

# Physicality and Emotional Impacts of Sex Work in *Hustling Verse: An Anthology of Sex Workers' Poetry*

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## **Abstract**

This paper was originally written for Genevieve Fuji-Johnson's POL 416W course, *Feminist Social and Political Thought*. The assignment asked students to use one or more readings from the class to make a specific and nuanced argument based on a choice of study questions. The paper uses APA citation style.

The scope of this paper focusses on the physicality of sex work and the way sex workers relate to themselves and their bodies. It looks at the way that *Hustling Verse: An Anthology of Sex Workers' Poetry* (2019) places complex elements such as identity and self in sex work in conversation with each other and discusses these elements with respect to the emotional impact engaging in sex work can have.

Sex work is stigmatized by many people, and the stereotypes that are attached to being a sex worker tend to consume the narrative about the industry. It is so broad and complex that it would be impossible to cover entirely in one paper. Thus, the scope of this paper will focus more narrowly on the physicality of sex work and the way that sex workers relate to themselves and their bodies. *Hustling Verse: An Anthology of Sex Workers' Poetry* (2019) places complex elements such as identity and self in conversation with each other and discusses these elements with respect to the emotional impact engaging in sex work can have. Doing so places the reader in the shoes of the poets and helps them to develop perspective relating to the lives of sex workers. The poets also discuss the act of sex itself and the physicality of sex work by using visceral imagery and vivid expressions of emotion.

Much of *Hustling Verse: An Anthology of Sex Workers' Poetry* (2019) uses metaphors and visceral imagery to discuss the way that the relationship to the

physical body changes when it is used to provide sex as a service. This imagery provides context in a very raw way and forces the reader to feel and visualize the way that sex workers experience their bodies. Aimee Herman illustrates this imagery so beautifully in “fifth floor walk-up” when they say, “Here, humans have spandex skin [...] I am fast-food menu minus discounts and / dipping sauces / I am still pulling out carpet threads / from parts of my skin / I have given away” (p.105). The image of spandex skin is one that is moldable and flexible, able to be stretched thin – perhaps also a site in which trauma is held and re-emerges every time it is touched by another person. But the image of spandex also implies the resilience of sex workers and their ability to maintain a strong relationship to their bodies as they continue in their work. The line of “pulling out carpet threads / from parts of my skin” also perpetuates this implication of holding onto trauma; the act of pulling threads out of torn skin is a slow and painful process that requires raw sensitivity. When combined with the symbol of stretching spandex skin being pulled, this image of resilience is enforced tenfold.

The “fast-food menu” line in Herman’s poem comes with idea of something being cheap and easy, insinuating that sex workers are just that; however, this implication is deconstructed at the end of the poem. Herman says, “Later, thunder & homework / & formulating words with an aftertaste / of the cash register in between your legs” (p.106). This idea that Herman sees their body as a means to make money (and utilizes it in this way) indicates that they are not selling their body by force, nor are they actually selling or giving away any part of themselves; rather, they are choosing to use their body in this way. They do not lack agency by providing this service – they are aware of the way other people view sex workers and the idea that they sell their body. In reality, sex workers use their bodies to sell a service.

There is also duality in the expression of emotion in *Hustling Verse*. The imagery that many poets use is vivid and at times feels emotionless, yet there is still emotion in places where it appears to be lacking; removing oneself from the act of sex being used as a service rather than a source of personal pleasure, for example, is emotional in itself. Akira the Hustler displays this duality in his poem, “Excerpts from *A Whore Diary*” (p.88). At the beginning he establishes the boundary between sex in a working relationship and sex in a romantic relationship when he says, “I am your love, no, SEX slave!!” a client screamed. / He’s right, he is my sex, not love, slave” (p.88). Here, Akira the Hustler clearly distinguishes the two types of relationships and the mindset that has to be maintained as a sex worker – in order to engage in sex as work and to sell sex as a service, there must

be a level of emotional separation between the sex worker and their client. Sex can exist without the presence of love.

Akira the Hustler continues to further illustrate a sense of duality in the sex work industry. He says, “Sometimes I learn things about sex at work and / bring them back home. Sometimes I learn about tenderness / at home and develop it into a technique for work. / Sometimes I tire of, or get excited by, the sex at work” (p.88). Again, the dual nature of sex is expressed here. Akira the Hustler takes things from his personal life and intimate relationships and applies them to his sex work, and vice versa. He closes the poem with the lines, “Sometimes it seems like I’m a migrating fish, / swimming down and back a river in flows with money, / camaraderie, *love and hate*” (p.88 emphasis mine), expressing once again two competing emotions simultaneously existing alongside each other. They can both be true, and *are* both true for many sex workers who perhaps lack the choice to engage in sex work, or to rely on it as their main source of income.

*Hustling Verse: An Anthology of Sex Workers’ Poetry* discusses identity in sex work; that is, the way that sex workers can both lose and find their identity in their work. Some poets discuss the way that sex work is dehumanizing, slowly stripping away what makes up a person’s identity. Alternatively, some show how their experiences in the sex work industry have shaped and informed who they are. Both perspectives exist. Milcah Halili shows both sides of this identity game in their poem, “Beloved Boy” (p.125). They say, “For some sex workers, hustling / is their daily sustenance until the day they peacefully / rest. For me, at least / back then, it was a means to an end” (p.125). Halili furthers this conversation when they speak on how they became more secure in their identity as a nonbinary person overtime through sex work. They say, “the more I tried / to be a perfect whore, the greater I saw him / as I stared at my reflection in all of the / mirrors [...] This is what a boy / becoming a man looks like. [...] This is a man whose / gender / is never threatened by wearing iridescent nail polish” (p.125). Here, Halili is illustrating how hustling and sex work changed its meaning. It began simply as a way to make money but evolved into something that enabled them to explore their identity. “A boy becoming a man” fosters a distinct image of growth; the reader is able to realize what this looks like, because “a boy becoming a man” is a commonly used phrase to indicate maturity and settling into one’s body.

The poets in *Hustling Verse* frequently discuss their bodies as objects as well as ways to express themselves and engage in sex work. In their poem “Sex Work Client,” Kay Kassirer alludes to this. They say, “this job is more acting than sex / more affirmations than orgasms,” suggesting that the act of sex when it is sold as

a service requires that sex workers view their bodies as a way of earning income, as benefitting others through pleasure but that benefit the sex worker by acting as the vessel through which the service is provided (p.151). Kassirer also uses gender inequalities as an example of the expectations placed on women, specifically female-presenting sex workers; they say, “sex work client isn’t afraid / to tell me what it means / to be a woman” (p.151). Kassirer speaks on the way that many people carry the idea that sex work is a “dirty” or illegitimate career. People who engage in sex work as clients often feel they have the right to comment on the perceived gender or sexuality of sex workers because of the industry’s stigma and stereotypes. They are paying for a service, which does leave room for the client to exercise perceived power over the sex worker; this enables them to make comments on their perception of sex workers and the industry.

“What it means to be a woman” is completely subjective and does not carry one universal meaning; for a person to identify as a woman means that they identify with the definition of “woman” that they feel comfortable with, or with particular aspects of what society says a woman should be. Kassirer further addresses gender expectations when they say, “sex work client pays for sex / because spending money is easier / than adding up everything / his toxic masculinity / has cost him” (p.151). Sex workers are viewed by many people as objects, as disposable and meant to be exploited in order to distract from the client’s struggles; within these lines in particular, Kassirer is placing paying for a sex worker and admitting to aggressive, sexist behaviours in conversation with each other. Sex work client, as identified in Kassirer’s poem, perpetuates toxic masculine stereotypes and behaviours. Instead of addressing it, they pay for a sex worker and (presumptively) seek to be validated in their masculinity and identity.

Much of the public discourse surrounding sex work and sex workers’ identities relies on negative and harmful stereotypes about the industry and the way that sex workers’ bodies are “sold.” In her 2014 paper titled, *Is Sex Works an Expression of Women’s Choice and Agency?*, on the legitimacy of sex work and whether sex workers have agency within the profession, Sophia Gore’s main argument perpetuates these stereotypes. She says, “prostitutes are expected to subordinate their own will entirely for the sexual gratification of the customers – thus it cannot be considered a legitimate enactment of agency. Since prostitution remains an explicitly segregated service dominated by women, it seems fair to argue that such a practice instils patriarchy and subordination over women in its most innate and intimate form” (p.2). Throughout the piece Gore explicitly argues that all sex workers lack agency and are in the industry to only benefit other people. This lens

fails to recognize sex workers as people and instead disregards them as illegitimate, as only bodies that are sold and given up in the pursuit of subordination.

Gore also speaks on the decriminalization of sex work and the exploitation of sex workers. It is important to note that Gore seems to think that predominantly straight and cisgender women are sex workers; but based on the biographies of the poets in *Hustling Verse*, it is evident that there are a large number of sex workers who do not identify as women. Many of the poets are queer, transgender, nonbinary, and other stigmatized minorities. Thus it is not only women who should be considered within this discussion. It is also important to note that given Gore's paper was published in 2014, perceptions of sex work and its value most certainly have changed since then. Though many people still maintain this perspective, the dominant view of sex work and sex workers is shifting upwards in an empowering direction. Nevertheless, Gore disagrees with the legalisation and legitimization of sex work, noting that "By legalising and legitimising sex work, one incidentally normalises subjugation of prostitutes (predominantly women). Legalisation masks and entrenches these problems rather than addressing them. [...] prostitution will always and inherently be exploitative of women and the practice subsumes the overarching structures of patriarchy. It is in consideration of such perspective that I concur that 'sex work' – by its nature – cannot be considered 'legitimate work'" (p.2). It is important to note here that though Gore disagrees with the legalization of sex work, they may not disagree with the *decriminalization* of sex work; decriminalization helps to ensure that policies and structures exist so that sex workers are protected. And though there is merit in saying that simply legalising sex work is not enough – there must be other such structures and policies in place to ensure the safety and rights of sex workers are upheld and protected – to say that sex work is illegitimate work does not consider many of their realities. It is the case that some enter the industry due to a lack of other options, however that is not the case for all sex workers and the job certainly does not strip sex workers of their agency.

There are undertones of optimism and empowerment within many of the poems in *Hustling Verse* that counter this assumption that sex work suppresses individual expression and takes agency away from sex workers. Milcah Halili's "Beloved Boy," as analyzed above, utilizes examples of identity shifts and growth as an individual through sex work to promote and support this idea (p.125). Halili says, "whores don't let public mockery / stop their glow. Hustlers / with pride keep hustling" (p.125). They exhibit pride in their work and in their identity as a

sex worker because of the way that it has enabled them to see the beauty in their individuality, and push past the stigma that is attached to sex work and to members of the LGBTQ2+ community. There is also evidence of sex work as fulfillment and as resilience in these lines; Halili acknowledges the struggles that come with identifying out of the “norm” in their discussion of being nonbinary and testing the bounds of what society at large thinks a man or a woman should be, while also acknowledging that there is empowerment and agency to, in fact, test the boundaries of expression of who or what they want to be.

Sex work is a complex industry in which sex workers must strike a balance between the give and take of emotion, as well as the use of their bodies to provide a service for others. As seen in *Hustling Verse: An Anthology of Sex Workers' Poetry* (2019), sex work can benefit sex workers and encourage growth in their identity and perception of themselves. Sex work can be fulfilling and act as a vessel for testing the bounds of individual expression. The poets use visceral imagery to express how messy and complicated working in an industry that relies so heavily on using your body to provide a service can be. There is a complexity to the sex work industry that can be both plaguing and empowering, as seen in the poets' expressions of emotion throughout the anthology; sex workers must often work within an unpredictable environment, forcing patience and flexibility to become a necessity – which can be plaguing and taxing, both emotionally and physically. Ultimately, *Hustling Verse* illustrates the intense physicality that is involved in being a sex worker and the emotional impact and turmoil that sex workers face for working within such a stigmatized industry.

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