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10-30-2009

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Presentation at First Annual Interdisciplinary
Conference on Human Trafficking at UNL
October 30, 2009

Stories of Sex Trafficking: Rescue, Victimization, and Silence

The best guess statistics indicate that the majority of people who are trafficked are women and children and that they are primarily being trafficking into commercial sexual exploitation.¹ In this presentation, I want to discuss some of the stories and narratives circulating about these women and children.

What stories are being told, and with what impact? What rhetorical approaches and frames are prominent? What are the relationships between the stories about trafficking survivors available in the public sphere, and activism, advocacy and policy actions and alternatives? These are some of the questions asked by journalism professors Anne Johnston and Barbara Friedman in their exploratory study of the ways major US newspapers, such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, cover the issue of sex trafficking.²

Their analysis identified the dominant frames as crime (37%) and politics or legislation (26%).

Since crime, politics and legislation were the primary frames, it's not surprising that the solution presented – in two-thirds of the articles – was more or better legislation and laws. Given that focus, it's also not surprising that the people most cited in the articles –

¹ In response to disputes over statistics, John Vanek asks, "How many victims do we *need* to find? 27 in the county? 27,000 in the United States? 27 million worldwide? How about this number: 1. A single victim is one too many." <http://jvanek.wordpress.com>.

² "Framing the Public Debate on the Global Sex Trade," Sex Trafficking Mini-Symposium, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, September 14, 2009.

more than half the time -- were politicians and government officials. Law enforcement and advocacy groups were cited in about equal, much smaller, percentages (33/30).

Johnston and Friedman note that we rarely hear the voices of survivors in this coverage. That makes sense in a number of ways, given, among other issues, the need to insure safety for survivors, to avoid retraumatization, and to interrupt tendencies to voyeuristic sensationalism. But it does point to a rather striking gap. When we do hear the voices of survivors in news articles on trafficking, the focus is often limited to the survivor narrative – what happened to them, and how it happened.³

These stories are hugely important in helping survivors reclaim their voice and in expanding our knowledge and educating the public about the mechanics of trafficking. As Gloria Steinem points out, “these twenty-first-century slave narratives force us to recognize the reality of slavery” (x).⁴ We certainly need to recognize the horror, exploitation, and violence that is trafficking. However Kinohi Nishikawa⁵ sounds a note of caution about a reliance on the rhetoric of victimization: “efforts to ascribe individualized pathos onto trafficked women obscure the structural conditions that have made trafficking such a vexing problem in our contemporary moment” (3). It is worthy of note, in this context, then, that attention to the demand issue is not as present in media coverage and that we don’t often hear survivor voices in the coverage or public conversations about solutions for eradicating trafficking. Bridget Anderson and Rutvica Andrijasevic point out that survivors are “not seen as political subjects, but rather as objects of intervention.”⁶

Johnston and Friedman’s work on news media made me curious about how sex trafficking was represented in literary texts. Are there consistent frames in novels or creative non-fiction? Do they differ from media coverage and, if so, how? In a longer

³ Nicholas Kristof’s coverage in the New York Times is a good example.

⁴ Steinem, Gloria. “Foreword.” *Enslaved: True Stories of Modern Day Slavery*. Sage Jesse and Liora Kasten, Eds. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

⁵ “Trafficking and Victimization: The Politics of Responsibility in *Lilja 4-Ever*,” Sex Trafficking Mini-Symposium, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, September 14, 2009.

⁶ Anderson, Bridget and Rutvica Andrijasevic, “Sex, slaves and citizens: the politics of anti-trafficking.” *Soundings* 40 (2008); 135-145.

version, I'll consider *Becoming Abigail* by Chris Albani, *Sold* by Patricia McCormick, *The Girl Who Played with Fire*, by Stieg Larsson, and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*. Today I want to look at *Vita Nuova*, a detective novel by Magdalen Nabb and *Lying Together: My Russian Affair*, a memoir by Jennifer Beth Cohen. Both of these texts deal with international sex trafficking.

Those of you who do more quantitative research might wonder about the need to examine representational strategies of sex trafficking. The discourses on trafficking circulating in the public sphere help drive public response – at the individual and community levels, and also at the broader policy level. Literature doesn't tell us what to do in any kind of didactic or morally prescriptive way, but it offers a mechanism to help inform how we think about and wrestle with complex issues. What we “know” about trafficking, and how we come to know it, impacts the responses we can imagine and create to address it.

Nabb's novel is a police procedural. Trafficking surfaces in the context of a murder being investigated by the protagonist, Marshal Guarnaccia. There is a role here for journalism as Roberto Nesti, a reporter for *The Nazione*, provides Guarnaccia with some crucial background information. For example, it turns out that although the father of the murdered woman (Paoletti) has no criminal record, he does have a history of pimping, among other unsavory activities. Nesti also connects Guarnaccia with informants.

The mechanics of the actual trafficking are familiar. Paoletti runs a staffing agency and uses it as a cover for bringing in women from Eastern Europe and forcing them into prostitution (69). He places just enough clients in legitimate jobs to stay under the radar. He owns a nightclub, the Emperor, which offers strip acts and lap dancing. He also owns a very upscale, discreet hotel nearby where male buyers can bring the women they pay to use. The women live upstairs in the hotel, under the supervision of the caretaker, an older woman. Paoletti keeps all the women's identification papers and uses his bouncers to “season” them (106) when they arrive. There is corruption in the police system as the prosecutor assigned the murder case is a silent partner in Paoletti's business. The

marshal in charge of the area where Paoletti's businesses are located has been pressured into silence.

Both Nabb and Cohen challenge an easy judgment about commercial sex work as, in addition to trafficked women and children, there are female characters who claim to be engaged in the work voluntarily. In *Vita Nuova*, Maddalena, a Rumanian, immigrated to work as a pole dancer at the Emperor under contract, met the terms of her contract, now works on a freelance basis with an agent who gets her "safe, well-paid gigs" (93), and is planning to go home and finish her university degree in economics (93). Maddalena sees prostitution as "an honest transaction," in contrast to the way in which she judges married women. She says, "Look around you at the women in here with their lifted faces and Vuitton handbags—all paid for by hubby while they're screwing his best friend. The difference between them and me is that their transactions are dishonest" (94).

Maddalena is the conduit to Cristina (94). Cristina and five others are "sex slaves," brought in by Paoletti from Eastern Europe. In the context of hearing Cristina's story, Guarnaccia discovers there are also two children involved, one about 8 and one about 12, who are forced to service clients. Initially Guarnaccia interviews Cristina in order to help solve his murder case; Nesti's prime interest is in a splashy news story. Guarnaccia acknowledges that "Cristina was nobody's priority" (115), but "now that he knew about the children, it was different" (115). I find this statement quite remarkable as it, on one hand, acknowledges how incredibly violent and criminal it is for children to be trafficked into commercial sexual exploitation and, on the other hand, seems less horrified when discussing Cristina's identical situation.

Both of these texts position groups of people in relation to each other. In Nabb's novel, in addition to contrasting voluntary prostitution and trafficking, a comparison is made between the trafficked children and local gypsy children. While Guarnaccia is investigating the murder and working to shut down the trafficking operation, another precinct is investigating the death of two gypsy children who died in a fire that was clearly arson. The mayor holds a press conference to denounce the crime, although

Guarnaccia's captain notes that the mayor is not particularly interested in the death of the gypsy children, but in what it means for his political future (52). When Guarnaccia becomes aware of the trafficked children, he thinks of what they must be feeling, "locked in a room, abused and frightened to death" (150), but he also remembers the gypsy kids "who only became important when their small, incinerated bodies . . . became a political football" (150). This is a fairly powerful indictment of a system – and public attitudes -- which can be mobilized to help certain victims of trauma and violence – here trafficked children -- but not others who are made to seem less worthy.

There are a number of complicated twists and turns in the plot. But, eventually the murder is solved; the club is raided and the trafficked children are taken to a safe house; Paoletti dies from what appears to be a stroke, which means he is not brought to justice and – as his wife points out – he gets away with it (259); and an unnamed girl presumed to be Cristina is found dead in the river.

Journalism also plays a major role in Jennifer Cohen's *Lying Together: My Russian Affair*; here it is Cohen herself who is a journalist looking for a story. In this memoir, trafficking is the catalyst for her personal journey. At the beginning of the narrative, Cohen is selling her boss on her need to go to Russia for a story on "sex-slave trafficking into the United States" (12). Again the mechanics will be familiar. Here's Cohen's pitch:

"young women from the former Soviet Union were being lured here with promises of work as nannies and house cleaners, only to have their passports confiscated by the Mafioso thugs who organized their transport. The women are told that without their passports, they don't exist. Then, terrified, they are forced to pay back their transportation costs and re-earn their identities by turning tricks in makeshift brothels or behind the stages of seedy strip joints" (12-13).

Cohen also references "marriage brokers and travel agencies that fronted for the Mafia pimps and arranged for the visas" (16).

In preparing for her trip to St. Petersburg to investigate the story, Cohen reconnects with Kevin Dillard, a former college friend, on whom she'd once had a crush. Dillard is now a journalist in St. Petersburg and provides help with sources and contacts. As the story progresses, they fall in love and make plans to marry and for Cohen to move to St. Petersburg.

Cohen uses the trafficking of women and girls to eroticize her romance. She observes that “even the idea that we are chasing pimps and whores as a form of courtship is kind of charming to me. . . . Prostitution, sex slaves. That was why we are here” (40). Throughout the narrative, Cohen freely throws around the word “whore.” As another example, in an interview with two women working in a strip club, Cohen finds herself in conversation with one while Dillard is interviewing the other, “we are like girlfriends, giggling and trading little secrets, me and the whore” (43).

Cohen breezily notes that “there is an undeniable sexiness to covering the sex trade” (41). This observation seems unbelievably heartless – how can commercial sexual exploitation, force/fraud/coercion, being made to prostitute, seem sexy? And, yet, there is no denying the ease with which sex trafficking can be and often is sensationalized and made titillating, which might account for the preponderance of mass market films and documentaries about sex trafficking, and the concurrent reduced focus on labor trafficking.

Cohen, too, meets women who assert agency in relation to their work in the sex trade. Natasha, one of the first on-camera interviews Cohen performs, insists that she decided to prostitute herself because of the money and the glamour, and that having the men in the club “drooling over” her, puts her in control. She makes a sharp distinction between herself and the “idiots” and “fools” who are trafficked or “forced into the trade” (47).

Cohen also spends a significant amount of energy distinguishing herself from women who are trafficked. She has little patience when her friends and family express concern at the speed of her romance and decision to move to Russia, noting: “it’s not like I am one

of those trafficked women, handing my fate to a stranger, watching my babysitting gig turn into a lap dance” (68).

When Cohen and Dillard fly to Moscow after a quick trip stateside, there is another moment of distancing. Cohen is told by a customs agent that, since she is still on a tourist visa, she’ll need to register with the local police. After leaving the customs desk, Dillard insists there is no need to register. This leads to a certain amount of discomfort on Cohen’s part as she feels a link between trafficked women without their documents and her irregular situation if she fails to register. “Maybe I am not so different from them” (112), she thinks. Yet she immediately rejects this notion. “Not to say that my fate is anything like theirs” (112).

Trafficking falls off the narrative stage as the focus becomes the clearly doomed relationship between Dillard and Cohen, a relationship which eventually self-destructs. Cohen recognizes that they were “deceived by our fantasies,” which were “fueled by a lifetime of fairy tales, Hollywood movies, and classic novels that romanticize tragedy and deify the power of romance” (174).

Even with the failure of the relationship, Cohen believes that “I did the right thing, chasing my fantasy, chasing this unknown” (202). It is this thought that leaves her slightly more willing to consider that she is not so unlike women who are trafficked, after all:

“Am I the opposite of those trafficked girls that brought me here last winter, free to come and go, totally unattached? Or am I like them in some way, stuck in some warp that I can’t comprehend?” (206)

Cohen moves from consciously and insistently separating herself and her situation from that of trafficked women, until the end when she is willing to open to the possibility that there are ways it might not be so different after all.

What do these texts leave us with then?

They relate fairly accurate delineations of the processes and mechanics of international sex trafficking, including the things that make girls and women vulnerable – poverty, lack of opportunity, the dream of a better life, the hope of what else could be possible for them.

The attention to potential action in response to trafficking is uneven and follows the model of many survivor narratives in news coverage by excluding survivors from discussions of solutions. In fact, Cohen’s narrative spends no time thinking about solutions. As Nabb’s novel is about law enforcement, and presents the raid on the club as successful, the conclusion to which a reader is guided is that law enforcement is the answer. However, Nabb also portrays the complicity and corruptness of some representatives of law enforcement, which works against such closure. Additionally, Nabb reinforces a model of personal heroics; no one was paying any attention to the situation of the trafficked women and girls prior to Guarnaccia’s involvement. It is Guarnaccia whose persistence, stubbornness and personal drive to address the situation eventually shuts down the trafficking operation.⁷ This speaks to something I hear frequently from law enforcement folks themselves, as they note the importance of having law enforcement personnel who are personally dedicated to ending trafficking in order to achieve success in the struggle. As a social justice activist, I certainly understand the importance of passionate commitment. However, I find myself profoundly uneasy at the idea that we have to rely on the personal interests of law enforcement, rather than on their professional responsibility to enforce the law. [This echoes the point Dr. Bales made last night, when he noted that we have laws; they’re just not being adequately enforced.]

Both Cohen and Nabb follow the news model of seeing trafficking primarily through the frame of criminality. There is little sense of trafficking as a human rights issue, and virtually no reflection of the ways in which it is embedded in and reflective of pervasive gender discrimination.

⁷ Guarnaccia: “We all like to think we’ve saved somebody” (192).

They both sketch out commercial sexual exploitation as a business, and a highly profitable one at that. Each presents one representative woman who asserts her choice to be engaged in commercial sex work, in contrast to the women and children who are trafficked, thus entering into debates between abolitionists and those who assert sex worker agency.

Neither text addresses the issue of demand. The men who buy the bodies of women and children are virtually invisible, and there is certainly no accountability and no consequences for these users. In Cohen's memoir, there is no punishment for the traffickers; in fact, they're barely seen and she exhibits no sense of their venality. Paoletti, though, in Nabb's novel, is consistently portrayed as vile and evil. There can be no doubt of the amorality of traffickers. Yet, as Bridget Anderson noted in a conference in London last spring, characterizing the traffickers as evil people may be an accurate observation, but it's unlikely to lead to the systemic and structural changes necessary to end trafficking. If our only plan is to get rid of the evil people who are facilitating the supply, well, it's hard to imagine a realistic and possible path toward that goal.⁸

Cohen's story makes the situation of trafficked women seem meaningless. This piece of investigative journalism is no more important to her than any other assignment. She exhibits very little concern about the women themselves, and there is no evidence that she has any consciousness of the brutality to which they are subjected. In a way they become a commodity to her, something she uses to build her career. In a metaphorical sense, this is maybe not so different than a pimp using them to build his business. Guarnaccia, at least, expresses some moral outrage at what is done to the trafficked children; there is no such outrage with Cohen.

⁸ Anderson, Bridget. "Human Trafficking: A Persistent Problem?" International Migration and Human Trafficking Conference, London, England, February 3, 2009.

Even though the women themselves tell Guarnaccia or Cohen their stories, these stories are shaped by the questions being asked, by what is of interest to their interviewer. Their experiences are interpreted through, or in response to, the needs of another person.

In a sense this lack of access to their stories is about the limits of language. There is a way in which language is wholly inadequate in conveying the reality of the experiences of trafficked women and children. For example, when we read an account of a woman being beaten with a hairbrush until the brush breaks, we can name the torture, the violence and the horror. We may even picture the scene in our imagination. We can pity, sympathize or empathize with the woman. But we can't really know it at an embodied level. If the experience of trauma, as Elaine Scarry suggests⁹, is ultimately unrepresentable and inexpressible, that has an impact on what we can understand and on what actions we might imagine taking in response.

I am not necessarily suggesting a direct cause and effect between reading literary texts and initiating actions in response to the social issues represented therein. But, the stories these texts tell and the ways they are told, have an impact on our public consciousness and the context of our actions. If even our creative writers and our artists can't offer a tentative gesture toward addressing the demand issue and creating systemic and structural change, a sense of paralysis or hopelessness can result. Everyone in this room is working to counter that despair, to create the possibility of hope and the possibility of eradicating trafficking.

⁹ Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain*. Oxford University Press (1987).