

Trafficking “Truths” and Troubling Complicities:
Exposing the Harm in U.S. Based Anti-Human Trafficking Efforts

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Abstract

Drawing from the work of postcolonial feminist scholars such as Lila Abu-Lughod, Liisa Malkki, and Laura Agustín, this paper explores the ritual and affective work accomplished by a series of billboards meant to raise awareness for child sex trafficking in the United States. Using a Foucauldian framework, I situate the campaign within its larger discursive space in attempt to illustrate the ways in which it both exemplifies and perpetuates dominant human trafficking tropes, in particular those preoccupied by female victimhood, sexual exploitation, whiteness, and youth. In doing so, I argue that the campaign’s narrative upholds rigid humanitarian representations of vulnerability and victimhood while eliding the widespread precarity and violence found outside those constructions. Such elisions endanger the lives of those most vulnerable to exploitation in the United States, while neglecting to address the ways in which Western consumers are complicit in their exploitation.

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Introduction

Were you to drive down Interstate I-85 in Atlanta, Georgia anytime between May and July of Spring 2019, you might have noticed small faces peppering this stretch of highway. Sallow eyes and discolored lips might have caught you off guard, visually disrupting the otherwise pleasant Southern landscape. You might lose focus for a second, and though you recover, this is only to be confronted by another mournful stare or misshapen body a few miles down. Something might seem off about these figures, and soon you would realize they're not human but doll; each subsequent billboard the enlarged plastic replica of an abused girl's body. Ashy complexions and ravaged skin, exposed extremities and pleading features, the images are matched with captions: "I hide the pain but you can't hide your identity," "Once you're imprisoned for raping me you'll see what it's like." "At 12 years old I never had a choice." Each message seems intended to communicate the pain felt by their lifeless, skeletal figures, yet little else provides context for the billboards' existence. Tucked away in the corner, so light you might miss it, lies the campaign's message: *Sex Traffick Proof the ATL*.

Titled the "Truth in Trafficking," these billboards were part of a campaign produced by an Atlanta based anti- human trafficking organization known as the International Human Trafficking Institute. On display across 23 Metro Atlanta locations and on MARTA trains city-wide, the ads garnered 9 million impressions each week of the 1-month campaign, and 90 news publications reported about the campaign to their audiences of nearly 70 million people (IHTI 2019). Given their rapidly achieved acclaim, the billboards have become central to an increasingly prominent U.S. dialogue focused on domestic human exploitation. Officially defined by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act passed in 2000, human trafficking is legally

understood to be that which involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to compel a person into commercial sexual acts or labor services against his or her will, as well as any commercial sex act that involves a minor regardless of means (TVPA 2000). According to the U.S. government, the United Nations, the International Labor Organization, and many other state and international agencies and NGOs¹, millions of individuals are victimized every year. However, due to the lack of consistent corroborative sources to document these figures (Weitzer 2019), as well as ambiguity in definition and representation of the activity itself, the complexity of human trafficking is often misunderstood, inaccurate, and incomplete.

Contemporary anti-trafficking campaigns in the United States are driven by narratives which constrain lived experiences to oversimplified and decontextualized plotlines. Connected to a long history of paternalism, identity politics,² and moral panic,³ dominant U.S. based trafficking discourses share a certain set of tropes which enable seemingly discrepant actors to coalesce around shared notions of sexual exploitation, femininity, youth, whiteness, and innocence. Given its contemporaneity and high visibility, the "Truth in Trafficking" becomes representative of nationwide initiatives which purport to work against the issue of human trafficking, yet uphold many of the dominant tropes that have skewed public perception and further endangered vulnerable populations in doing so.

¹ A nonprofit organization that operates independently of any government, typically one whose purpose is to address a social or political issue.

² Originating in disability justice and activism, "identity politics" has become a term used widely through the social sciences and humanities to describe phenomena such as multiculturalism, women's movements, civil rights, queer movements and nationalist/ethnic conflict (Bernstein 2005: 47).

³ According to Sociologist Ronald Weitzer, moral panics drive movements which "...define a particular condition as an unqualified evil, and see their mission as a righteous enterprise whose goals are both symbolic (attempting to redraw or bolster normative boundaries and moral standards) and instrumental (providing relief to victims, punishing evil doers)." (Weitzer 2007: 448). For more on "moral panics" see Weitzer, "The Social Construction of Sex Trafficking: Ideology and Institutionalization of a Moral Crusade." (2007).

Through this paper, I explore the ritual and affective work accomplished by the language and imagery of the “Truth in Trafficking.” I enter this analysis by tracing the genealogy of dominant human trafficking discourses, before further focusing on the effects that result when a highly visible campaign magnifies select modes of victimhood and overemphasizes certain forms of exploitation over others. Of these implications, I will focus on how depictions which exemplify tropes of female sexualization, exploitation, infantilization, and racialization often ignore the systemic factors that have fueled the growth of human trafficking, exceptionalizing sex trafficking while neglecting to address the continuum of labor on which it exists. Through this case study, I seek to render visible the complicity anti-trafficking efforts hold in exacerbating the “issues” they aim to eradicate, while highlighting the larger narrative implications of NGO representations which elide widespread precarity and violence.

Methodology

I have never driven down I-85, nor have I been to Atlanta. Not only was I unaware of this campaign’s existence prior to the fall of 2019 but until recently had been completely ignorant to the extent of human trafficking’s presence in the United States. However, during the previous spring, while bouncing between potential thesis topics, I was given the opportunity to assist my Political Science advisor in analyzing national survey data related to public perceptions of human trafficking in the United States. Intrigued by exploration of a topic I knew very little about, and excited at the possible impact of this work, I agreed.

In preparation for the analysis, I began to do background research. I started at the surface, sifting through available statistics and parsing legal definitions regarding U.S. trafficking and its victims. In doing so, I hoped to situate the issue within its domestic landscape. As a student of Political Science, I have been taught to analyze the world top-down. Generally, political

scientists tend to situate power within institutions of law and policy, understanding influence to be enacted through election and legislation. Power is centralized rather than dispersed, concentrated in the hands of a few rather than scattered amongst the hands of many as a more Foucauldian framework would suggest. Therefore, given the specificities of a framework provided by this discipline, I began to formulate my understanding of human trafficking through the rhetoric espoused by various presidential administrations and within the language of various pieces of trafficking legislation. Immediately, rifts began to show. I found that language continued to shift drastically between officials of subsequent time periods and opposing political parties. In the span of a decade, discourses flowed from those grounded in human rights to those espousing criminalization, nationalism, and xenophobia. Certain actors advocated feminism while others used trafficking as a platform for religious proselytization. The scope had been molded and manipulated such that numbers themselves were misconstrued and unreliable, the rhetoric euphemistic, and the legislation exclusionary.

Recognizing the partisan nature of this issue, especially in a context of increasing political polarization, I chose to center my Political Science thesis on whether U.S. citizens might interpret the issue of human trafficking differently through a partisan lens. By performing quantitative analysis on an open-ended survey question that asked Americans to describe, in their own words, what they understood human trafficking to be, I looked for the frequency of certain words in individual responses, calculating whether such frequencies reflected framing from their respective parties. Based on a review of trafficking policy, public speeches, general ideological differences, and statements made by both Republican and Democratic officials over the last few decades, I hypothesized stark differences.

I was wrong. Contrary to my hypothesis, there was comparable appearance of the most dominant human trafficking tropes in responses from each. Not only were members of both Republican and Democratic parties guilty of manipulating portrayals of human trafficking victimization and threat, but the lack of correlation between elite rhetoric and public understanding pointed to trends more deeply embedded and more hegemonic than those that can be pulled from policy. In other words, it soon became clear that the topic required a more nuanced exploration than that which could be conducted solely within a Political Science framework.

Thus, as a Feminist and Gender Studies major, I now enter this project through different lens. Rather than starting at the top, I begin at the bottom. Rather than rely on numerical corroboration, I think critically about the words and images that have been associated with an issue, allowing myself the messiness of a methodology that is rooted not in data analysis and statistical significance, but in postcolonial theory and feminist epistemologies. I narrow my scope from rhetoric disseminated at a national level, to that displayed through a single campaign, in a single city, in a single state, at a single moment in time.

As a Western subject and consumer of Western media, I myself have repeatedly been exposed to narratives of human trafficking. I hold vivid memories of watching the Hollywood blockbuster *Taken* during high school, screaming from the couch as a young American woman travels to Paris and is abducted by Albanian traffickers. I had a similar reaction while reading *Sold*, the fictionalized story of a young Nepali girl sold into sex slavery in India. Little did I understand that these sources were complicit in a form of “literary trafficking,”⁴ and that I, as a

⁴ An expansion of the term used by Lila Abu-Lughod in *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* Which she defines as the “popular genre of writing on the abused Muslim woman” which “we can think of as a form of trafficking” (Abu-Lughod 2013: 82).

member of the Western public, was feeding an industry rooted in depictions of women's sordid and brutal treatment (Abu-Lughod 2013). However, as an uninformed and uncritical teenager, I accepted trafficking to be an issue that occurred elsewhere. It was a danger concerned family members warned of as they wished me luck in my post high school travels, yet went undiscussed in the context of our rural New England town.

Not only was I taught to view trafficking as a threat that was incited upon entrance to another country, but one entirely predicated on my identity as a young, white woman. As I embarked on a year abroad, I thought of femininity as a marker of heightened vulnerability. I saw myself in *Taken*, and in doing so, conflated reality with classic Hollywood scripts of "good guys" hunting down and punishing "bad guys" while discovering and saving "good girl" victims (Lerum 2016). Such narratives depend on a certain iconography: the gendered victim, the racialized perpetrator, the Western savior. Through repetition, this tale has become entrenched within the American psyche, instilling fear in young white women like myself, as well as the communities that care about us. However, the deeper I delved in my research, the more I came to recognize not only the ubiquity of this narrative, but its neglect; the sensationalization of my own identity leading to the erasure of others.

Therefore, when I discovered the "Truth in Trafficking" billboards while exploring material related to my work, I saw myself centered in a public campaign in which I realized I had no place. With light hair and white skin, I saw my own body plasticized and ravaged, my own face collapsed, my own fears publicized for all to see. Fears I had since realized came at the cost of others' precarity. In calling itself the "Truth" in trafficking, this campaign situates itself as not only the ultimate portrayal of exploitation, but as the most accurate portrayal, maybe even the only portrayal. As such, it has been consumed readily - acclaimed by news sources from the

political left and right, endorsed by both secular and religious anti-trafficking initiatives, responded to by both men and women.

In seeking to understand the impetus and implications of the “Truth in Trafficking,” as well as its place in the greater anti-trafficking discourses, I analyze it not in isolation, but as a product of a larger discursive space. Derived from the Latin word *discursus*, meaning “to run to and fro,” the word “discourse” has come to be understood as the patterned and linked systems of text, talk, and action that are contained in certain social spaces (Rogers et al. 2005: 369). Born out of prominent social theorist Michel Foucault’s understanding of social practices, “orders of discourse” are inherently entangled with political, social, racial, economic, religious, and cultural formations (Foucault 1969, 1972). Thus, the production and manifestation of specific discourses relies entirely on their historical context, and the ways in which discursive origins and actors shape the language along lines of power and hierarchy (Rogers et al. 2005: 370). Such discourses are maintained through their reliance on a certain set of tropes. These tropes essentialize and homogenize their objects, ultimately retaining power through rampant repetition of words, images, and statements alike (Said 1978).⁵ Relying on shared Western understanding, these discourses encourage participation by convincing individuals that in joining the dominant discourse, they too can achieve social capital.

Though this paper recognizes that human trafficking involves both labor and sexual exploitation, methodological challenges have compelled researchers to study the most visible and accessible trafficked persons: namely women who have been trafficked for the purposes of

⁵ Reference to Edward Said’s writings on “Orientalism,” which he defines as a “style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident’” (Said, 1978, 2). This statement establishes the dichotomous nature of Orientalism, the insistence that such discourse is not about the Orient itself, but rather about the ways in which Orientalist discourse has defined the West through invoking a so-called “other”. Said emphasizes the corporate nature of Orientalism by stating it to be, in short, a “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said, 1978, 3).

sexual exploitation (Musto 2009: 282). The following overview is representative of that imbalance, and thus reflective of the overall negligence of labor trafficking efforts. This gap is important to note as it stands in stark contrast to the proliferation of discourses surrounding sex trafficking, and exemplifies one of the “...many silences” which themselves are “an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (Foucault 1976: 314). Therefore, this genealogy takes note of the absences in addition to the propagation, and illustrates the incitements and intensifications which have historically molded and entrenched dominant trafficking tropes within the United States.

Given the multi-dimensionality of human trafficking discourses, I take the "Truth in Trafficking" as a case study which exemplifies the complexity of a campaign that contains not one trope but many. In the following pages, I aim to pull apart the overlapping and often congruous strains that are held within both the imagery and text of these billboards. Working within the frameworks of prominent scholars such as Michel Foucault, Lila Abu-Lughod, and Liisa Malkki, I embark on a multidisciplinary analysis of *this* specific awareness campaign as a mode of power. Recognizing that, “Critiques of representations always incite questions about how else we might understand the world. It does not matter so much whether these ... are truth or fiction; the question has been how they function in the world into which they are inserted” (Abu-Lughod 2013: 107), I choose to expose the implications of a specific set of representations by interrogating that which has explicitly labeled itself as the “Truth.”

The "Truth in Trafficking" is composed of multiple pillars, from its language to its materiality to its social life. These pillars are co-constitutive and contingent. While they are able to operate on different dimensions, their interplay is integral to both interpretation and impact of the message. The billboards operate formulaically; it is through the repetition of certain words

and visuals that dominant tropes become evoked and further entrenched in public awareness. In the following analysis, I identify the presence of these tropes and trace their recurrence throughout the campaign, in order to show the ways in which each work to invisibilize certain forms of harm.

Just as in *The History of Sexuality* (1976) Foucault preoccupies himself not with sex itself, but the way in which sex is “put into discourse,” my primary concern in this analysis will be to

... locate the forms of power, the channels it takes, and the discourses it permeates in order to reach the most tenuous and individual modes of behavior, the paths that give it access to the rare or scarcely perceivable forms of desire, how it penetrates and controls everyday pleasures (Foucault 1976: 299).

Through this genealogy I lay foundational understanding for the closer analysis that follows, highlighting the contingent events which have contributed to the emergence, circulation, and perpetuation of trafficking’s dominant discourses. In doing so, I also seek to render the seemingly normal strange (Guessous 2019, lecture notes), presenting a vast and tumultuous landscape into which a specific analysis can be inserted, unpacked, and discussed.

Genealogy of Dominant Trafficking Discourses

There is no one discourse of human trafficking. Like sex, there instead exists a “... multiplicity of discourses produced by a whole series of mechanisms operating in different institutions” (Foucault 1976: 314). Rather than tell a single story, the narratives and tropes that circulate are ones born out of various motives, depicted through multiple mediums, perpetuated by a range of actors, and entrenched within widespread communities. Whether driven by political elites, news and popular media, or non-governmental organizations invested in anti-

trafficking efforts, these discourses are simultaneous and overlapping, mutually reinforced and reflective of the spreading moral panic associated with exploitation and, specifically, sex. As I will attempt to show in the following pages, these discourses largely center on notions of sexual exploitation, femininity, youth, and whiteness. In doing so, such discourses erase alternate forms of labor exploitation, render all sex work morally reprehensible, and invisibilize many non-white, non-female victims.

To understand the shifting nature of these discourses, much of the scholarship on human trafficking relies on problem framing literature. Such literature examines the process through which the public comes to view certain social conditions via a particular perspective, emphasizing specific aspects of the issue while filtering out others. As most issues are complex and can be viewed multiple ways, problem framing becomes integral to how topics or situations become defined and debated in the public sphere (Druckman 2001; Iyengar 1991; Nelson & Kinder 1996; Sasson 1995).

To understand how framing has impacted the issue of human trafficking in the United States, both historically and contemporarily, I begin by tracing its emergence of this discourse within the public sphere. By charting the various evolutions and manifestations that have emerged since its introduction, I hope to broadly illustrate a series of complex and intertwining narratives that involves actors which range from Progressive Era activists to right-wing politicians and religious conservatives.⁶ Representations shift in regards to victim and perpetrator alike, and although the nexus of concern fluctuates between time periods, a continuing and disproportionate fixation on certain forms of trafficking persists over others.

⁶ The combination of which is an example of what Lila Abu-Lughod terms “strange political bedfellows” (Abu-Lughod 2002: 787) in her article *Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?* For American Anthropologist, Vol. 104, No.3. 2002.

Dominant discourses of Victimhood

Commercial sex first became discussed as a form of sexual slavery in the United States during the early 1900s. The Progressive Era (1890-1920) marked the beginning of a conversation which depicted all sex workers as trafficked against their will by male pimps for prostitution. As the narrative evolved, it derived its power through racializing both sets of characters. Victims of this new so-called slavery were either “innocent,” white European girls, or else rural (white) American women who were drugged, tricked, or else imprisoned into a life of forced prostitution. Their perpetrators were foreign or non-white, typically Eastern European Jews, Chinese and Italian immigrants, or else African American men in urban U.S. centers (Donovan 2006).

Termed “White slavery” by the social reformers who adopted this cause, this phrase not only implied that all white women engaged in the sex trade were slaves, but that a distinction existed between the “innocent” women who engaged involuntarily with sex work, versus those who participated consensually. The titular language of this movement further divided the “innocent” women along racial lines as “African American women and other women of color were seem as immoral, unchaste, and deviant,” and thus likely to engage in prostitution. A dissonance in expected moral standards therefore permitted the absence of women of color from the discourse on white slavery and forced prostitution altogether, despite the fact that during that time Asian women in California who were those most likely to be at risk (Bromfield 2016: 130; Walkowitz 1992).

Progressive-era conversations lay the foundation for many of the dominant tropes that would persist for the next century. White slavery advocates successfully planted the seeds of a moral panic that would be nourished over the years and eventually blossom into modern-day

trafficking discourses. By referring to all forms of prostitution, both voluntary and coerced, as well as any female sexual behavior considered “immoral,” such as kissing or even dancing with unrelated men, as white slavery, Progressive Era discourses conflated sex slavery with sex work in a political move that embedded notions of gendered sexual purity. Such ideologies worked on multiple dimensions, controlling female bodies by instilling fear into young women eager to leave their rural homes,⁷ while simultaneously using representations of foreign perpetrators upholding white Anglo-Saxon superiority and racial hegemony over recent immigrants (Bromfield 2016: 131).

Driven primarily by Christian groups preoccupied by sexual morality and secular feminists concerned with female exploitation, the moral panic surrounding white slavery gained political momentum and eventually led to the passage of the U.S. White Slave Traffic Act of 1910. Also known as the Mann Act, this law prohibited the transportation of any girl or woman between counties or across state lines for “immoral purposes” or prostitution (Bromfield 2016:132). In theory, the Mann Act was purported to mitigate trafficking. In effect, it restricted women’s mobility and treated victims as criminals.

By prosecuting any behavior deemed to be “immoral,” the Mann Act brought further condemnation to individuals in sex work communities as well as those who may have been forcefully trafficked. By neglecting to mandate social services or protection, victims in the wake of prosecution were left without physical, emotional, or financial support. However, having satisfied activist demands, and activists themselves momentarily placated, lawmakers took a step back from the battle against “white slavery.” The Mann Act became routinized in all cases of sexual slavery and the issue disappeared from popular circulation for the next 80 or so years. The

⁷Prompted by changing gender roles and the increase independent wage-earning women in cities during this era (Donovan 2006)

next several decades in U.S. history show limited trafficking discussion on any level, political or otherwise (Farrell & Fahy 2019: 618).

A resurgence of trafficking discourses came during the late 1990s. This was during the Clinton Administration, a time characterized by growing emphasis on women's issues and the growing linkage between women's rights to all forms of humanitarianism (Abu-Lughod 2013: 82). Trafficking itself increasingly came to attention as prominent political figures, such as First Lady Hillary Clinton and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, brought it to focus through a women's rights lens. During this time, trafficking was represented primarily as an abuse which centered on the commercial sexual exploitation of women and children. Due to this singular emphasis, representations or discussion surrounding labor trafficking or the trafficking of men and boys were virtually nonexistent (Farrell & Fahy 2009). The Presidential Interagency Council of Women, established by the Clinton administration in the mid-1990s and chaired by both Hillary Clinton and Madeleine Albright, further publicized sex trafficking and in 1998 was officially tasked to head the administration's anti-trafficking efforts. The culmination of such efforts throughout this period, those that began within women's communities and were increasingly endorsed by elite voices, built on the pre-existing Progressive Era discourse which had framed trafficking primarily as a threat to girls and women.

In a similar extension of early 1900s victimization language, mid-1990s coverage began to increasingly include stories of young, white women bought from the Soviet Union into the U.S. (Farrell & Fahy 2009). Despite being of European origin, the shared physical appearance of these girls resonated with the broader American public, who, upon seeing young, white victims, felt connected to the cause in a way previously unrealized. The growth of such depictions informed the campaigns of special interest groups who began to frame trafficking along such

(white) lines in an effort to prove it worthy of public sympathy and legislative attention.

Capitalizing on the momentum displayed by anti-trafficking interest groups and alternate news sources, in 1998 *The New York Times* released an exposé on the sex trafficking of white, slavic women. This feature is credited for finally drawing the attention of U.S. lawmakers, and galvanizing public forces to pressure the administration into official action (Bromfield 2016: 133).

In October of 2000, President Clinton signed The Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (TVPA) into law. As the first comprehensive piece of legislature to address trafficking since the Mann Act, and the first to explicitly center victim needs, TVPA assuaged many of the activist and special interest group demands. However, no sex workers or sex worker advocates were involved in TVPA related discussions, and upon examination it becomes clear that the language of the act itself upholds many of the dominant tropes that preceded it. Despite purporting to address all forms of trafficking, and not those solely limited to the sex industry, legal scholars have found that TVPA explicitly reflects trafficking discourse's historical overemphasis on sex.

Not only is sex trafficking the first type of trafficking specified within the text, but the only whose characteristics are explicated at length. Within this definition, and its subsequent mandates, TVPA parallels the tenets of "White Slavery." By further dividing female trafficking persons into victims and criminals based on evidence of *consent* in sexual acts, the law marks those forced into prostitution as "innocent," while those who consensually engage in sex work are "guilty." Only the "innocent" are rewarded with social benefits (Doherty 2015: 26) and thus a sexual ideology pervades what is putatively an unbiased legal text. Additionally, the presence of

an age criterion for sex trafficking⁸ and not labor sets different expectations for punitive action regarding each, ultimately prioritizing response to one victim over another (Doherty 2015; Musto 2009). Since this time, both the female victim and the child have remained integral to political framing of human trafficking.

This focus became particularly noticeable in the titular callout of the 2003 *UN Protocol for the Prevention, Suppression, and Punishment of Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children*. Not only does the explicit (and exclusive) naming of certain victims further embed historical gender biases, it also infantilizes women and children by stripping both of their agency. Additional emphasis on “the child victim” has been reinforced through state laws which favor minors, allowing lower burden of proof for cases in which they are involved and imposing much higher criminal penalties than those that may be enforced for cases involving adults (Bouche et al. 2018: 1286). Such legislative disparities have made it easier for law enforcement to pursue cases of minor sex trafficking, leading to significantly more prosecutions of minor sex trafficking cases in the United States than any other form of human trafficking (Bouche, Farrell, Wittmer 2016). Such cases are thus circulated by the media (Bouche et al. 2018: 1286), and cultivate public perception of an imbalance that has been fully constructed through legal discrepancies and lack of recognition. Such exclusions continue to contribute to contemporary framing that systematically ignores victims who don’t fit the prescribed, archetypal mold of young, and often white, female.

⁸ a) Sex trafficking in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age; or

b) The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, through the use of force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjection to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, slavery (22 U.S.C. § 7102 (9)).

Despite purportedly centering women, TVPA proved additionally divisive within feminist movements. Rather than criminalize all forms of sex work, the trafficking definitions supported by the Clinton administration limited sex trafficking to *forced* prostitution. Following TVPA's passage, claim-makers from many anti-prostitution feminist advocacy groups joined forces with fundamental Christian organizations to publicly oppose the differentiation between commercial sex, and commercial sex induced through force, fraud, and coercion (Farrell & Fahy 2009). Relying on the claim that all prostitution is inherently an institution of male domination and female exploitation (Dworkin 1981) these activists, known as abolitionist feminists, and their evangelical counterparts, motivated by overarching disapproval of any non-marital sex, embarked on a mission to eradicate all forms of sex work (Weitzer 2007).

The focus on sex trafficking resulted in the narrow application of TVPA to mostly sex trafficking cases, though empirical reports from service providers found that the majority of trafficked clients reported being trafficked into domestic work or other forms of labor (Bromfield 2016). Founded in the rhetoric of Clinton era policies, the gap in both visibility and response to labor trafficking was soon exacerbated by the subsequent president. Exemplified through both policy and speech, the Bush administration employed human trafficking frames which worked to further entrench the anti-sex work bias espoused by both abolitionist feminists and the religious right.

Beginning when Bush took office in 2001, the director of the State Department's trafficking office, John R. Miller, revealed that the federal administration had been "working closely with faith-based, community, and feminist organizations to combat all forms of prostitution" (Weitzer 2007: 459). Not only were these anti-prostitution groups given consultative access to the issue, they were soon included in governmental function as

organizations became official partners of U.S. government agencies, and some individual activists even hired directly (Weitzer 2007).

The Bush administration continued to bolster an anti-prostitution agenda through intentional use of religious rhetoric. The goals of U.S. policy on sex trafficking during this time worked to establish a causal link between prostitution and sex trafficking, recognizing both to be “inherently dehumanizing” (Zimmerman 2011:85). Bush and his officials played into evangelical notions of sexual morality, rooted in the merits of love-based, monogamous, heterosexual, and marital relations (Jakobsen, 2009). By repeatedly invoking the “evil” in both human trafficking and prostitution, this language effectively introduced a theologically inclined sexual ideology into U.S. anti-trafficking policies (Weitzer 2007; Zimmerman 2011).⁹

As a result of this integration, abolitionist NGOs seeking the eradication of prostitution largely co-opted U.S. anti-trafficking discourse with a singular focus on sex trafficking. Consequently, given the prominence of neo-abolitionists in anti-trafficking efforts, narratives of sex trafficking have far outweighed those of labor, despite its explicit inclusion in the TVPA definition. As the Bush Administration continued to provide both financial backing and oratory space to religious groups involved in anti-trafficking initiatives, anti-sex work rhetoric came to increasingly characterize Republican stances on human trafficking. The dominance of these

⁹ In 2001, Bush established the White House Office of Faith Based and Community Initiatives to “promote partnerships between the federal government and religious social service providers” (Zimmerman 2011: 87). This office eradicated restrictions on the use of federal funds for religious activities, while simultaneously welcoming faith-based organizations to work closely with the government in combating trafficking. However, collaboration was only allowed so long as organizations promote a conservative agenda. This agenda included, at minimum, anti-abortion programs, abstinence education, and church run services (Zimmerman 2011). Additionally, the 2003 Trafficking Victim Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA) included an anti-prostitution clause which stated that none of the research or health outreach funds “may be used to promote, support, or advocate the legalization or practice of prostitution,” (US Dept. of State 2003, Sec. 7g.), a policy which prevented government employees from considering alternatives to abolishing prostitution. In 2004, the State Department released a report titled “The Link Between Prostitution and Sex Trafficking” and in 2005 the TVPA Reauthorization Act explicitly stated that prostitution is “inherently harmful and dehumanizing” (TVPRA 2005).

narratives overpowered, and soon effectively erased, all non-sexual forms of exploitative labor and all non-female victims, and has continued to be prevalent in the language of subsequent administrations.¹⁰

Grassroots Perpetuation of Dominant Discourses

Non-governmental organizations have been heavily involved in the proclaimed “battle” against sexual slavery since its inception. Ranging in perspective from abolitionism and neo-abolitionism¹¹ to those working either within pro-sex work frameworks or else those whose efforts extend from faith-based beliefs, groups such as the American Purity Alliance, formed in 1895, were opposed to state-regulated prostitution and pushed for the abolition of all sex work.¹² Since this era, NGO involvement in anti-trafficking initiatives has only grown. Owing to framing that has increasingly politicized, emotionally charged, and exaggerated the scope of human trafficking, in addition to federal enterprises such as the White House Office of Faith Based and Community Initiatives which actively fund anti-trafficking efforts, an industry has been born which relies on such tropes to bolster public interest and level monetary support. By linking trafficking to women’s rights during an era in which the idea of universal human rights has been broadly accepted (Abu-Lughod 2013: 82), the anti-trafficking platform has quickly become a lucrative one.

In 2015, a report conducted by independent news non-profit *Truthout* found that the 50 most popular organizations – those that appeared most frequently in news stories, other media, or

¹⁰ Particular examples of the recurrence of these tropes can be found in the following speeches of Obama and Trump administrations: Trump, Donald. “Remarks by President Trump in Meeting on Human Trafficking on the Southern Border.” 1 February 2019. Cabinet Room, Washington, DC and Obama, Barack. “Remarks by the President to the Clinton Global Initiative.” 25 September 2012, Sheraton New York Hotel, New York, New York.

¹¹ NGOs that fit within abolitionist frameworks include the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, The Salvation Army, the European Women’s Lobby, Equality Now, and Captive Daughters, to name a few (Musto 2009: 286)

¹² Additionally joined by the League for the Moral Protection of Women which was formed for the same purpose in 1910 (Bromfield 2016: 131).

in conversations with experts in the field – shared an annual budget of around \$686 million (Moore 2015). The same study found that the 36 top-earning anti-trafficking organizations in the United States revealed a shared budget of \$1.2 billion in 2012.¹³ While many organizations are capitalizing on this wealth and visibility to creatively inform the public about their respective initiatives,¹⁴ efforts to remain at the forefront of this moral crusade have often come to the detriment to the cause overall.

Though one would hope that the growing field might lead to an increase in victim resources, or else mitigation efforts, many of the most visible organizations display dissonance between mission and action. At the administrative level, top-funded anti-trafficking organizations in the United States are distinctly disempowering for women in general and for victims of human trafficking in particular. Fewer than half offered women any leadership roles in the organization and only five had trafficking survivors on staff or boards in any position (Moore 2019). Additional concerns might be raised about budget allocation. Should the cumulative \$686 million shared between the most popular NGOs be divided evenly amongst the 2,037 federal and state-level cases of human trafficking prosecuted in 2014 in the United States, each case could hypothetically receive about \$300,000 for victim support - housing, for example. Yet in 2014, there were only about one thousand beds available for trafficking victims nationwide and it was found that only 14 states and Washington DC have services specifically targeted to meet the needs of sex-trafficked adults and sex workers (Bromfield 2019: 135). This gap between financial ability and tangible resource highlights a disheartening trend in which the moral crusade is prioritized over the needs of those it seeks to help. To maintain visibility through both

¹³ The most recent year complete financial information was available.

¹⁴ Amnesty International's pro-sex workers rights declaration in 2015 resulted in a significant spike in social media discussions concerning sex work and human trafficking, demonstrating the important role some NGOs are playing in shaping narratives concerning sex work and human trafficking (The Opportunity Agenda 2016).

financial profit and social capital, many organizations continue to frame human trafficking within popular understanding, and in doing so, exacerbate and circulate inaccurate representations of the issue.

In their investigation of top U.S. based anti-trafficking NGOs,¹⁵ *Truthout* found that such groups routinely interchanged trafficking with the words sexual exploitation, prostitution, and other-related terms. Thus, the claim to combat “trafficking” has been used to initiate and justify restrictive policies against sex workers and support anti-prostitution efforts worldwide (Bromfield 2016: 134). Attaching the word “slavery” to all such efforts compels concerned individuals to donate to affiliated NGOs. Despite best intentions, the continued support of uninformed donors only incites moral outrage and perpetuates charitable voyeurism that does nothing to change the conditions under which trafficking comes into practice (Musto 2009: 284). By linking the two terms, anti-trafficking efforts gain uncritical support despite the connotations such support might have for anti-sex work agendas.

Moreover, majority of the top anti-trafficking organizations continue to actively gender this discourse by claiming to exclusively serve female victims of forced sexual exploitation. This narrow focus comes despite the fact that sources such as the International Labor Organization report trafficking in other labor sectors to be far more pervasive (Moore 2019). Such rhetoric is an extension of dominant media reporting and policymaking practices which center on the sensationalized issue of sex trafficking, rather than labor. The likely more typical cases of migrant labor exploitation – such as agricultural, industrial, or child labor exploitation - are usually ignored, while the worst cases of abuse and exploitation and “sex slavery” are highlighted and depicted as wholly representative of the issue (Weitzer 2019). As has been

¹⁵ Such as Polaris Project, Demand Abolition, Not For Sale, Truckers Against Trafficking, and the International Justice Mission (Moore 2019).

illustrated from the Progressive Era onward, the emphasis on sex and female victimization, particularly young, white female victimization, is effective in galvanizing support, regardless of the consequences it has on mass understanding.

This is the stage on which we enter 2019, focusing specifically on a single discursive strand that spans the length of Metro Atlanta. Acclaimed by fellow anti-trafficking organizations, local politicians, and national journalists alike, this strand relies on many of the tropes which precede it, and has stirred discursive proliferation (Foucault 1976) of its own. Therefore, I enter my analysis by locating the "Truth in Trafficking" not only as an extension of pre-existing trafficking discourses, but as itself "a dispersion of center from which discourses emanated, a diversification of their forms, and the complex deployment of the network connecting them" (Foucault 1976: 315). Though the discourses within this campaign are multiple, the most dominant forms consistently fall in line with historical overemphasis on sex trafficking versus labor, continue to depict sex work as inherently violent, and perpetuate a rigid characterization of "the victim" as young, white, and female. Such a campaign serves not only as to deceive the public and policymakers alike, but ultimately endangers the lives of those centered in it.

Analysis: The "Truth in Trafficking" Billboard Campaign

Situated within this larger discursive field lies a city preoccupied by issues of human-trafficking, an organization dedicated to its eradication, and a particular campaign meant to raise awareness for the harm it imposes. All together, these pieces constitute the discursive space which surrounds the "Truth in Trafficking."

Located in Atlanta, Georgia, the International Human Trafficking Institute was originally founded as an initiative of the National Center for Civil and Human Rights, Inc. to fight the demand for sex and labor trafficking. IHTI grounds the majority of their efforts in their own

backyard. This focus might appear necessary, as Georgia has long been considered a human trafficking hub. In 2005, the FBI first identified Atlanta as one of the 14 cities with the highest incidence of sexually trafficked children (Varela 2019). Despite the absence of a uniform data collection system for tracking the number of human trafficking victims in the U.S., several studies have contributed to Atlanta's alleged reputation. Research completed by The Urban Institute estimated that the Atlanta underground sex industry generated \$290M in income in 2007, while in 2010 a youthSpark study estimated that in Georgia, 7,200 men buy sex with adolescent females in any given month. In 2017, 276 cases of human trafficking in Georgia were reported to the National Human Trafficking Hotline—20% of which were for labor trafficking (Polaris 2017) and in 2018, the National Human Trafficking Hotline ranked Georgia fourth among states in trafficking human labor (IHTI Anti-Human Trafficking Strategic Plan 2018).

Explanations for this centralization abound. Those most directly tied to anti-trafficking work state that sex demand exists anywhere alongside large crowds of people with disposable money (Board 2019). As one of the most popular convention destinations in the country, home to the largest airport in the world, and container of the most strip clubs per capita of any of the 14 major U.S. cities, Atlanta stands at the apex of trafficking utopias.

Citing the steadily increasing growth of Atlanta's residents and visitors, IHTI partnered with the City of Atlanta, FBI, and Atlanta Super Bowl Host Committee¹⁶ in January of 2018 to bring together persons representing business, government, anti-trafficking organizations,

¹⁶There exists a pervasive belief that the Super Bowl is the single biggest day for human trafficking in the United States, and each year has been perpetuated in popular press despite a lack of evidentiary support. Though I will not be addressing the correlation between public events and trafficking in this paper specifically, the practice of relying on hearsay and popular belief for decision-making may result in misappropriation of resources in anti-trafficking efforts. For more see "Do Public Events Affect Sex Trafficking Activity?" by Kyle Miller, Emily Kennedy, and Artur Dubrawski. (2016). *Cornell University*.

advocacy, civic, faith, and philanthropic entities to form the Metro-Atlanta Human Trafficking Coalition. The meeting resulted in a three-year strategic plan grounded in interrupting the business mode of trafficking using technology, training, policy, compliance, outreach, and awareness (IHTI Anti-Human Trafficking Strategic Plan 2018). In June of the same year “Human Traffick Proof the ATL” was officially launched. Centering on two pillars, the strategic plan purports to first, “Traffick-proof vulnerable people” by aligning existing metro-wide resources with the needs of socially and economically disadvantaged youth and their families, and second, to work towards “Demand Prevention,” which attempts to hold buyers accountable for their “illegal and harmful acts.”

The emphasis on demand separates IHTI from most local, national, and global efforts which solely focus either on removing and restoring victims or stopping/persecuting the traffickers. However, despite acknowledging both that “Labor trafficking in the United States is seldom mentioned in our metro-areas anti trafficking efforts” and “efforts to address labor trafficking in our metro area need to be accelerated” (IHTI 2019: 1), the first public campaign released under “Human Traffick Proof the ATL” focuses exclusively on sex.

The “Truth in Trafficking” departs from traditional approaches as its supposed audience is neither victim nor bystander, but buyer. In particular, those buying sex with children. In spring of 2019, IHTI joined forces with Legend ad agency to launch a campaign designed to “get into the predator’s mind, deconstruct his motivations and destroy his justifications” (AJC 2019). Displayed in 23 locations across Metro Atlanta, crossing Major Interstates 1-85, 1-285 and 1-20, and advertised on MARTA Trains throughout the city, “The goal of ‘Truth in Trafficking’ is to eradicate the demand for selling and buying children for sexual and labor exploitation,” says Deborah Richardson, Executive Director of IHTI (Interfaith 2019). Depicting ravaged and

abused dolls, the billboards seek to represent a harsh reality in which predators both view and treat their victims as less than human. Through the emaciated bodies and red-rimmed eyes, IHTI believes they can infiltrate awareness of the buyer, changing the perception of a harmless, mutually beneficial encounter into the reality of rape, horrific incarceration, and loss of life.

Despite its claims to be different, within the following sections I will seek to show how both the epithets and imagery of the various billboards effectively embody the dominant tropes that have long been characteristic of human trafficking discourses. Relying on sexualization, violence, femininity, youth, and whiteness, each representation works to elicit a specific response not only from the target audience (predators), but from the Western audience members who are exposed to this campaign. Initially drawing from the framework provided by philosopher Michel Foucault in his well-known and oft-cited work *The History of Sexuality* (1976), I will highlight the ways in which a campaign premised on ending sexual exploitation paradoxically contributes to sexualizing the women it purports to “save,” ignoring the contextualization for their exploitation, while simultaneously erasing the need of those who exist beyond its specific iconography.

“Truth in Trafficking”



Discourse of (Female) Sexualization

Sex has long been an object of discursive fascination. Grounded in feminization of its objects and objectification of their bodies, the various manifestations of sexual discourses reflect both their proliferation and malleability. Discussions centered on the societal preoccupation with sex have been most prominently addressed in Foucault's writing, which disputes commonly held notions of silencing and refutes the supposed censorship of sex. On the contrary, he argues that this alleged silence gave rise to a

...multiplication of discourses concerning sex in the field of exercise of power itself: an institutional incitement to speak about it, and to do so more and more; a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause *it* to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated detail (Foucault 1976: 302).

This fixation has had residual and lasting effects, infiltrating not only medical, juridical and psychological practices within the U.S., but NGO and aid efforts. Trafficking awareness campaigns, in particular, have historically displayed a tendency to utilize scare tactics and "voyeuristic, often sexualized images" (Haynes 2019). In this, the "Truth in Trafficking " follows suit. Despite IHTI's overarching mission to "end the trafficking of persons," the producers choose to focus their messaging exclusively on sex, branding the boards with explicit calls to "*Sex Traffick Proof the ATL*" rather than carry the coalition's tagline, which seeks broadly to "*Traffick-proof vulnerable people*" (IHTI 2019).

The billboard language is even more explicit: "Once you're imprisoned for raping me you'll see what it's like," "Molested Since 12. Sold by Dad. Forced on Drugs. Raped 8x a Day." The direct mention of "heinous" sexual crimes, such as rape (Foucault 1976: 312), seek to elicit strong affective reactions in viewers and works to intensify both public rage at perpetrators and

empathy for the victims. “Rape” becomes a site which radiates a growing discourse of sexual perversions, “... intensifying people’s awareness of it as a constant danger” and in turn creating “further incentive to talk about it” (Foucault 1976: 312). Through explicit reference to sexual crime, the public becomes implicated in its existence. However, verbal cues alone are not able to communicate the extent of IHTI’s intended horror.

Hence, the dolls. Each an embodiment of “woman as eroticized victim” (Abu-Lughod 2013). Billboard after billboard depicts slightly altered but equally sexualized images, all of them female. Despite lacking any formal system to derive total numbers for the gender of trafficking victims in the U.S., female victimization frames not only monopolize IHTI’s billboards, but much of the awareness campaign market.

Moreover, this feminization allows, if not encourages, exaggerated eroticism. This becomes evident through the posturing of each doll, many of their respective body poses gesturing at sexual readiness through nakedness and facial expression. For example, a doll protected by nothing but a cascade of pink hair, her red lips slightly parted and downturned in an expression often equated with desire to be kissed.



Another full body shot depicts the doll curled in a shower – a location often tied to eroticism. Though seated upright, she too wears no clothing and instead hugs her bent legs into

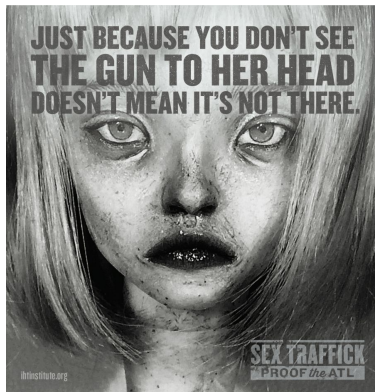
her body and circles them with her arms such that her naked torso remains just slightly hidden. Her head falls sideways and appears wholly unsupported by her neck, a submissive gesture known as “head canting” that has been illustrated as an example of the “power differential” an appeal for protection, and a form of ingratiation or appeasement (Costa 2001: 64).



A third doll sits crouched. Her full naked body is in profile; her head turned so that she is able to stare evocatively into the public gaze, representative of the "coy glance" psychologists describe in courtship signaling - a combination of a half smile and indirect eye gaze that is more often employed by women than men (Moore 1995: 319). Knees bent, her hands fall between her legs and disappear into her crotch. Her nakedness only becomes visible at the small of her back, exposing all her lower extremities as she leans forward to emphasize the curvature of her plastic body in a pelvic tilt that additionally connotes norms of sexual interest.



We are provided a less inclusive view of the remaining dolls, each depicted from the shoulders up. However, like the fully nude images, both facial expressions and that which is exposed unabashedly hint at sexuality. Their risen collarbones and bare shoulders imply what lies just out of view, below where the billboards end. The sultry stares and parted lips carry connotations of enticement, with potential to be interpreted as such by audiences who have been conditioned to see the sensuality in such expressions. Their necks are long and thin, and their eyes cartoonishly enlarged.



One doll appears drowned, her pupils rolled upward in a deathlike trance and her body submerged in bubbling pink liquid. Yet she too is eroticized by her unclothed body and exposed chest.



The hyper-visibility of femininity in this campaign can distract from the absence of other gender identities. Notably, the invisibility of male victims in this campaign speaks to the prevalence of notions of hegemonic masculinity in sexual discourses. Entrenched within notions of power and domination, “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and subordination of women” (Connell 1995: 77), has prescribed men to be aggressive, dominating and thus perpetrators of sexual violence. Women are passive and subordinate, and therefore victims. “The very idea of male victims of sexual violence creates a type of cognitive dissonance given deeply held notions of male domination, especially with respect to sexual activity” (Bouche et al. 2018: 1286). Thus, male victims of sex trafficking are denied visibility in public discourses. This not only compromises the ability of NGOs and others to identify and allocate resources to men, but further feminizes an issue that implicates individuals regardless of their gender. However, it is not only the sexualized femininity of the dolls that causes concern, but the way their exploitation becomes synonymous with abuse.

Discourse of (Sexual) Violence

In sexual discourses, it is often women who become figureheads for violence. The figure of the victimized female sits within a long history of paternalism that predates the narrativization of trafficking. Stemming simply from long standing beliefs in women’s “need for protection” (Chuang 2010), notions of paternalism harken back to “White slavery” and invoke calls for the paternal state to “protect the gendered victims by punishing the evil traffickers” (Cheng 2011: 482). Perceived to be especially vulnerable to the effects of poverty and migration, women -

girls especially - come under heightened scrutiny in rescue narratives (Chen et al. 2005) and undergo eroticization by those seeking to “save” them.

This much is evidenced by the billboard dolls. Note the bruises that mark their skin. Observe their black eyes, fading scars and emaciated bodies. Each dolls’ body is etched with the brutality we assume they have been subjected to. The word “rape” hangs dauntingly above their fallen heads. In these depictions, sex trafficking becomes not only synonymous with human trafficking, but sexual exploitation itself becomes equated with physical violence. The dolls’ pain is signified through visible devastation of the her limbs, torso, and face. Despite legal recognition of the use of “force, fraud, or coercion,” to compel persons into sexual acts (TVPA 2000), the "Truth in Trafficking" viewers are left solely with the image of “force.” To be a victim is to be battered and beaten; to be worthy of attention, one’s exterior must reflect their exploitation.

In this, the "Truth in Trafficking" elides the less visible forms of sexual abuse such as emotional and psychological maltreatment, spiritual and financial coercion, deceit or gas lighting.¹⁷ The victim becomes one that is conspicuous, a discernable embodiment of her own abuse. Yet she is simultaneously eroticized, titillating. In her nakedness and vulnerability she is meant to inspire horror and pity (Abu-Lughod 2013: 101), and in the process becomes dehumanized and homogenized. It is important to note that this level of destruction is most evident on the white dolls’ skin. In fact, none of the women of color portrayed show any of the signs of physical abuse, and thus audiences are invited to feel greater alarm when confronted with the abuse of white women than with those who have black or brown skin.

¹⁷ To manipulate (someone) by psychological means into questioning their own sanity (Encyclopedia Britannica).

Born out of an analytical exploration on the growing popularity of writings on abused women, anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod coined the term “slave pornography” to refer to the pornographic elements of these narratives which center on marginalized bodies. This genre relies on depictions of rape and horror, enacted upon female figures to elicit pity at their plight and admiration for their escape. Though Abu-Lughod generates this term in response to narratives centered on Muslim women, “slave pornography” becomes alarmingly applicable to the genre of the trafficking awareness campaign.

The “Truth in Trafficking” dolls are given no voice other than that which is reflected through their appearance or inscribed across their portraiture. Each is reduced to both a subject of sexual force, and an object of sexual desire. Despite traces of violence, the dolls all share a singular body type: thin. Their most sensual features, eyes and lips, have been put to the same exaggerated effect. This feminine youthfulness parallels relatively recent shifts in body aesthetic culture within the U.S. In the 1960s and 70s, as beauty ideals for women moved from more mature curvaceous bodies¹⁸ to the stick-thin, flat-chested figure epitomized by supermodels¹⁹ (Ruskin 2019). In striving for this appearance - eerily reminiscent to that of a malnourished, emaciated and non-threatening preadolescent - women were increasingly encouraged to discipline their bodies and conform to ideals that were almost impossible to achieve. IHTI makes use of this norm. In each billboard, the doll simultaneously embodies both weakness and “beauty.” Each becomes endowed with stereotypical appeal and heightened sexualization, much of which hinges not only on her femininity, but on her infantilization.

¹⁸ Eg. Marilyn Monroe

¹⁹ Eg. Twiggy or Kate Moss

Discourse of the (Girl) Child

In many ways, it is obvious that the billboard dolls are children. Youthfulness accentuates every bit of their appearance: the large eyes and small features, the smooth skin. Several of the epithets contain an age:



By doing so, IHTI not only elevates the image of the woman, but specifically that of the girl. Relying on the trope of female vulnerability, IHTI seeks to invoke greater compassion for their cause than would be elicited from any other identity. Often “... depicted as exceptionally underrepresented because of a pernicious combination of economic impoverishment, gender disadvantage, and social liminality” (Sweis, 35), girls in particular become emblematic of morality and representative of all children. Though IHTI states that “Nowhere in their mission statement or description of anti-trafficking implementation does IHTI specify the gender of their beneficiaries, yet the billboards portray solely feminine presenting children.

In doing so, the "Truth in Trafficking" participates in the “... new genre that capitalizes on the current humanitarian focus on the girl child as the exemplary victim” (Abu-Lughod 2013: 100). This emphasis lies in contradiction to statements from campaign producers, such as LEGEND ad agency CEO and artistic creator of the "Truth in Trafficking" Michael Dunn who writes, “We hope this campaign not only changes behavior but also stimulates conversations

around the dinner table. It's not an easy conversation. It's a mandatory one, so we all can protect our youth—both girls and boys" (PRN 2019). Ironically, boys are nowhere to be seen.

Claims such as this are part of larger pattern of anti-trafficking rhetoric that tends to exaggerate the impact human trafficking has on young women. Statistics such as “The average age of entry for girls into prostitution in the U.S. is 12-14 years old...” are widely quoted by both policy makers and NGOs in an effort to bring attention to child sex trafficking. However, this statistic lacks any sort of corroboration and, at the behest of policy makers, prominent anti-trafficking groups such as the Polaris Project have had to disclaim this statement, adding: “This statistic is not actually supported by any data. We've looked at both our internal data and external data sources, such as open source research and media, and we don't believe that 12-14 is an accurate average age of entry into prostitution” (Sardina 2019). Regardless of such disclaimers, the public has consumed and internalized this messaging.²⁰ Given the long and documented history of the child’s affective appeal, this emphasis is profitable.

By grounding itself in claims about threatened children, the "Truth in Trafficking" seeks to elicit an emotional response from its audience and compel them into empathetic contribution to their campaign. This move is strategic, given that minor sex trafficking is a valence issue, and it has been shown that the most effective concentration of law enforcement efforts, anti-trafficking support, and funding are likely to be forthcoming for organizations with a minor sex trafficking mission (Bouche et al. 2018: 1287). Fundraising strategies aside, this focus comes to the detriment of the majority of sex trafficking victims. Despite a national study by U.S.-based

²⁰ Exemplified by nationally distributed public surveys regarding general knowledge of trafficking. When asked to describe human trafficking in their own words, there appears an overwhelming presence of gender bias in respondents’ answers. Mentions of *woman* or *girl* appear in 7.38% and 3.34% of responses respectively, while *man* only appears in 1.43% and *boy* in less than one percent. Appearing in 6.2% of responses, inclusion of the general *child* or *minor* is more common than mentions of men (NIJ Survey 2013).

Demand Abolition, which campaigns against the sex trade, indicating that only a small percentage of people buy sex with children, IHTI chose to allocate significant resources - money, time, external consultation, creativity - to a campaign centered solely on them.

Thus, the child, understood as innocent and in need of protection, represents the possibility of the future.²¹ The dolls, embodiments of a girlish “innocence” (Malkki 2010), are implied to have begun life in childlike wonder. Through captions such as “At 12 years old, I never had the choice” and “Molested since 12. Sold by Dad. Forced on Drugs. Raped 8x a day” the dolls become even further infantilized representations of the girls they depict. Through explicitly combining her youth to her lack of agency, the billboards lead viewers to understand that the victim had no preceding knowledge of the events that caused her life to erode. Her original state of naiveté, or innocence, is what makes her pain even more gut-wrenching. She is not complicit in its occurrence and is therefore blameless.

Due to this “innocence and goodness,” (white) children as sufferers have become familiar charismatic figures that are “attributed an affective authority that adult refugees and other victims can generally never hope to address” (Malkki, 65). The “Truth in Trafficking” strives to communicate this suffering. Many of the female doll children look directly into the camera with apathetic, lifeless stares. However, again we must note that it is only the white dolls whose skin shows signs of abuse, whose eyes are sleepless, and whose bodies are visibly malnourished. Through signs of physical harm and psychological damage, even insinuations of death, the white dolls become representative of the affective authority viewers are helpless when confronted with, while simultaneously ignoring the ways in which scores of native children, Black children, and Latinx children are routinely brutalized, murdered, kidnapped and forgotten about in the United

²¹ A tenet of “reproductive futurism” as coined by post-structural queer theorist Lee Edelman (Edelman, Lee. (2004). “No Future: Queer Theory and Death Drive.” *Duke University Press*.

States.²² Rather than acknowledge such social realities, the campaign's producers generally state that the billboards' intent is to expose "... the irreparable damage [the perpetrator] does to these innocent children who have absolutely no choice — and never have (AJC 2019)." Language such as this denies that child social or cultural specificity (Malkki 2010: 65). Each figure becomes a generic human being rather than individual person; each physically abused girl becomes widely representative of child sex trafficking. These analytic leaps allows white, middle-class audiences to feel secure in their perceived understanding "problems," that, in reality, are fully decontextualized from their social and historical specificity (Mohanty 1986). Through this invocation, the audience is able to separate the needs of the vulnerable child from the social context that created his/her insufferable conditions. Child-centric initiatives therefore become a mode of erasure, removing the impetus for governments or other actors to take responsibility for overarching and systemic inequities.

An unfortunate collateral impact of these melodramatic portrayals is that they reinforce the craving for 'innocent' victims, along with the corollary belief that if someone is not 'innocent', they cannot be a victim. This is detrimental to actual victims, child or adult; male, female, or non-binary, who often inhabit a grey world between agency and exploitation (Feingold 2019). NGOs often become reliant on the dichotomy between "good" and "bad" victims in order to galvanize general support.

²²According to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, of the estimated 613,000 people reported missing in the U.S. last year, about 60% were people of color. Although black women make up less than 7% of the U.S. population, they represent about 10% of all missing persons cases throughout the country. Estimates by the Black and Missing Foundation put the total number of disappeared black women and girls at 64,000.

The danger in these portrayals is intensified in regions such as Atlanta where it has been documented that the most vulnerable population is not young girls, but transgender youth, 71 percent of whom report being trafficked in their lifetime (Varela 2019). Moreover, 64 percent of the homeless youth in Atlanta, for whom trafficking is a heightened threat, are male (Atlanta Youth Count 2019). In such cases, the image of the girl usurps potential resources, deflecting attention from those most likely to be exploited. The billboards employ a pathos that has garnered widespread attention. However, much of this, I argue, is due to not only gendered, but racialized imagery.

Discourse of the (White) Girl Child

The irony in this campaign to save “innocent” children lies in the precarity it elides in not only non-female, but non-white demographics. As such, it is important to note differences in color of the dolls’ skin. Of the ten images used, six have white skin, three are Black, and one appears Asian. This ratio is fully unrepresentative of victim estimates, given a 2018 study which found that the vast majority of homeless youth, those most vulnerable to trafficking, were either Black/African American or Multiracial (Atlanta Youth Count 2018).

The move to white-wash a child trafficking campaign carries heavy implications, the first being that using a white child to evoke universal empathy equates whiteness with universality. In saturating the campaign with images of white femininity, the "Truth in Trafficking" harkens back to the rhetoric of “White slavery.” Refusing to provide women of color, and Black women in particular, visibility that is proportional to their victimization, ITHI holds women of color to a lower moral standard, forcing them into relative silence within all trafficking discourses. While acknowledging the presence of both Black and Asian women in this campaign, the rate at which they appear relative to white women encourages the continued conflation of whiteness with

innocence. The visual imbalance implies that victims are more often white than not (not true), and suggests that white women are more worthy of attention and response than people of color. Again, this appeal is ironic given the context in which the billboards are placed, the predominantly white faces centered in the 2nd largest majority-Black metro area in the country (World Population Review).

The absence of women of color stands in contrast to histories of “plantation pornography” - eighteenth and nineteenth century British writings and pictures that depict the abuse of Black bodies in the Atlantic slave trade. This genre has overflowed into the present as a business that infiltrated literature, fine art, popular publishing, film, video, and BDSM cultures (Abu-Lughod 2013: 103). Through this proliferation, the erotic Black body comes to be a norm, rendering Black women’s potential exploitation unlikely and thus unidentifiable. Their history of abuse is eroticized, and thus sex is assumed to be inherent to their mode of being. Therefore, when it comes time to identify those in need of “saving,” those who have been exploited as opposed to those who have been fetishized, the racial script flips and the white women’s abuse become sensationalized for the purpose of pity as opposed to pleasure.

Added irony lies in the racialization of the perpetrator. While women of color are ignored in the trafficking discourse, men of color are placed under heightened scrutiny. In continuing resonance with “White slave” rhetoric, contemporary discourses remain contingent on scary stories about girls and young women tricked or abducted and sold into “sex slavery” by “foreign” or “evil” men. Repeated in nearly duplicate format by celebrities, filmmakers, select researchers and activists alike, the brown/Black man becomes representative of the harm inflicted upon white women (Lerum 2019). As a result, the targeting, profiling, arrests, and convictions against vulnerable populations inherently impair the health and wellbeing of

communities that have limited or no access to services that provide safe working environments and/or protections against state-sanctioned violence. Thus, men of color's centralization in sex trafficking narratives is further highlighted by the overall absence of narratives on labor.

Discourse of Labor

A human trafficking campaign that focuses exclusively on sex entrenches tropes that commonly conflate sex slavery with sex work, equate sex work with violence and exploitation, and uphold beliefs surrounding conventional gender roles and sexual morality (Bromfield 2016; Lerum 2016; Chapskis 2003; Chuang 2004). The white-washing of such a campaign permits continued fixation on notions of white victimhood and purity. However, of additional importance is the absence the "Truth in Trafficking" allows, the overemphasis on sex eliding the prevalence of other forms of trafficking and the precarity of those most at risk.

By being held up as *the* victims of sex trafficking, the girl dolls are ultimately removed from the larger contexts that have laid foundation for all labor exploitation. Scholars who study the lived experiences of domestic workers have found that inhumane immigration policies, racial injustice, gender inequity, economic inequality, and other systemic barriers all play central roles in increasing vulnerability to abuse on this continuum of labor, including sexual labor, exploitation (Hafiz 2019). However, all these precursory inequities are eclipsed by the dolls' damaged bodies and general indications of suffering. Their childlike faces and gestures at age downplay the need to address issues that run deeper than individual plight.

By showcasing the girl-dolls' "experiences" at the hands of sex traffickers and buyers, and allowing their faces to monopolize the human trafficking spotlight, non-sexual child labor is silenced as a dominant form of exploitation, despite the fact that, "Only one out of four youth were engaging in sex work of some sort, trafficked or otherwise" and that "the vast majority of

youth trafficking experiences involved a wide range of different kinds of labor trafficking” (Varela 2019). Such messaging is a continuation of legal imbalances in trafficking investigation and persecution between minors, exemplified by the presence of an age criterion for sex trafficking and not labor. Just as this definition, established in the 2000 TVPA, set different expectations for punitive action regarding each, ultimately prioritizing response to one victim over another (Doherty 2015; Musto 2009), the "Truth in Trafficking" denies any space for exploited children who have *not* been subject to sexual force.

While sex trafficking imagery continues to flourish in NGO domains and beyond, “experiences and protection of vulnerable and undocumented migrants, both male and female and often people of color, who may be victims of labor exploitation... have been pushed off the radar” (Bromfield 2016). By ignoring more common forms of exploitation, such as children engaged in child labor, workers picking fruit, catching fish or packaging chicken, campaigns neglect what should be arguably their largest target group, thereby missing the opportunity to inform migrant laborers of the risks of unscrupulous labor recruiters and entrapment through debt (Haynes 2019).

By participating in the moral panic on sex trafficking, IHTI contributes to national efforts which rebrand social issues connected to poverty, migration, and labor rights as individual problems derived from either lack of agency or personal depravity. Such elisions render non-female, non-sex trafficked victims disposable as “they are either not identified at all, or they are misidentified as illegal migrants, transferred to immigration detention facilities, and eventually deported” (Bouche et al. 2018: 1285). By ignoring the political context of trafficking as a vehicle to both move abolitionist agendas and scapegoat non-white men, initiatives which centralize dominant narratives further endanger vulnerable populations. The "Truth in Trafficking "

becomes an instance of repetition that both constitutes a pattern and ensures the continuation of the discourse itself.²³ Much of this come back to the discursive appeal of a sexually exploited woman, and the sensationalization of innocent girlhood.

Therefore, in what follows I embark on an exploration not only of the billboard content, but on its materiality, contextual underpinnings, and continuing social life. My analysis lies intertwined with statements from the campaigns producers and contributors themselves, emphasizing the impact such work has had on the world into which it was inserted. Renowned for the ways in which it departs from traditional messaging, I seek to show how in actuality the “Truth in Trafficking” is a continuation of problematic historical attempts at awareness-raising, the public reception of which perpetuates harmful tropes.

Discourse of the Doll

Central to this campaign is the image of a doll: Lifeless, emotionless, meant to be handled, collected or displayed; used by another for their own pleasure and then placed on a shelf until further interest has been piqued. Selected for the common medium in which she works, Swedish based campaign artist Emilie Steele states that the sculptures she creates are “designed to tell their own stories” (Salmone 2017). The images which are now publicized throughout Georgia pre-exist IHTI’s campaign. Notable for their enchanting combination of beauty and grotesque, with their exaggerated or duplicated features—such as rodent-esque teeth, blacked-out eyes, and, in some cases, multiple heads and limbs— the dolls take on a surreal

²³ This much has been made apparent through public opinion surveys meant to gauge American awareness and knowledge of trafficking. When asked to describe their understanding of the issue, more than 25% of the respondents mentioned solely “sex acts,” 15.79% mentioned both “labor and sex acts” while less than 5% referenced only labor. Sex trafficking’s presence in the vast majority of responses, over 40% if *sex acts* and *sex and labor acts* are taken together, in relation to labor’s presence in less than 20% of responses, points to contemporary continuation of the historical imbalance in trafficking discourses (NIJ 2013).

quality “that both attracts and repels the viewer” (Scene 360).²⁴ Steele describes them as “abject figures” that long to be human, hovering in the uncomfortable borderlands of consciousness, expressing traits that are universal but not socially accepted. “Displaying constructed dolls can remind us that we, ourselves, are artificial and constructed,” Steele writes (Emilie-steele.format).

Steele’s dolls are always feminine and meant to invoke both “the objectification of the restricted female body” as well as “the glorification and obsession of purity” (Emilie Steele 2018). Despite Steele’s intent to contribute “to the conversation regarding constructed ideas about the human condition,” the irony lies in decontextualized format in which her dolls appear. Rather than provide commentary on an industry that has built itself on the tropes of objectification, in Atlanta, Steele’s dolls are represented without the socially complex realities that accompany sex trafficking, and therefore work to further entrench that which has already been so eagerly consumed.

This effect seems to be exactly what campaign producers sought to evoke through such imagery. “Not only are we numb to the pain,” stated Michael Dunn, Legend ad agency CEO and creator of the “Truth in Trafficking,” but “research shows predators rarely even see children as human but rather as objects” (AJC 2019). Therefore, the dolls stare from the billboards, disrupting the skyline. The plastic figurines supposedly reflect the harms of a discourse that has denied them agency, the right to life even. However, in portraying the victims as inanimate, IHTI participates in the very dehumanization they seek to critique. Not only does this medium equate those who have been sexually exploited with passivity, but becomes reminiscent of childhood, further centralizing the image of the girl. Victims of sex trafficking become static protagonists in

²⁴ It is also important to note that not all the dolls appear to be Steele’s artwork. Although she is credited overall, I was not able to find the Black or Asian doll images anywhere in her gallery and, given the notable stylistic distinctions between the two sets of images (signs of physical abuse most notable), I suspect that she only contributed images of the white girl-doll while LEGEND Ad agency supplemented with faces of color.

their own plotline, a means to profit off the “damsel in distress” trope Western audiences have come to anticipate when confronted with stories of female exploitation, or, as they have come to be known in feminist and humanitarian circles, “rescue narratives.”

Discourse of Rescue

In their 2019 impact evaluation, IHTI reported that “One of our most visible accomplishments this year was the execution of our recent billboard campaign The Truth in Trafficking.” Through risk of being shamed and losing employment, the coalition believes these billboards will effectively deter predators from committing such acts, writing “Buyers will think twice about making their next purchase!” (IHTI 2019: 4). However, they provide no structure for accountability. Therefore, IHTI remains trapped within the moral crusade, espousing rhetoric that hints at impact without creating any.

As statements made by anti-human trafficking organizations continue to demarcate the issue by gender, both discourses of sex (reliant on the figure of the female) and discourse of the child (reliant on the image of the girl) become core tenants of overarching gestures to the “rescue narrative.” Rescue narratives themselves are not unique to trafficking awareness campaigns. Inherent to most humanitarian efforts, and especially those centered on girls and women, tales of saviorism resonate with broad audiences as,

We live in an era in which the idea of universal human rights has been broadly accepted. The very success of the institutionalization of the concept in myriad organizations and its virtual monopoly on the high ground of global morality led feminists in the 1980s to try to link the struggle for women’s rights and well-being to human rights (Abu-Lughod 2013: 82).

As trafficking gained its most recent prominence as a “women’s issue” during the 1990s (Farrell & Fahy 2009), the crusade to eradicate it unsurprisingly centered on broad illustrations of the damsel in distress. Since the passing of the 2000 Trafficking Victim Protection Act (TVPA), scary stories about girls and young women tricked or abducted and sold into “sex slavery” by “evil” men have been repeated in nearly duplicate format by celebrities, filmmakers, and select researchers and activists (Lerum 2019). Narrativizing the discourse along these lines transforms lived experiences into compelling plotlines and render stories of human trafficking, sex trafficking, in particular, susceptible to further sensationalization. Manifest in news media and fiction accounts alike, stories of helpless victims, evil traffickers, and heroic saviors are largely shaped by cultural prejudices and political agendas (Baker 2014: 224).

Such efforts, lauded by the public, typically operate through the collaboration of anti-trafficking NGOs and law enforcement. Police officers and social workers join forces to “rescue” sex workers and then coerce them into “diversion” programs, or else face incarceration. An infamous example lies in the collaboration between U.S. based social workers and Project Reaching Out to the Sexually Exploited (ROSE), a prostitution exiting and diversion program for sex trafficking victims and prostitutes. In 2013, Project ROSE conducted raids targeting sex workers for arrest unless they agreed to participate in a 6-month long prostitution and diversion program. However, following the “rescue” many were ineligible because participants could have no prior arrests *for sex work* (Bromfield 2015: 134). The outright irony in this initiative is clouded by the inexcusable violence. By uprooting individuals, removing them from their means to livelihood, branding them criminal, and then denying any follow-up resources, anti-trafficking efforts not only uphold social injustices, but enact violence on vulnerable bodies in the name of saving them.

This much is corroborated through voices of the so-called “victims” themselves, as a community-based participatory research project conducted by the Young Women’s Empowerment Project (2012) reported that girls and young women in the sex trade found social services to be one of the primary sources of harm for them (Bromfield 2015: 135). Additional research shows that aggressive policing and forced “rescue” not only violates the human rights of individuals in the sex industry, but those of their children and families as well (Lerum 2016: 20). Regardless of such accounts, it is the rescue narrative itself that continues to dominate media and policy level discussions. Subsequently, trafficking becomes framed solely in terms of criminalization and victimization, feeding a carceral rescue industry that requires constant supply of girls and women who are arrested and forced into one camp or the other. This is all while Western audiences cheer the “rescuers” on, breathing sighs of relief when the mission is deemed “successful.”

The "Truth in Trafficking" creators assign themselves the role of savior, boldly exposing the “realities” faced by (young, female) victims of (sex) trafficking. Following this script, viewers are called upon to infer that the “you” addressed in each tagline is the (evil, male) buyer. The paradox in this particular tale of rescue lies in the way these figures become caricatures of the tropes they attempt to disrupt, the overall effect becoming one of “slave pornography” and saturation. In purporting to expose the *harm* of sexualizing young children, the “rescue narrative” itself depends on a sexualization that does violence to real bodies. Lacking any connection to a sense of hope or purpose for an effective solution, such depictions are overwhelming at best and normalized at worst. Much of this effect is due to the medium.

Discourse of Deflection

It is now well established in marketing sciences that after seeing a “short spot” on human trafficking, such as a public service announcement or poster, majority of people can feel subconsciously satisfied with what they have contributed to the cause, despite no further action being taken. This is entirely due to the brevity of a billboard ad. A blip on the radar of busy human routine, a fraction of a moment in any individual’s day, the public awareness campaign is a medium best suited for messages that are quick and easy to digest. However, while there remains a lack of sustained and active participation from audiences exposed to public awareness campaigns (Friedman 2019), 17% of the budget IHTI allocates toward their *Human Traffick Proof the ATL* initiative lies in “marketing” (IHTI 2019: 14).

Thus, in an effort to forge memorability, IHTI utilizes the scare tactics and sexualized images anti-trafficking campaigns have become infamous for. At risk of losing what they believe to be the key message, the "Truth in Trafficking" remains in the superficial, reducing victims to their common stereotypes. In doing so, IHTI refuses to delve deep into the details where details matter, such as when it comes to quality decision-making, recommendations, policy advice and implementation, legislation, or legal representation (Ewart-James 2019).

Marketing mass hysteria to gain public support reifies trafficking in all forms, (i.e. labor, sex, and human trafficking) and furthers the demand for these economies to thrive in clandestine markets, regardless of government objectives to curb or eradicate trafficking. Given that IHTI’s target audience is supposedly perpetrators, the sexualized images and lack of information may in fact exacerbate the fetishizing of young girls. The quick erotic visuals have potential to validate and potentially feed pedophilic tendencies. Moreover, general viewers - which, given the prominent locations, are many- are left without any call to action. Absent a directive, request, or

even hotline (the only form of referral being IHTI's website printed in the corner in white, tiny font), the "Truth in Trafficking" appears to be built around the assumption that providing people with human trafficking visuals will in turn inspire them to care and become involved.

Additionally, minimal information is provided regarding the research grounding this campaign. It is primarily credited to be the "brainchild" of Legend ad agency CEO Michael Dunn, a white man with no documented history in anti-trafficking initiatives. In partnering with Deborah Richardson, who, despite her experience in the field at large, does not identify as a trafficking survivor, the creators produce what simply becomes one of the many anti-trafficking campaigns which "use stories of vulnerability and victimhood to illustrate the scope of the problem, yet fail to meaningfully engage with survivors in creating and controlling these narratives" (Hafiz 2019). For the sake of impact, IHTI appears to sidestep any form of expert knowledge, either scholarship or lived experience. Therefore the campaign is allowed not only to entangle all human trafficking with sex (notably, sex that is physically violent), but the exclusive focus on trafficking itself dilutes the relationship between human trafficking and other forms of oppression and marginalization.

Therefore, while the campaign aims to mobilize moral outrage and activate care surrounding the issue of sex trafficking, the story obscures the realities of all human trafficking, especially the deeper structural factors that create vulnerable populations and an abundance of perpetrators. The billboards therefore act as a deflection, hyper-visibilizing already objectified bodies while those most vulnerable become forgotten and neglected, allowing cycles of poverty and exploitation to continue uninterrupted.

Discursive Proliferation: Social Life of the Campaign

Following the announcement of its release, the "Truth in Trafficking" gained momentum, receiving increasing coverage from news sources and fellow anti-trafficking organizations alike. The billboards garnered 9 million impressions each week of the 1-month campaign, with the second month on MARTA, and 90 news publications reported about the campaign to their audiences of nearly 70 million people (IHTI 2019). Operating within various (and often opposing) societal domains, the billboards were given accolade and glowing description, held up by journalists and reporters as the pinnacle of an awareness campaign gone right. However, in their coverage - their incitement to discourse - each additional source became a moment of perpetuation and repetition²⁵ that is complicit in further entrenching the campaign's dominant tropes.

After being initially discussed in the PR Newswire, a national press release distributor contracted by individual companies, coverage of the "Truth in Trafficking" was picked up by *The Interfaith Children's Movement (ICM)*, a grassroots, interfaith advocacy organization "dedicated to improving the well-being of all children in the state of Georgia." This group, alongside its multi-faith partners, endorsed the campaign on their personal website, providing their own commentary on the campaign's context. The background provided by ICM was constituted by statistics pertaining to identities of trafficking victims and perpetrator, all of which were left uncited. The organization states that the "Average victims' age is 11 to 14," "Approximately 80% are women and children bought, sold and imprisoned in the underground sex service industry," "Average lifespan of a victim is reported to be 7 years (found dead from attack, abuse, HIV and other STD's, malnutrition, overdose or suicide) and that "Perpetrators tend to be

²⁵ Again, referencing Edward Said's writings on the discourse of *Orientalism*.

affluent fathers” (ICM 2019). No corroboration is given for these “facts,” and many are iterations of statistics that have already been widely disputed.²⁶

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution joined the conversation soon after. As the only major daily newspaper in the metropolitan area of Atlanta, Georgia, the paper has wide reach and circulates to over 200,000 recipients. The article released on May 31, 2019 touts the campaign, stating, “Who can see and read such moral scripts — even for a moment — and not be moved?” and “If you find them uneasy to look at, that’s the intended reaction. If you’re moved to do something, to demand something better for our children, even better” (Staples 2019). The same is true of the coverage provided by Out of Home Today, a website for all news and information related to the “Out of Home Industry.”²⁷ The site published a release statement in which the subtitle reads: “We see a large number of nonprofits using OOH. None of recent memory are as effective as this campaign” and proceeds to describe the billboards as “powerful” and “provocative” (Board 2019). In praising the campaign so publicly, media sources remove any impetus for the public themselves to be critical. By reading sources they consider reliable, viewers lack reason to be analytical beyond what has already been written. The reporters they trust have told them the campaign is “powerful,” and therefore the imagery becomes representative of reality, and reality is shocking. The media simply becomes a regurgitation of the IHTI’s own unchecked message, and thus the tropes pervade.

Such praise soon infiltrated partisan news sources. In early June of 2019, *RedState*, self-reportedly the nation’s leading conservative news site, published a similarly complimentary piece. While unapologetically nationalistic in her review, writing “We are loathe to admit that [sex

²⁶ The entry age of girls in particular is discussed in the section “Discourse of the (Girl) Child”

²⁷ “Out of Home Industry” encompasses all advertising that reaches consumers while they are outside their home.

trafficking] happens here in this great country, but it does,” the reporter continues on to ultimately commend IHTI for addressing the issue through such a “shocking” display (Davis 2019). On the other end of the ideological spectrum, NPR published a Georgia public radio interview with Deborah Richardson, the executive director of IHTI. Citing the “Truth in Trafficking” as part of a “major campaign to stop human trafficking in Georgia,” the interview itself equates the sex-trafficking specific billboards with the larger trafficking movement, setting precedent for the audience, and those subsequently exposed to either, to conflate the two. When the interviewer asks Richardson the impetus for her involvement in this line of work, Richardson states,

I got into human trafficking because in 1999 I was sitting in the back of a courtroom and watched a ten year old girl come in handcuffed and shackled... she was found in the back seat of a van with a 42-year-old man... had been locked up for three days and was charged with child prostitution (Flemming 2019).

With this comment, Richardson herself disseminates notions of horror and pity based in dominant discourses related to “the girl.” Itself a form of “literary trafficking,” testimonials such as these, which center the pain and “rescue” of young victims, dramatize human suffering and are designed to cause alarm and outrage (Weitzer 2007: 463). This sentiment translates into Richardson’s justification for the campaign itself, stating “They’re very provocative, we want them to get attention, we want them to be uncomfortable because we need to start having the conversation” (Flemming 2019).

However, despite Richardson and others’ insistence on the necessity of discomfort, scholars and activists from all backgrounds concede that an overwhelming focus on victim pain and suffering can lead to both desensitization and “compassion fatigue,” in which audiences

struggle to relate to the plight of the victims and instead become increasingly detached (Friedman 2019). Regardless of this expert insight, all sources credit the power in this campaign to its discomfort and laud IHTI for their brave interventions. Nowhere have I found negative or even remotely critical coverage of the “Truth in Trafficking.” The near unanimous praise the campaign has received from a large ideological and professional spectrum points to the pervasiveness of gendered, racialized, and infantilized tropes. Religious or secular, liberal or conservative, knowledgeable or ignorant, numerous voices create the cacophony upon which such discourses become circulated and thus normalized. Through acknowledgement and endorsement they become taken for granted and taken as “Truth.”

Alternate Strategies: Look Beneath the Surface

Despite the ways in which the shameless sexualization and white-washing of campaigns such as the “Truth in Trafficking” capture public attention, we cannot allow their continuation of the dominant discourse to eclipse the more nuanced and careful efforts put forward by other organizations.

A decade following initial passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) initiated the *Rescue & Restore Victims of Human Trafficking* campaign. Intended to increase the identification of trafficking victims in the United States and to help those victims receive the benefits and services they need to restore their lives, Rescue & Restore is primarily focused on outreach to those individuals who most likely encounter victims on a daily basis, but may not recognize them as victims of human trafficking. By educating health care providers, social service organizations and law enforcement communities about the issue of human trafficking, it seeks to encourage these intermediaries to

look beneath the surface by recognizing clues and asking the right questions. As part of this initiative a billboard series titled *Look Beneath the Surface* was launched.

Depicting a range of individuals that vary along lines of gender, age, race, nationality, and sexual orientation, *Look Beneath the Surface* reflects the comprehensive scope of human trafficking.



Despite the demographic array, the cast of characters that scatter *Look Beneath the Surface* advertising is far from arbitrary. As certain populations are at disproportionate risk, the campaign is intentional about how such information is disseminated, working with individuals who have experienced child abuse, survivors of gender-based violence and sexual assault, disconnected and homeless adults and youth, American Indians and Alaska Natives, and migrants fleeing conflict and disasters. Moreover, efforts go beyond the stories of individual victimization to raise awareness concerning the impact trafficking has on families, communities, and even industries, providing information on the role of consumers and the demand contributing to labor and sex trafficking and bring greater attention to the public health consequences of human trafficking.

The campaign has had tangible impact, extending beyond the superficial circulation awarded work such as “The Truth in Trafficking.” One critical factor that contributed to the success of the *Rescue and Restore* campaign was a clear call to action. The HHS campaign, along with many other government and non-government public awareness efforts, pointed the public to call the National Human Trafficking Hotline for help. Since 2007, the hotline has received 138,000 calls from the community, leading to the identification of more than 33,000 cases of human trafficking reported from all 50 states, Washington, D.C., and U.S. territories. 15,700 of such calls came directly from survivors themselves (Chon 2019), illustrating not only increasing public investment in the issue, but heightened individual victim empowerment and decreasing barriers to help. Recognizing the entwined and co-constitutive work of alternate organizations, HHS provides grants to conduct outreach to identify victims of trafficking and provide comprehensive services to survivors.

By shaping public awareness campaigns in strategic and visionary ways, survivors can convey that inhumane migration policies, over-policing, and the lack of decent working conditions sustain the climate that makes trafficking possible. In so doing, these campaigns can improve the conditions for not only survivors of trafficking, but broadly for low-wage, migrant workers.

Conclusions

Interwoven throughout the “Truth in Trafficking” are discourses which perpetuate the exploitation, sexualization, and infantilization of white female victims, sidelining narratives of those who don’t fit such typography and resulting in the continuation of a crusade rooted in morality and Western benevolence. Though taken down after only one month on display, IHTI shows no intent to put the billboard images to rest. On the contrary, under “Marketing and Media

Task Force” goals listed within the two-year outlook of the coalition’s impact report, the first bullet states: “Determine next steps of *Truth in Trafficking* campaign - e.g. using social and digital media videos posted on stations and sites frequently visited by target audience” (IHTI 2019: 13). Given the future social life of this campaign, I therefore end by asking how this “Truth” functions in the world into which it was, and will continue to be, inserted.

To be clear, I am not arguing that we dismiss all attempts to raise awareness for human exploitation. Nor am I stating that we refuse to support efforts aimed at ending it. Rather, I ask that we prevent the sensationalization of efforts which exceptionalize a single discourse, in this case that of sex trafficking, to invisibilize the various and multiple forms of precarity that exist within the United States. As many scholars²⁸ have shown, a critical subject is not one who succumbs to the affective appeals of humanitarianism, but one who examines such appeals and recognizes their inherent ironies and blind spots. This task is easier said than done, and therefore, I begin with myself.

To acknowledge my own role in the creation and perpetuation of this “Truth,” I take stock of the specific corporeality that has implicated me in its violence. As a young, white, American woman, when I saw these billboards I saw the potential for my own pain. I felt pity for those with whom I could identify, while simultaneously feeling relieved and grateful for the distance between our social locations. Upon first encounter, these images carry an emotional persuasiveness that draws from the familiar language of human and women’s rights. Relying on a vocabulary of consent and freedom, the billboards exceptionalize the girl-dolls’ “lack of choice.” The subjects are young, they are female, and therefore invite us viewers to demand their rescue. However, as victims of sexual exploitation, they are simultaneously damaged, disparate,

²⁸ Lila Abu-Lughod, Miriam Ticktin, Liisa Malkki, Jaspir Puar, to name a few

other. Thus, we are asked to both relate to and distance ourselves from the images, drawing distinctions between those who have a choice and those who don't.

The affective language of this campaign operates by asking us (white) women to identify with the faces scattered along our daily commute to work. Maybe the dolls unearth a particularly painful memory; often they evoke a "sisterly feeling" and repugnance for those who violate "innocent" others (Abu-Lughod 2013: 107). This affect, often manifest in a sense of anger, empathy or urgency, gains authority through its association with the value of "choosing freely." To "choose freely" is to make use of the "universal rights" Western feminists have historically fought for. To "choose freely" is to choose along the lines of love, independence, and sexual freedom. In trafficking discourses, those who "choose freely" to engage with lifestyles deemed oppositional to such values (eg. sex work) becomes marked as "morally impure," while those who we understood to have had no choice become "innocent."

Therefore, sexual morality becomes standardized. Many feminist advocates emphasize the violence and danger imposed upon women who sell sex, rejecting the idea that it can ever be a "job." In doing so, they deny that such individuals may sometimes be independent agents who decide to use commercial sex for instrumental ends. On the other hand, advocates who wish to recognize sex workers' agency and attempt to reduce the risk and stigma associated with sex work often ignore larger barriers to labor more generally, such as wage and immigration status. Neither group addresses nor sufficiently describes the situation as articulated by those *within* the industry (Agustín 2005: 97), thus allowing U.S.-based anti-trafficking efforts to conflate the concept of prostitution with trafficking, and the study of labor and migration to shift to the domains of criminology and feminism. The ensuing moral panic allows Western societies to

avoid an uncomfortable truth: our enormous demand for sexual services and the fact that many women do not mind or prefer this occupation (Agustín 2006: 29).

In refusing to engage with such nuance, NGO operatives incite viewers - such as myself - to see images of abused girls and sympathize with them simply because we perceive these “victims” to have lacked choice. Through an “identification and appropriation of pain” women become “voyeurs of cruelty,” experiencing the complex affect of such a campaign as it instils us with a passion to save *other* women and children (Abu-Lughod 2013:104). In witnessing others’ agony and misfortune from the comfort of our own homes, cars, or places of work, Western viewers are absolved of our complicity. This is the language of disinterest.

By allowing the faces of white women to dominate their messaging, anti-trafficking organizations remove white women from blame. The “you” addressed in the billboards is clearly not us, and therefore women are allowed an emotional complicity; we are encouraged to take on the suffering, and in doing so victimize ourselves into inaction. Despite the (undue) prevalence of my own features across the metro area of Atlanta, I myself feel no further fear because I am aware of the way my class status and financial security will likely protect me from any form of exploitation. Coming from an upper-middle class family, it is my privilege, my participation in a consumer-driven, capitalist society that has exacerbated the systemic inequalities which allow trafficking to flourish. By reducing concerns of women’s labor to questions of sex work, we sensationalize and exceptionalize one form of trafficking as particularly abhorrent, overlooking the more pervasive and foundational abuses undertaken by global labor industries, such as that of garment manufacturing or agriculture. Whether participating in, or simply ignoring, the consumption of such products, we allow bodies to not only be harmed, but worked to death for the sake of a globalized modernity (Kempadoo 2015:17).

By ignoring the ways in which a globalizing labor industry nourishes deeply embedded domestic structural violence, the “Truth in Trafficking” becomes a caricature of the forced and de-contextualized empathy so often employed by human trafficking awareness campaigns. Through a notable lack of engagement with perspectives that come from *within* experiences of human trafficking, the creators invoke dominant tropes associated with human trafficking and in doing so dilute the relationship between human trafficking and other forms of oppression and marginalization. Thus, the narrative upholds rigid NGO representations of vulnerability and victimhood while eliding the widespread precarity and violence found outside those constructions. The sex-trafficked child becomes the grounds for competing feminist, political, and humanitarian claims, all of which ignore master narratives of capitalism and individual complicity.

To de-exceptionalize trafficking is to recognize that it is not an exceptional problem requiring exceptional solutions. To de-exceptionalize the *study* of trafficking is to recognize that a single method approach is not adequate and an objective researcher does not exist. Thus, this paper is a rebuttal to the existing methods which I, myself, have participated in. Like the discourses they center on, such work tends to operate under dominant assumptions while ignoring a messiness that cannot be contained by data analysis. As the extreme end of a continuum of labor exploitation that affects many, it is impossible to address human trafficking in isolation, and rather crucial that we recognize it as the result of systemic and global forms of oppression which require systemic solutions for all workers. Rather than center on two-sided debates and dichotomous representations of “good” and “bad,” it is imperative that scholars and organizations consult and incorporate the voices of those who have experienced such exploitation firsthand, following the example set by campaigns such as *Look Beneath the*

Surface, and providing a call to action both for those who consume their messaging and for those on whom the messaging is centered.

We, as viewers, must check our acceptance of the narrative as it is portrayed. We must be careful not to identify with pain simply because it is familiar. We must refrain from allowing ourselves distance, and thus passivity, from those we perceive to be other. We must question the silences just as we question the discursive explosion, and we must be critical of that which we have been told to take as “Truth.

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