

Review of *Street Sex Workers' Discourse: Realizing Material Change through Agential Choice* by Jill McCracken, Routledge, 2013, 276pp., \$44.99 (paperback).

Reviewed by Elizabeth C. Britt,
Northeastern University

To get a good sense of Jill McCracken's project in *Street Sex Workers' Discourse*, one should pay attention to what she says about the title. As she discusses in the preface and again in the final chapter, she gave the book a title before finishing her analysis. She subsequently learned that although her interview participants engaged in street sex work, they did not identify as "street sex workers." In other words, they did not define themselves by these activities. By the time McCracken came to this understanding, the original title had already been used in promotional materials, so she could not change it. The story, however, epitomizes two overarching arguments of the book: one, naming matters. And two, when attempting to represent or intervene in other people's lives, we need to listen to them first.

The book makes these two arguments through an interview and observation study of discourse about street sex work in an undisclosed city in the southwestern United States. McCracken examined the discourse of seventeen women who exchanged sex for money or drugs, twenty public figures (such as activists, social service providers, and police officers) interacting with those who exchange sex, and scores of local newspaper articles. As a rhetorician, McCracken is interested in the language used to describe this work (and those engaged in it). More particularly, she is interested in the relationship between this language and the kinds of interventions it makes possible. At the heart of her investigation are questions about the nature of agency: to what extent can individuals be said to make authentic choices?

McCracken finds that the discourse about street sex work—emerging from news articles as well as from public figures and those who exchange sex—is saturated with the commonplace language of individualism. Exchanging sex for money or drugs is seen in highly individualized terms rather than embedded in social and economic realities. Exchanging sex is defined as a problem for both those who engage in it (constructed as victims of trauma, poverty, or drug addiction, for example) or as a problem for neighborhoods (constructed as victims of those engaged in sex work). Defined in these ways, the problem can be solved only by changing individual behaviors, specifically the behaviors of the women exchanging sex: they can be motivated to change their "lifestyles" through counseling, drug rehabilitation, and criminal prosecution. McCracken argues that reframing the exchanging of sex by focusing on systemic violence and injustices can instead lead to new ways to improve the lives of those who engage in the practice.

In Chapter 1 (Quotidian Rhetoric Creates Meaning through Collage), McCracken lays out her rhetorical methodology. She draws on the concept of "quotidian" rhetoric, or the unconscious symbolic means by which we make meaning in our everyday lives, to frame her central argument that naming matters. The language that we use (and that is used

around us) both creates and reflects ideologies, thereby constituting how we interpret ourselves and the world. She combines this notion with the concept of the collage to illustrate how our taken-for-granted ideas can be shifted by paying attention to different perspectives.

Chapters 2 through 5 draw on the voices of her participants to create various collages of meaning regarding street sex work. Chapter 2 (Who is the Victim: The Neighborhood or the Woman?) illustrates the pervasiveness of individualistic thinking about the “problem” and its solutions by examining the trope of victimization. Chapter 3 (Is She a Criminal, a Victim, or a Victim of the Criminal Justice System?) extends this analysis, exploring various understandings of whether exchanging sex is morally wrong and should be criminalized. In Chapter 4 (“An Opportunity to Change”: Responsibility and Choice), McCracken highlights an unspoken assumption in all of the discourse about street sex work, which is that the workers have the responsibility to change, i.e., stop the practice, and that succeeding at this change is largely a matter of individual willpower. Chapter 5 (Systemic Violence Perpetuates Victim Status) complicates the notion of individual choice by viewing street sex work as part of a patriarchal system that does real and symbolic violence to women.

The voices that McCracken brings together in these middle chapters are alone enough reason to read this book. Particularly impressive is that McCracken lays these voices side by side, allowing the reader to create a collage of meaning from them, rather than creating hierarchies of expertise. This rhetorical choice dovetails well with McCracken’s stated goal, in the final chapter, to treat those who exchange sex as experts worth listening to. Paying attention to the voices of those involved in street sex work, she argues, can make possible “agential choice,” or the ability of individuals to make decisions regarding their best interests. For McCracken, fostering agential choice means recognizing both the individual’s capacity for self-knowledge and power as well as the myriad forces (material and discursive) shaping that capacity.

Street Sex Workers’ Discourse: Realizing Material Change through Agential Choice is original and important. The book should help influence policy about sex work as well as other activities involved in street economies. The book’s specific questions about agency—how people act given the material constraints of their lives—are timely and significant not only in McCracken’s field of rhetorical studies but also more broadly in the social sciences and humanities.

Elizabeth C. Britt

Northeastern University

e.britt@neu.edu