsider, at least initially, by most of my participants. It was through working and spending time with these women, some more than others, I created an environment that contributed to my understanding of the language they and others use to describe their lives. My volunteer and paid work at *Casa Segura*⁶ and other social service agencies in Nemez allowed me opportunities to develop a rich understanding of street-based sex work and related institutions on a daily basis. Throughout my research, I also became involved in many sex worker rights organizations as a member and a leader, and now also identify as a sex worker rights advocate. I agree fully with Laura Agustín (2005b) when she argues: “researchers need to be prepared to confront their own preconceived ideas, their own “outsider” status and the structures of power they inevitably participate in. Reflexivity on the part of the researcher will be an essential element of the work, a continual questioning of where moral reactions come from and a humble attempt to leave them aside” (p. 627). I document my own attempts at this reflexivity and what I have learned about commercial sex, as well as myself, throughout.

This book's framework emerged from my participants' explanations of the problems and solutions surrounding street-based sex work. Challenged with the complexity of separating qualitative data into discrete, fixed categories of chapters, subtitles, and even the definitions of problems and solutions, my analyses offers a picture of the material conditions surrounding street-based sex work and how they influence an individual's power and agency as well as the culture that concurrently creates, supports, and works to dismantle street-based sex work.

Sex work, the industry surrounding the exchange of sexual services for money or other gain, is complex and riddled with contradictions. Patience and a skeptical suspension of preconceived beliefs therefore proves helpful. My research and analysis confronts the tensions between dichotomies: good/bad, moral/immoral, right/wrong, member/outsider, lawful/criminal, agent/victim, and many others. Being mindful of these tensions reveals the parts of stories that merely fulfill one's expectations based on what one has been conditioned to "hear," as well as possible disruptions in the categories and tensions themselves. The categories are always in flux, if even minutely. Therefore, in order to participate fully in this analysis, I ask the reader to become aware of and then blend, or shift, the dichotomies/dualities that perpetually inform discussions of sex work and allow for the tensions existing between and among these categories to emerge.

AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF STREET-BASED SEX WORK

This study is grounded in rhetorical analysis, or the study of how language shapes and is shaped by cultures, institutions, and the individuals within them. I then look at this language from an ideological perspective, or the identification and examination of the underlying assumptions of communicative interactions. Not only is my participants' language examined, but also the underlying belief systems of language. Situating sex work and the industry as rhetorical constructions, I offer an example of how signs and symbols that comprise material conditions (i.e., resources, criminal laws, punishment, avenues for entering and leaving these street economies), can be analyzed to better understand how goals, agendas, interests, and ideologies are represented and implemented through language. My analysis reveals the constructed nature of these problems and solutions, while offering insights into the rhetoric of the everyday and how language and ideologies shape the material conditions of street-based sex work.

Because language shapes our understanding of the world (McCracken 2010), one's language awareness and choices influence an individual's perception of herself as well as her available opportunities. These language choices are embedded in belief systems about one's worth, body, sexuality, race, class, and abilities even prior to one's birth, and therefore dissembling these constructs is, in fact, impossible. And yet it *is* possible to take an

action or an identity like “prostitute” and pull at the threads that create and dismantle the construct in order to provide insights into restructuring the problems and issues surrounding street-based sex work. Existing research, policies, laws, and participants’ spoken words transcribed allow for moments to be frozen in time in order to better understand the language in varied contexts. It is through this examination of the language and underlying belief systems that these beliefs become clear.⁷

My record of this language allows for an examination of the underlying ideologies surrounding street-based sex work; in particular, I show the way the problems of street-based sex work and their corresponding solutions are defined impact the material conditions surrounding people who participate in street economies. Examining these problems and solutions based on how people who exchange sex understand them reveals how language and its subsequent effects on belief systems and actions ultimately influence what choices, options, and paths are and are not available to an individual, which can then further constrain or create opportunities for action and change.

Because discourse is central to this analysis, the language used to talk about these transactions and the people who participate in them is also closely examined and deconstructed. Like the material conditions surrounding people who participate in street economies, these terms have histories and contexts. Embedded within systems of race, class, gender, citizen status, and other power structures, they reflect and co-create values and belief systems. And yet, notably, they are fluid, meaning they can and do change. The terminology and ideologies are central to this analysis because they co-create material reality.

My research is an ethnographic case study of a local system that can be extrapolated to other subcultures and the construction of identities based on the language of the individuals who are directly involved in this work. Because my study investigates the language of policy-making and the people who forge it, it has implications for ethics and policy in addition to gender studies, cultural studies, and ethnographic research.

THE SEX INDUSTRY

Sex work is defined as any commercial sexual service performed in exchange for material compensation. Rather than refer to the act of exchanging sex for money that in some countries is illegal, as the term *prostitution* usually does, *sex work* is a term that includes activities both legal (exotic dancing, phone sex operators, burlesque performers, adult pornography) and illegal (activities that involve face-to-face direct exchange of sexual stimulation for commercial gain).⁸ In the United States, street-based sex work is illegal and involves those persons who solicit or exchange sex on or near the street, in cars, hotels, truck stops, or outdoors, as opposed to using

telephones, the Internet, or other referral systems (McCracken, Thukral, and Savino 2006).

Men, women, and transgender/transsexual individuals all exchange sex for money or other gain. My study focused on women who exchange sex for drugs or money, what is commonly referred to as prostitution or street/survival sex work. Analyzing issues surrounding male and transgender sex workers in non-heterosexual environments was beyond the scope of this project. Although these issues are extremely important to consider in an analysis of sex work, trying to include them in this analysis would complicate the study by introducing those ideologies and discriminations that arise when concepts of gender and sexuality beyond heterosexual practices are involved. In my discussion of sex work in general, I strive to be gender-neutral, meaning men, women, and transgender individuals all sell sex. When I speak of my participants in particular, I refer to them as women. Although I was open to interviewing anyone who identified as a “woman” whether cisgendered⁹ female or not, none of my participants identified as transgender,¹⁰ and therefore my analysis focuses entirely on interviews with cisgendered female women.¹¹

Issues surrounding sex work are convoluted and complicated. Policy makers, activists, academics, among others, wrestle with them to write laws and policies, design social services, and analyze existing policies, services, and circumstances of individuals. Discourse is always at the center of these struggles to frame an issue and reach specific goals based on various political and moral agendas. To complicate matters further, sex workers are the focus of public opinion and policy, and yet historically have not been direct contributors to the conversations surrounding sex work and policy. Research in the past twenty years has drastically changed this scenario.¹² Without sex workers’ expert and lived understanding, external policy makers, researchers, and practitioners risk creating policies that exacerbate problems and perpetuate the material conditions that harm individuals, rather than co-creating solutions that emerge from lived experience.

The language used to discuss the exchange of sex for money or other gain, as well as those who participate in these activities, is fraught with difficulty. Naming is powerful, as I argue in this monograph, because it simultaneously creates and constrains those individuals it struggles to define. And yet, naming is also convenient and even necessary because it allows the speaker to discuss an agreed upon set of practices, actions, or identities. Take street-based sex work for example. As I explore more fully in Chapter 5, the terms *prostitute* and *sex worker* identify the person who participates in these transactions as primarily a victim or an agent. Integrated throughout my argument and analysis, I show that neither term accurately describes the participants in my study. Because I am a rhetorician and language is a central focus of this book, locating my own language has been a challenge. In order to simplify the varieties of language and to reflect my own values, I use the phrase *women who exchange sex for money or*

drugs or the identities chosen by my participants. The title of this book, *Street Sex Workers' Discourse*, directly contradicts this statement, and in so doing reflects my own learning and growth as a researcher and scholar of language. I proposed this title to the publisher prior to completing my analysis, and it was included in publicity for the book. I have and continue to wrestle with this "terminology" issue, and it was only in the later stages of my analysis and completion of this project that I came to understand that although the terms *street sex workers* or *street-based sex workers* are commonly used in academic research, my participants, as well as many others involved in street-based economies, do not identify as sex workers.¹³ *I use the term street-based sex work to refer to an entity, not an identity, because none of my participants identified themselves in this way.*¹⁴ Because it was too late to change the title when I came to this understanding, it is a reminder to me that language evolves, reflects, and impacts our understanding of the world. The practices, identifications, actions, and positions of choice and power from which these exchanges are made cannot be neatly identified because they are attributed to an incredible range of individuals in varied sets of circumstances.

Because names and identities are so important and intrinsic to understanding the people participating in these activities, individuals must be able to identify themselves, using the terms most accurate for them. Sexual commerce occurs on myriad levels for everyone. I am not referred to as a "house-based flirter" because I can, with a wink and a smile, persuade the postal delivery man to bring a heavy package into my son's bedroom. The term *street-based sex work* reflects the location of the interactions, the vague positionality revealed about the people who participate in these interactions, as well as the belief these actions are sexual commerce, meaning they are a form of work provided in exchange for money. Although the term is similar to *sex work*, I differentiate it to emphasize the participants are often not approaching this work from the same position of power and choice as many self-identified sex workers do. As a point of clarification, the phrase, *women who exchange sex for money or drugs*, could be applied to any sex worker, but within this context, I refer to women in a street-based environment. I include the words *for money or drugs* in this phrase because the use of drugs is so prevalent in my study and was often provided directly in exchange for sex or purchased from the money earned in these exchanges.

THE MATERIAL CONDITIONS OF STREET-BASED SEX WORK IN NEMEZ

The material conditions surrounding street-based sex work cannot be mapped out in their entirety, as they differ substantially based on location and personal circumstances, but some of the primary considerations

include social status, control and power over and within working conditions, experiences of and adjustment to the work, arrests, drug use, risk of HIV/AIDS, and resident issues with and responses to prostitution.¹⁵ These conditions often interact to exacerbate oppression of and difficulty in the lives of women and men who exchange sex for drugs or money.

People who participate in exchanging sex for money or drugs are some of the most marginalized and victimized people in the sex industry and society.¹⁶ They work near the street, in the park, and out of cars and hotels. Their exchanges of sex involve real time and proximal contact with their clients, which implies varying levels of danger and risk. Woven through the documented material conditions of street-based sex work in Nemez are the women's stories. Avery Gordon's (2008) "complex personhood" provides a framework from which to read them:

It has always baffled me why those most interested in understanding and changing the barbaric domination that characterizes our modernity often—not always—withhold from the very people they are most concerned with the right to complex personhood. [. . .] Complex personhood means that all people (albeit in specific forms whose specificity is sometimes everything) remember and forget, are beset by contradiction, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others. Complex personhood means that people suffer graciously and selfishly too, get stuck in the symptoms of their troubles, and also transform themselves. Complex personhood means that even those called "Other" are never never that. [. . .] At the very least, complex personhood is about conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people's lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning. (p. 4–5)

One's "complex personhood" requires the reader to listen, as I included in J. Krisnamurti's epigram at the beginning of the Preface, "not only to the words, but also to the feeling of what is being conveyed, to the whole of it, not part of it." And it is grounded in respect for that individual as a human—just like the listener.

In the following section, I outline the material conditions related to street-based sex work in Nemez, specifically focusing on criminalization and arrests, neighborhood and community responses, drug use and risk of sexually transmitted infections, and violence.

Criminalization and Arrests

Prostitution was legal in Nemez at the end of the nineteenth century and into the early twentieth. In addition to receiving regular medical examinations, prostitutes also took out business licenses. Although primarily American, the women were also French, German, Belgian, and Dutch. Prostitution was

permitted but not welcomed in Nemez, and as the city grew, the women were pushed to the edge of town. The Temperance Movement, which created the national prohibition on alcohol and gambling, chased away prostitution by the 1920s, at least as a legal business enterprise. Prostitution was forced underground, where it has remained since.

Nemez has a metropolitan population of approximately 1,000,000 and was identified as a High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area by the Office of the National Drug Control and Policy. Located at the crossroads of major interstates and being close to the Mexican border, Nemez is a hub for incoming drugs from Mexico and Central America. Some communities within Nemez serve as conduits for drug traffickers, generating a marketplace for gang members, men and women exchanging sex for drugs or money, and injection and other drug users.

Officer Tom Hixson, a white 52-year-old heterosexual male and a former supervisor of the vice unit,¹⁷ described the penalties for prostitution arrests in Nemez: "If you're arrested for prostitution on the streets, the first offense, you're going to spend 15 days in jail, you're gonna get about a five-hundred and something dollar fine and you're going to be area restricted 1,000 feet from where you were arrested."

Between January 2003 and December 2006¹⁸ there were approximately 1395 commercialized sex crimes¹⁹ according to the Nemez Police Department. Of those arrests, approximately 1,370 were for prostitution, ten were for commercialized sex/pandering, and ten were for commercialized sex/other.²⁰ These statistics do not account for those individuals arrested for loitering, violating zone restrictions, and other crimes for which people involved in street commerce are often arrested. Discerning precise data about prostitution is difficult because it is illegal and the women, men, and transgender individuals who participate in prostitution are difficult to track. These figures only help to clarify the significant numbers of people arrested for prostitution.

Neighborhood Residents

In 2002, the Nemez Police Department created a unit that focused resources on problems affecting the community at large. One outcome was the Dover Project (made up of the Nemez Police Department, Building Safety, The City Council Ward Office, and six neighborhood associations) to curb violent crime in the area. In early 2003 (with pressure from the Dover Project), the Westwood Adult Hotel and Bookstore was closed. One police commander described this hotel as a "den for narcotics and prostitution." This closure encouraged the six neighborhood associations to believe their area's reputation as a place to find drugs and prostitutes might be changing.

In April 2004, the Nemez Police Department initiated a deterrence program that targeted the clients of prostitutes. The program required the "john," or client, be photographed by police and then given a booklet on prostitution