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Novels, Public Policy and Anti-Trafficking Efforts

Donna M. Bickford
Carolina Women's Center, dbickford@unc.edu

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Dr. Donna M. Bickford
Carolina Women's Center
dbickford@unc.edu

Novels, Public Policy and Anti-Trafficking Efforts

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The discourses on trafficking circulating in the public sphere help construct public response. Representational strategies in literature offer mechanisms to inform how we think about and wrestle with complex issues. So, as we're thinking about what we know and what we need to know, it's important to also think about **how** we know, and to acknowledge that representations have impact and symbolic power. Although human trafficking encompasses both sex and labor trafficking, in the U.S. we have seen the most attention paid to sex trafficking; no wonder, then, that our cultural products reflect that emphasis. Documentary films on the topic are plentiful, mainstream Hollywood films increasingly so, and survivor narratives are available. Fictional portrayals of sex trafficking, however, have been a more recent development. In the first literary analysis I've seen of any of these novels, Ashley Dawson calls this literature "a form of cargo culture, an aesthetics of people who have been turned into illegal but nonetheless highly profitable cargo" (180).[1]

A sizeable proportion of novels that do treat human trafficking view it through a criminal justice/law enforcement lens.[2] There are some, though, that take a different approach.[3] Patricia McCormick's award-winning[4] young adult novel *Sold* (2006) and James Levine's *The Blue Notebook* (2009) both feature minor victims of sex trafficking as their protagonists. In both cases, these are girls forced into commercial sexual exploitation;

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[1] "Cargo Culture: Literature in an Age of Mass Displacement." **WSQ***: Women's Studies Quarterly* 38: 1 & 2 (Spring/Summer 2010). 178-193.

[2] These might include *Vita Nuovo* by Magdalen Nabb, Stieg Larsson's *The Girl who Played with Fire*, Linda Fairstein's *Hellgate*, or *Burn* by Nevada Barr.

[3] For example, Lucha Corpi's *Death by Solstice* (a rare novelistic look at labor trafficking) and *On Black Sisters' Streets* by Chika Unigwe, and Chris Albani's *Becoming Abigail*.

[4] National Book Award finalist, Quill Award Winner, ALA Top Ten Best Book for Young Adults.

one trafficked from Nepal to India and one trafficked within India. The novels share many characteristics, in addition to geographic location. Both novels illuminate some of the multiple factors that make individuals and communities vulnerable to trafficking, including poverty, and deep, systemic gender discrimination. Fraud, deception, and familial complicity are present as part of the actual mechanics of trafficking in each novel.

The novels are written in the first-person; we hear the stories of the trafficking victims in their own voices. This is noteworthy as it is a direct contrast to most current conversations about trafficking where people talk for and about survivors but the voices of survivors themselves are remarkably absent, or used in voyeuristic ways, but not incorporated in any meaningful way into the conversation. Putting us in the mind of the trafficked girl challenges images of trafficking victims which "perpetuate stereotypical notions of gendered helplessness" (Dawson 188). Rather than portraying trafficked people simply as abject, passive victims, McCormick and Levine offer girls who create spaces -- admittedly small -- within which to assert their own individuality, who build connections with others, and who strategically implement coping strategies as a way to survive physically, mentally, and emotionally. These are determined attempts to exist with some kind of internal intactness.

In the face of treatment which de-individualizes and dehumanizes them, turning them into objects and receptacles, one of the ways the girls assert agency is by insistently claiming their identity. In *The Blue Notebook*, Batuk is taken to a luxury hotel to service a rich man's son in order to "teach him how to be a husband" (141). She observes that she is referred to as "your toy," "your dolly," "the little bitch," but never by her name -- Batuk. When other prostituted women are brought to join the party, Batuk comments that, they, like her, "are not introduced by name" (175), noting that sometimes she feels like she's "lost her name. . . [and] become an anonymous unit" (176). One small intervention she makes when she finds herself cleaning up in the bathroom with one of the other girls is to introduce herself: "My name is Batuk" (192). Later when she is in the

hospital after being tortured, a senior doctor asks her name and responds “Batuk, that is a lovely name,” in an affirmation (193).

In *Sold*, the story begins with Lakshmi’s life with her family in her village in the hills. After she is sold into bondage, her handler, Mumatz, repeatedly refers to her as an “ignorant hill girl” (106). Towards the end of the novel, when Mumatz again calls her a “stupid little hill girl” (260), Lakshmi defiantly owns that identity: “a little hill girl. . . Which is, still, what I am” (260). Thus, despite all that was done to her, her core sense of self remains strong and constant.

Literacy serves as a space of survival and as a coping strategy, as Lakshmi and Batuk both write of their experiences, creating space for their own thoughts and feelings to take precedence and be acknowledged. These first-person narratives are sharply observant and consistently self-aware. Prior to being trafficked, Batuk learned to read and write at a missionary’s medical clinic, where she was taken after she contracted tuberculosis (70). After a kind nurse begins the process of teaching her to read, the priest, Father Matthew, noting her interest and determination, arranges for a reading teacher.

Lakshmi had some minimal schooling in her home village, but she becomes fully literate in the brothel when Harish – the son of another prostituted woman – sees her looking at his picture book. He offers to give her a reading lesson the next day, tomorrow, which leads Lakshmi to realize, “how long it has been since a tomorrow meant anything to me” (163). The first sentences Harish teaches her are also an assertion of self and individuality: “My name is Lakshmi. I am from Nepal. I am thirteen” (165).

The girls both reflect on their response to their changed circumstances. When Batuk is first raped to break her in, she observes that “I had entered Gahil’s house as a soft glob of warm clay. I would leave there a hardened useful vessel” (37). Then later, “I had been rewired from the girl who had entered this house just two days before into a new Batuk” (90). One aspect of that transformation is an awareness “that my existence was in my hands alone” (90). Another point of her awareness is of her own inner space. After her

first rape, Batuk thinks, “he may have taken my light and extinguished it, but now within me can hide an army of whispering syllables, rhythms, and sounds” (58).

Lakshmi ponders the constantly altering codes of appropriate behavior. One vignette is entitled “Everything I Need to Know,” which contains the life lessons that her mother, Ama, teaches her at her first menstruation (15). When her father takes her to the city to sell her, we learn the “City Rules” (30). In the brothel, the lesson is updated: “Everything I Need to Know Now” (141).

Other coping strategies require dissociation from the realities of their existence. Lakshmi describes the things you hear when you service a customer – a zipper, a shoe being removed, the horns in the street. “But,” she says, “if you are lucky, if you work hard at it, you hear nothing” (127). Or, “Sometimes, I pretend that what goes on at night when the customers are here is not something that is happening to me” (157). She demonstrates resistance in other ways as well – refusing to cry when she is beaten, staying focused on her goal of paying off her alleged debt and returning home, not knowing that the goal is made unattainable. She cherishes the few moments of human connection and intimacy: her lessons with Harish; her friendship with one of the other girls, Shahanna; her conversations with the tea boy; even once a customer who wants to hold her after he uses her: “I could feel myself, my true self, give in to the simple pleasure of being held” (176).

Batuk practices dissociation as well, noting that “with habituation I gained greater skill at releasing myself to the upper air” (98). She, too, builds a friendship -- with Puneet, a boy who is prostituted -- and also joins others in making fun of their keeper, Mamaki, calling her Hippopotamus behind her back and telling jokes about her. Before Batuk was taken from her home, she described her mother punishing her because her “resilience was too great.” At those times, Batuk intentionally refrained from crying so she could “build up my ability to reside within myself” (12), an ability she utilizes in the brothel. Batuk also inhabits a rich fantasy life as a coping mechanism. She creates imaginary worlds, playing make believe with Puneet, and her narrative is interspersed with poems, dreams, fairy tales and fables, and imagined conversations with a tree and a stuffed tiger, all

interventions that help her in some ways transcend the reality in which she's trapped. And, lest the products of her imagination cause the reader to question her sanity, Batuk explains. "I am not deranged." (12). "I am not deranged, but there are countless days I wish I were" (13).

For all their similarities, in their endings, the stories diverge. When the brothel where Lakshmi is kept is raided and she is liberated, she speaks to the police and those accompanying them using the sentences Harish taught her: "My name is Lakshmi. I am from Nepal. I am thirteen" (263). One of things that Ama included in her lessons to Lakshmi is that "Simply to endure is to triumph" (16). This becomes true at the end of *Sold*. Lakshmi did endure and is freed. Batuk was not able to endure; her story ends as she is lying in a hospital, clearly dying as a result of the torture inflicted upon her.

Why should we acknowledge, or what are the effects of acknowledging, agency in relation to experiences of trauma? I do not want to be heard as minimizing or sanitizing the violation of human rights that is trafficking. The fact that in these novels the protagonists are represented in ways that give them individuality, humanity and agency should not and does not detract from the horrors and violence they faced or that trafficking victims and survivors face. But, it *is* to note that, although most trafficking victims come from positions of very little societal privilege, they are not without some agency. This should be meaningful as we think more fully about prevention and intervention efforts, and about what narratives are made available and what narratives we are able to hear. And, are there ways in which these narrative choices could intervene in or reshape cultural discourses on human trafficking?

These accounts, even in fictional form, are difficult to hear. In Dawson's essay, he suggests that one of the challenges to writing novels about human trafficking is that we don't have the literary forms to adequately represent these experiences (179). [This parallels the question raised by folks in Holocaust Studies: how do you represent the unimaginable?] Perhaps, in other words, the novel as genre falls short here. The structures, or more formalist aspects, of these two narratives speak to this point. Levine's

choice to employ multiple genres, including two children's stories he says he originally wrote for his own children, perhaps indicates the obstacles in conveying the reality of these experiences.[5] In an online review of *Sold*, Jen Robinson describes the vignettes as poems which offer "a snapshot of some aspect of Lakshmi's life, but at just enough of a remove to make it bearable to read about."[6] In a Q&A on McCormick's own webpage, she discusses her choice of genre, noting that "vignettes seemed to be the right way to tell a story that is inherently so fractured."[7]

These two novels help us think about the ways in which victims and survivors of sex trafficking are represented, how their stories are told, and which narratives have cultural currency. Mary Crawford's new book[8] on sex trafficking in south Asia deliberates about this as well. Crawford asks:

> Whose voices are heard when sex trafficking is being defined and described? The question is not trivial, because power is a central component of sex trafficking. . . . Whose accounts are authorized and supported, and whose are marginalized and subjugated? (Crawford 89).

She goes on to discuss what she calls the "formulaic" (117) nature of many survivor narratives published in Nepal – and I would say elsewhere, too -- narratives which portray a young, innocent girl seeking a better life who is duped by someone she trusts. Crawford is not disputing that this chain of events occurs, but points out that the consistent reproduction of this particular narrative can lead – has led -- to proposed solutions based on "protectionism" (120), resulting in efforts to limit the physical mobility of women and girls to purportedly keep them "safe," with little regard for the conditions that might have led them to leave their home in the first place. She also notes the use of these narratives in NGO fundraising efforts, a decision often made in response to research that finds that "people are more willing to offer help in response to information about a specific individual than in response to information about a group or

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[5] [www.bfkbooks.com/interviews] Accessed 9.21.2010.
[6] [http://jkrbooks.typepad.com] Accessed 9.21.2010.
[7] [www.pattymccormick.com] Accessed 9.21.2010.
[8] *Sex Trafficking in South Asia: Telling Maya's story*. New York: Routledge, 2010.

class of people, even though the latter illustrates the scope of a social problem" (122).[9] It's not that these stories aren't true, not that they're not tragic and not that they don't evoke a response, but their deployment is not unproblematic. The successful use of these survivor narratives in fundraising requires a "wholly blameless" victim and one who is "deserving of help" (122).

This need for a perfect victim frames the spotlighting of minor victims of sex trafficking in these novels and is echoed by recent strengthened attention on domestic minor sex trafficking[10] in the US. Who could disagree that the sex trafficking of minors is a horrible crime and needs to be stopped? So does the trafficking of anyone! But this specific focus on minor sex trafficking also echoes the societal desire Crawford describes for an uncomplicated victim – one who is easy to identify and recognize *as* a victim (as is anyone engaged in commercial sexual activity under the age of 18 -- by our law anyway, if not necessarily by our law enforcement).

It is also striking that we have so few narrative accounts, fictional or not, dealing with the role of demand in causing and perpetuating human trafficking. In both of these novels, the customers are portrayed as an incessant parade of men to be serviced – few are described, most are nameless. This is how it seems to the girls – and it is probably another necessary coping mechanism. However, this strategy (also employed in most news accounts about trafficking) makes the buyers and users invisible to the reader. It lets us avoid the real question, which is: how do we change a global culture that sees bodies, and especially the bodies of women and children, as a disposable commodity and infinitely substitutable?

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[9] We heard these narratives in our keynote speech by Benjamin Skinner. Nicholas Kristof was recently on my own campus, employing similar strategies in his talk.

[10] Or what some refer to as CSEC (commercial sexual exploitation of children).