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‘It’s All in Their Brain’: Constructing the figure of the trafficking victim on the US-Mexico border

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Abstract:

This article is a qualitative reflection on a series of human trafficking awareness meetings held in a city on the US-Mexico border. It argues that along this border, representations of the human trafficking victim go beyond the stereotypical notions of the virginal female youth, target of sexual exploitation and violence. Rather, characterisations reflect a specific set of cultural and historical forms which further frame victims as inherently foreign, a proxy for Mexican, despite the ethnic similarities connecting communities on both sides of the US-Mexico divide. References to Mexican origin in this part of the United States have historically been used as part of an attempt to articulate social and ethnic difference, often despite sharing a common ethnic past. In the context of American anti-immigrant sentiments, Mexicans are described not only as inherently foreign, or as lacking government-sanctioned immigration status, but also as innately uncivilised, uneducated, hypersexual, criminal and pathological. On the US-Mexico border these characterisations become further complicated by the immediacy of Mexican border cities and their ongoing struggles amid the war on drugs.

Collectively, the tropes of crime, violence and inherent pathos historically associated with Mexico and its people have seeped into the construction of the human trafficking rhetoric on the border, and have been quickly and effectively disseminated, despite the absence of empirically-informed indicators. Furthermore, while this practice is reflective of the efforts through which historically Mexican nationals have been othered along the US-Mexico border, in the current context of globalised fears over migrants and national security, human trafficking constructions become another tool of US border control and migration governance.

Keywords: anti-trafficking, human trafficking, migration, US-Mexico border, victim advocates

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Introduction

I am late for a meeting convened by a group of local NGOs involved in the fight against human trafficking in the city of Stanton,¹ a community on the US side of the border with Mexico. As a newly arrived researcher to this community I am here to listen to law enforcement agents and local NGO representatives talk about local human trafficking and its alleged explosive growth.

From the moment I walk into the building I become aware of my feelings of unease. I fear the day will be filled with commonplace narratives of captive foreign women forced into prostitution—the familiar modern-day slavery rhetoric of prostitution abolitionist anti-trafficking interventions. Yet I am also attending driven by what I have sensed amounts to a much more complex, much more intriguing local discourse. From the moment I arrived in this predominantly Mexican-American US city I became aware of the existence of a not so subtle series of tropes pertaining to the people of Rio Viejo, Stanton’s neighbouring city on the Mexican side. These tropes—which involve notions of cultural and racial difference—seem to have seeped into local human trafficking discourses. While the virginal, naïve and young woman who has fallen prey to unscrupulous traffickers is still centrepiece in the local human trafficking discourse, this figure reveals a series of precise, racialised codes that are culturally and historically specific.

The present article reflects my efforts to make sense of these tropes. It provides a qualitative reflection of a series of public meetings held in Stanton which aimed to generate awareness of human trafficking among the local public. It

¹ The names of the locations where research was conducted have been changed to maintain the anonymity of respondents.

argues that in this city the figure of the human trafficking victim is not merely articulated as the young female target of sexual exploitation and violence but is also construed as migrant and racialised as Mexican.

References to Mexican origin have historically been used to articulate explicitly racialised and racist notions of Mexican nationals. These notions have involved representations of Mexicans as inherently foreign, or as lacking government-sanctioned immigration status, but also as innately uncivilised, uneducated, hyper-sexual, criminal and even pathological. In Stanton, these characterisations, often articulated by Mexican Americans, become further complicated by the city's immediacy to Rio Viejo and that city's violent, troubled past. The astonishing homicide rate arising, according to official discourses, from conflicts among Mexican drug trafficking organisations consolidated Rio Viejo's reputation as one of the most dangerous cities in the world. Stanton responded with a frantic campaign to establish its status as one of the safest US cities, in an attempt to position its identity as counter to that of the troubled city to its south.

I will argue that collectively, long-standing, racialised tropes of Mexicans as criminal, violent and inherently pathological stand as fundamental elements in the construction of the human trafficking rhetoric and its expeditious and effective dissemination and acceptance in border communities, despite the absence of empirical evidence. Furthermore, I will argue that while these practices reflect the historical othering of Mexican nationals along the border, in the current context of globalised fears over migrants and national security, human trafficking constructions—with the figure of the trafficking victim as a female Mexican migrant at the centre—constitute another tool of US border control and migration governance.²

The sections that follow, in addition to outlining research methods and activities, provide an overview of the literature of trafficking victims' representations, followed by background sections on Stanton and Rio Viejo and the way in which Mexico's war on drugs has furthered ingrained perceptions of Mexico's border cities as places of inherent decay, crime and vice. I will argue that human trafficking awareness activities in Stanton coincide with the exodus of a significant number of Mexican residents who, fleeing the violence in Mexico, have relocated to cities on the US side of the border. In particular, the emphasis of local anti-trafficking efforts in Stanton to construct the victim as a migrant—specifically as a *Mexican* migrant—are indicative of the local anxieties over the presence of displaced Mexicans.

Methods and Activities

The focus of this article is a series of five human trafficking awareness meetings held in Stanton, between April 2014 and February 2016. These meetings were facilitated by members of a local anti-trafficking coalition (referred to in this paper as advocates) consisting of local NGOs working in collaboration with government agencies. The meetings were open to the public and announced via local and social media. The meetings had the goal of 'educating people about how relevant [human trafficking] is to the [Stanton] region' and of teaching local residents how to 'recognize the faces of people who might be affected'³ in order to assist law enforcement in the identification and reporting of human trafficking activity.

I became aware of these meetings during conversations with local community advocates and researchers. Some of the observations outlined in this essay took place in the context of my own participation at one of these meetings in October 2015. Yet the majority of the information comes from publicly-available data on at least four other meetings which were covered by local media.

Human trafficking awareness meetings were facilitated primarily by women. The facilitators identified themselves as native Stantonites or as having lived in the community for a significant number of years. While no specific details on their age or any other demographic identifiers were found in media records, advocates were adults and identified themselves as culturally aware of the challenges experienced by the trafficking victims by virtue of sharing the same ethnic background (i.e. Mexican). They reported having long histories of employment with local NGOs and government agencies, working as victim advocates, case managers and criminal investigators. Each had worked extensively in local anti-trafficking organisations that work directly with victims. None of them reported having received any kind of psychiatric training.

² N Mai, 'Between Embodied Cosmopolitanism and Sexual Humanitarianism: The fractal mobilities and subjectivities working in the sex industry', in V Baby-Collins and L Anteby (eds.), *Borders, Mobilities and Migrations: Perspectives from the Mediterranean in the 21st Century*, Peter Lang, Brussels, 2013.

³ L Lopez, 'Group launches campaign against sex trafficking', *Stanton Times*, 28 January 2016.

The number of attendees at these meetings, according to published reports, exceeded 50 on at least one occasion, and included local NGO staff, law enforcement officials, and community members.⁴ Also in attendance were members of immigration federal agencies.⁵ There was a specific range of topics covered in the meetings: general human trafficking awareness; traffickers' *modus operandi*; descriptions of anti-trafficking law enforcement activities; references to specific human trafficking prosecutions carried out locally or within this US border state and descriptions of the work conducted by local anti-trafficking NGOs. A concept fundamental to the trafficking awareness meeting was the figure of the trafficking victim: the young, naïve, migrant woman from Mexico.

Representing the Trafficking Victim: A review of the literature

As Sanghera reflects, anti-trafficking discourses involve 'complicated categories, constructs and players' where 'issues of migration, trafficking and sex work are peppered with constructs of sexuality, gender and vulnerability', leading to the emergence of deeply ingrained 'assumptions and myths'⁶ which have persisted despite the range of critical efforts to challenge their staying power.⁷

The trafficking victim trope—that of a sexually exploited, virginal young female held against her will by greedy, hyper-violent male predators—has often been critiqued by feminist, critical and post-colonial scholars who have voiced concerns about the overly simplistic nature of such figures.⁸ Exploring the lives of sex workers, scholars have criticised the reduction of their complex experiences of precarity and resilience.⁹ Choo, in her work on Korean hostesses, and Cheng, in her examination of love in US military camp towns in North Korea,¹⁰ challenge the dichotomous construct of the powerful Western male (in this case, US military personnel) and the timid trafficking victim by showing how power differentials are used in 'unexpected and creative ways by migrant hostesses as a discursive resource to attract clients while appealing to their sense of benevolence and sympathy to rescue third world women in need'.¹¹ Choo's rich ethnographic data sheds further light on the conditions faced by both parties, '... participat[ing] under constraining migrant labor contracts to pursue opportunities for social, economic and global mobility'.¹²

Despite the range of empirically grounded, critical efforts challenging the figure of the passive, exploited trafficking victim, the trope continues to dominate public and policy discourses. Its dominance is also clear in the literature of trafficking on the US-Mexico border where, with very few exceptions, trafficking has continued to be described primarily from a prostitution abolitionist perspective. Although a growing number of authors engage in more critical, grounded work that acknowledges the agency of women in sex work, the majority of literature, as Vanwesenbeeck states, 'is still much more about sex than it is about work',¹³ focusing on topics that further stigmatise sex workers (e.g. incidence of sexually transmitted diseases including HIV and condom use, the wrongs associated with sex-workers' labour choices, the identification and description of the forms of victimisation that allegedly led them to sex work, etc.).

In her work on the construction and representation of the trafficked victim, Andrijasevic suggests that beyond the mapping of agency and the articulation of rights, understanding how the figure of the victim is embedded in larger historical, cultural and political contexts is imperative in sex work analyses.¹⁴ The case of Stanton provides a unique window into how hierarchies of pathology alongside racialised articulations of Mexican identity have been effective in grounding anti-trafficking discourses on the US-Mexico border despite the lack of empirical data. It outlines how

⁴ D Crowder, 'Focusing on the modern version of slavery: Junior League backs human trafficking awareness', *Stanton Inc*, 1 February 2016.

⁵ A Martinez, 'Groups Unite to Aid Human Trafficking Victims', *Stanton Times*, 20 January 2016.

⁶ J Sanghera, 'Unpacking the Trafficking Discourse', in K Kempadoo, J Sanghera and B Pattanaik (eds.), *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered: New perspectives on migration, sex work, and human rights*, 2005, pp. 3–4.

⁷ R Andrijasevic, 'The Figure of the Trafficked Victim: Gender, rights and representation', in M Evans et al. (eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Feminist Theory*, Sage, London, 2014, p. 360.

⁸ Andrijasevic, 2014; E Bernstein, 'Sex, Trafficking and the Politics of Freedom', *School of Social Science Occasional Papers No. 45m* 2012, Princeton: Institute of Advanced Studies; Sanghera, 2005.

⁹ L M Agustín, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, labour markets and the rescue industry*, Zed Books, 2007; P Kelly, *Lydia's Open Door: Inside Mexico's most modern brothel*, University of California Press, 2008; N Mai, 'Surfing Liquid Modernity: Albanian and Romanian male sex workers in Europe', in P Aggleton, and R Parker, (eds.) *Men Who Sell Sex: Global perspectives*, Routledge, Abingdon, pp. 27–41; M Padilla, *Caribbean Pleasure Industry: Tourism, sexuality, and AIDS in the Dominican Republic*, University of Chicago Press, 2008.

¹⁰ S Cheng, *On the Move for Love: Migrant entertainers and the US military in South Korea*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011.

¹¹ H Y Choo, 'Selling Fantasies of Rescue: Intimate labor, Filipina migrant hostesses, and US GIs in a shifting global order', *Positions*, vol. 24, no. 1, 2016, pp.179–203.

¹² Choo, 2016, p. 200.

¹³ I Vanwesenbeeck, 'Another Decade of Social Scientific Work on Sex Work: A review of research 1990–2000', *Annual Review of Sex Research*, vol. 12, issue 1, 2001, pp. 242–89.

¹⁴ Andrijasevic, 2014, p. 360.

Stantonites have found ways to position themselves as different from the people in Rio Viejo amid the severe, deeply engrained forms of structural inequality and violence both communities have historically faced.

Stanton

Stanton is a community of a little over 800,000 inhabitants, neighbouring the Mexican city of Rio Viejo to the south. Populations combined, this region constitutes one of the largest metropolitan areas on the US-Mexico border. On its own, Stanton has historically stood as one of the most strategically located cities in North America, connecting Mexico to the United States through a series of ports of entry—railroad and transportation hubs which allow for the overland transit of a significant portion of the trade between the two countries. Stanton is also home to one of the largest military bases in the continental US.

Prior to US immigration efforts that in the 1990s were effective at shifting migration flows into the Sonoran desert,¹⁵ Stanton had been an important hub for irregular border crossings. Currently, given its location, the city is a key operational centre for multiple government agencies, but particularly for those involved in the monitoring of trade and migration flows, and border security. However the number of irregular border crossings along this section of the border is among the lowest compared with other regions.

Like most cities on the US-Mexico border, Stanton has historic, deeply ingrained, social and economic, race-based inequalities. Along the border, official US Census data puts the rate of Latino residents at 81 per cent. Almost one-quarter of the entire border population lives in poverty.¹⁶ While the unemployment rate has decreased in light of the overall US economic recovery, most employment options throughout the border are limited to fields of scarce growth and potential and which generally command low wages. Low-income residents face significant limitations to affordable healthcare and education. Environmental disasters—both natural and man-made¹⁷—increase vulnerability of the poor, who are often monolingual speakers of Spanish, and whose access to state-sponsored programmes and services is limited. Exposure to pollutants is exacerbated in border communities given their arid weather, frequent temperature inversions, heavy border traffic, and the prevalence of aged, poorly maintained vehicles, all negatively impacting the health of local residents.

The generations-long economic disparities existing along the entire border, its proximity to Mexico, the availability of cheaper goods and services and in some cases, the demand for those that were labelled illicit or even illegal in US territory, have been factors in the emergence of the border as a fertile territory for smugglings of multiple kinds. ‘Borderlanders,’ Diaz says, ‘[have historically] smuggled, out of ignorance of the law, to save or make money, or to avoid the inconvenience of finding a customs post.’ The everydayness of clandestine trade eventually leads locals to construct ‘a moral economy of the illicit trade’¹⁸ where illicit activity has been often tolerated, if not altogether normalised.

Despite the long-standing, well documented history of illicit activity in cities on the US side of the border, most of the stigma pertaining to the border as a zone of decay, vice and crime appears inherently connected to the cities on the Mexican side. Mexico’s border cities and towns have historically been a destination for US residents in search of the often exoticised Mexican experience, or for those looking for goods and services which can be obtained at a lower cost. Academic literature has often made reference to Americans’ patronage of Mexican red light districts,¹⁹ and in fact, prior to the onset of the drug-trafficking related violence, the one in Rio Viejo was among the most frequented, attracting US-based soldiers stationed across the border, as well as US residents seeking the promise of unrestricted alcohol, Mexican food and cheap sex.

¹⁵ Operations ‘Hold the Line’ and ‘Gatekeeper’, implemented in California and Texas respectively, were effective at temporarily curtailing irregular migration flows into the United States.

¹⁶ US Census Office, QuickFacts: Stanton County, Texas, retrieved 24 July 2016, <http://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/PST045215/48141>

¹⁷ T W Collins, A M Jimenez, and S E Grineski, ‘Hispanic Health Disparities after a Flood Disaster: Results of a population-based survey of individuals experiencing home site damage in Stanton (Texas, USA)’, *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2013, pp. 415—26.

¹⁸ G T Diaz, *Border Contraband: A history of smuggling across the Rio Grande*, University of Texas Press, 2015, p. 1.

¹⁹ S X Zhang, ‘Woman Pullers: Pimping and sex trafficking in a Mexican border city’, *Crime, Law and Social Change*, vol. 56, issue 5, 2011, pp. 509—528.

Rio Viejo

Although Rio Viejo began to experience widespread and disturbing violence already in the 1990s, between 2007 and 2011 it faced a period of extraordinary brutality. While numbers vary significantly, estimates place the number of homicides in Mexico during those years in the 100,000 range, the majority of them on the US-Mexico border.²⁰ The intensity of the violence and the exceptionally large number of killings led to the inclusion of multiple cities on the Mexican side of the border, including Rio Viejo, in the US State Department no-travel list, as well as designation as one of the most dangerous cities globally.²¹

Scholars and policy makers have explained this most recent wave of violence as the result of the battle among Mexican drug trafficking organisations for territory control,²² even though the history of structural violence on the border pre-dates the war on drugs. The narrative of Rio Viejo as a crime-ridden city has been further compounded by the hyper-visibility of the drug conflict and its presentation in the media, most often through excessively graphic images of violence, which have further inscribed the US-Mexico border in the global imagination as a place of violence and death and its residents as pathologically crime-prone.

In these settings the attempts of Stanton's predominantly Mexican American residents to distinguish themselves from their neighbours to the south should not come as a surprise. Yet the story is not new: Mexican Americans have historically fought to maintain a degree of social separation from Mexicans. In Colonial Mexico, residents of Mexico's North sought to be perceived as having stronger European roots than Mexicans in other parts of the colony.²³ It was common among Mexican Americans born in California, New Mexico and Texas during the 18th and 19th centuries to claim having higher levels of Spanish blood than Mexicans, who by virtue of performing the dirtiest, most labour intensive jobs had been stigmatised as *gente corriente*—the most vulgar, poor folk.²⁴

The current visibility of Mexico's drug trafficking related violence and the widespread concerns over irregular migration in the US have only facilitated the continued othering of those who reside on the Mexican side of the border, and in the case of Stanton—the people of Rio Viejo. The othering, however, has been selective. When the violence in Rio Viejo forced many to relocate to Stanton, members of the Mexican upper class (perceived as good standing and respectable citizens) settled easily in the US city, given their resources and connections. Yet the large majority of those who fled the violence were low-income, working class Rio Viejo residents, many of whom to this date have, despite having valid claims for asylum, been unable to qualify for relief, the threshold of evidence required for them to file asylum claims being exceedingly steep. This has led them to remain in conditions of heightened precarity, and to join Stanton's myriad of informal economies.

Creating Human Trafficking on the Border

Once the anti-trafficking meeting starts, it does not take long to learn the goal of the presenters: generate awareness of human trafficking among the general population so that they too learn how to identify victims who can then live a life free of oppression, which is described as intrinsic to sex work. In line with the prostitution abolitionist discourse, the trafficking victim is identified as a young, innocent teen exploited by unscrupulous Mexican pimps and madams who profit from her labour in what is described as Stanton's booming local sex market. In Stanton, we are told, this universe is hidden, inaccessible and brutal, and is comprised of strip clubs, massage parlours, and dance clubs where migrant women are forced to sell their bodies, having been forcefully separated from their loved ones. Victims can be everywhere, and be anybody; they are also easy to recognise as they appear to be 'out of place'—a proxy for foreign:

'You never know who you are standing next to, or who you are sitting with who might have survived such a horrible experience. (...) Most of the victims nationwide come to the attention of entities like us because someone sees something that isn't right—the person looks like they are being controlled or beaten up and needs help. A shy person who won't make eye contact, a neighbour who never leaves the house alone... it

²⁰ D A Shirk, 'Drug Violence in Mexico: Data and analysis from 2001–2009', *Trends in Organized Crime*, vol. 13, issue 2–3, 2010, pp. 167–174.

²¹ G Correa-Cabrera and K Staudt, 'An Introduction to the Multiple US–Mexico Borders', *Journal of Borderlands Studies*, vol. 29, issue 4, 2014, pp. 385–90.

²² H Campbell, *Drug War Zone*, University of Texas Press, 2009.

²³ D G Gutierrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican immigrants, and the politics of ethnicity* University of California Press, Berkeley, 1995.

²⁴ Gutierrez, 1995, p. 33.

could be at a grocery store, a salon, a hotel or at your apartment complex; there are so many places where the victim could be forced to go.²⁵

The concerns over the spread of trafficking in Stanton seem to coincide with the exodus of Mexican nationals to cities on the US side of the border. In fact, while reports on the state of trafficking in the US were ubiquitous following the passage of the TVPA in 2000, there is no indication that human trafficking was much of a concern on the borderlands, let alone in Stanton itself, perhaps due to the very health of the sex market in the cities on the Mexican side of the border. In fact, it appears anti-trafficking activity in Stanton was virtually non-existent prior to 2011. Perhaps the most telling piece of evidence of this absence and very recent nature of local residents' concerns over the spread of trafficking came from one of the advocates themselves:

'When we started [the anti-trafficking work] at the Sheriff's department we were asked to look for agencies and universities that have (sic) already done studies but nobody has even done a study on human trafficking so we really have no statistical data locally.'

The lack of data can be explained by an absence of state regulations requiring the collection of trafficking statistics or by a lack of empirically-based studies on trafficking. Yet the call to identify victims appears to be an acknowledgement on the part of Stanton's anti-trafficking advocates that they are unable to identify victims. The audience is informed that many victims refuse their help. While this could be explained as the women's rejection of moralistic discourses, it may also be that they do not identify themselves as trafficked.

None of these factors, however, has stopped government officials or anti-trafficking advocates from speculating about the dimensions of the trafficking issue, some going as far as claiming that twenty per cent of all trafficking victims in the US travel through this border state in the course of their journeys. A report from the Texas Advisory committee to the US Committee for Civil Rights identified Stanton as one the US most prominent cities for human trafficking activity, despite providing no details on the methods or data used to make this assertion.²⁶

'It's All in their Brain'

Despite their focus, through my interactions with advocates I realise the women who receive their services do not always appear to have experienced trafficking-like conditions. In fact, their experiences and backgrounds vary widely. Although the majority of the clients are in fact of Mexican origin, this is primarily a result of the proximity of that country. On occasion, women from Asia and/or Europe may be referred for counselling or for help securing housing services, most often while they await immigration proceedings. It is in fact as a result and in the context of immigration enforcement activities that most women are referred to advocates' services, their places of employment having been raided by immigration authorities, or the women themselves having been identified as being in the country irregularly, rather than them experiencing trafficking conditions.

The majority of the women that the advocates assist report having lived as irregular migrants on the American side of the border for long periods of time, most often in the company of family members and friends at the time of their arrest and referral to services. Others report crossing the border to and from Rio Viejo on a daily basis in order to work in the informal economy, performing childcare or housework. Only a handful of the women who receive services come in contact with advocates as a result of their involvement in the sex work market, and do so as prosecutorial witnesses and under court orders emerging from the investigation of alleged cases of trafficking.

These women most often report living on both sides of the border, supporting and taking care of their families. The majority appear to work independently. Many have developed long-term relationships with clients who provide them with a consistent source of income or in-kind payment (purses, clothing, makeup) for their services. Younger women appear to be more likely to work with pimps while continuing to reside with family members, primarily on the American side of the border. Reports of exploitation, victimisation, or of restricted mobility are not common. In fact it appears most women referred to, or identified by the local anti-trafficking groups travel constantly to and from Stanton and Rio Viejo, having extensive familial ties in communities. Advocates repeatedly reported their frustration over the very ability

²⁵ C Gaytan, Sex trafficking and human trafficking a problem in Borderland, interview, 20 January 2016

²⁶ Texas Advisory Committee to the US Commission on Civil Rights, *Human Trafficking in Texas: More resources and resolve needed to stem surge of modern day slavery: A report to the United States Commission on Civil Rights*, August 2011.

of the women to travel without restrictions across the border, as this often led to them missing court dates or case-related appointments.

Despite the advocates' awareness of the vast range of experiences of the women they assist, they consistently refer to them in the meetings as young, migrant and foreign victims of trafficking. Although many of the women are in fact US citizens, or possess the ability to cross the border legally, the local trafficking narrative seeks to inscribe a specific identity to the victim: the young, unaccompanied, female migrant forcefully involved in the sex trade. The depiction, however, does not stop there. In the course of the trainings, advocates suggest that the women who receive their services present a particular condition as a result of their trafficking experience that renders them unable to identify their condition as victims, and which in turn demands—and justifies—intervention. As an advocate mentioned, 'it's all in their brain'.

While trauma has indeed been identified as a potential element and consequence of the trafficking experience—manifested through depression, significant memory loss, irregular sleep patterns, limited ability to maintain meaningful social relationships, etc.—in anti-trafficking meetings advocates suggest that the behaviour their clients present is a consequence of deeply engrained, subnormal cultural practices common among Mexican migrant women. These overgeneralised assertions—alongside graphic depictions of women's suffering and exploitation are used in presentations as unquestionable proof of victims as anomalous. The articulation of a specific gendered and racialised victim in the local anti-trafficking discourse reflects not just fears over the spread of trafficking in Stanton, but rather the collective anxieties over the presence of Mexican nationals in the city.

By mobilising scientific terminology common in trauma and victimisation literature, advocates craft a simplistic, yet powerful narrative of the trafficking victim as naïve, young and mentally unstable that resonates with the general public. Furthermore, the trope is specifically racialised, as victims of trafficking are monolithically described as foreign (a proxy for Mexican) which makes them inherently predisposed, as a result of their upbringing and culture, to behave inadequately or to lack the socialisation skills necessary for their proper integration. The advocates in turn—Mexican Americans residing on the American side of the border—construe as their moral duty the incorporation of victims into their new society (even when the majority have in fact lived and worked in the United States for long periods of time). In the process, sex work is increasingly vilified, as it is described by advocates as having rendered women 'unable to develop healthy social relationships, to cope with their everyday life, acquire or develop new knowledge'.

In a confusing turn, anti-trafficking advocates use these narratives to position themselves as the ideal interlocutor between victims and the local community by virtue of sharing a common ethnicity. Advocates in fact often refer to their own background as an element that allows them to better understand the dynamics of the women referred to their services, with phrases like 'We are also Spanish; we also speak Spanish and we understand where they come from'. Simultaneously, the advocates position their cultural capital as different from the women's. In fact, the advocates' ability to position themselves as culturally competent to provide help relies on the clear-cut, cultural othering of those they assist, their rhetoric often reflective of the anxieties over the women's origins, practices and social ties and interactions. The women they assist are described as indeed irrational, and operating on the basis of pure instinct:

'Victims have no working, rational brains. They are not dominated by reason, but rather by their emotions.'

According to the advocates, the levels of brain dysfunction existing among the women they assist limits the latter's ability to think and to retrieve information—again, despite lacking psychiatric training or having the ability to diagnose mental illness. This, the public is told, is a result of women's involvement in sex work.

'Their brain works different (sic) and their memories are fragmented. [The sexual encounters in which they engaged] happened so much (sic) and so often that [the women] do not even remember they [took place.]'

Amid this rhetoric, the brains of women who sell sex emerge as being different from those of the rest of the 'normal' population, their ability to retrieve information being further compromised by their involvement in the provision of sexual services. In this context, participation in sex work is described as having a direct impact in the constitution of the female brain, even leading to memory loss. Statements of this nature not just further demonised sex work, but were used to produce pseudo-clinical justifications that further obscured the experiences of women, reducing their lives to their labour choices.²⁷

²⁷ R Napier-Moore, 'Revisiting Feminist Participatory Action Research: Because "a woman's life is richer than her trafficking experience"' in K Kempadoo, J Sanghera, and B Pattanaik (eds.), *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered: New perspectives on migration, sex work and human rights*, Second Edition, Paradigm, Boulder, 2005, p. 235.

While on the one hand advocates often referred to the extent of memory loss experienced by the women they worked with, they simultaneously cited the cases of women who recalled having been forced to engage in dozens, even hundreds of sexual encounters every night. Graphic stories of teens who reported having been raped in agricultural fields or inside lurid brothels helped not only to further construct and inscribe notions of the pervasiveness of sex trafficking, but also vilified those who purchase sex (who were in turn monolithically described as migrant men).

In addition to the racialised, othered ‘john’, a central character in the construction of the trafficking victim is the pimp. The pimp, audiences are told, ‘brainwashes’ the victim with false promises of love and attention, ‘tapping into her vulnerability, staging up scenarios, often in collusion with [other pimps] as a way to recruit (...) creating the illusion of safety and protection’. In the context of the presentations women are consistently depicted as desperately longing for the love and attention their working class, often dysfunctional families do not provide, becoming easy prey for exploiters, described in turn as men ‘from the border,’ who lure them with promises of love. Women—a senior advocate expressed with disgust—go as far as falling in love with their traffickers. ‘[The pimp] provides just a little bit of sugar. It is just that tiny little bit of sugar that tells the victim, well, perhaps this one reward was worth all the suffering.’

While the advocates rely on the characterisation of the trafficking victim as an easy to manipulate young and naïve teen unable to distinguish a ‘normal’ from an ‘abnormal’ relationship, their personal experiences with women referred to them following their “rescue” from trafficking situations are far from straightforward. Advocates express frustration over their interactions with teens and young adults who have opted for sex work as a way to support themselves and often their family members. Rather than dealing with the docile women described in anti-trafficking presentations, advocates are often faced with the challenge of dealing with young women who have found in sex work an effective mechanism for their own economic survival and that of their families. However, in most cases, teens are referred to advocates not as a result of the former’s involvement in sex work, but rather following attempts to run away from the parental home. At one of the events, one immigration officer reported with frustration how the mother of a young woman who was often at the advocates’ shelter would call him every time her daughter went missing—another indicator that the women who come in contact with anti-trafficking advocates are far from experiencing trafficking conditions. While the services they provide do not necessarily target trafficking victims, advocates still perceive their role as that of moral guides, expressing how they ‘are the ones who often need to teach them what normal is about’.

‘Aliens from Mars’

References to women’s place of origin abound during the presentations. While some advocates’ statements seek to make reference to how on occasions, ‘[l]ife under normal conditions’ may be foreign to an individual who has experienced intense levels of victimisation, others specifically referred to women as resembling ‘aliens from Mars’ as a way to describe how different their practices and behaviour were, further suggesting the otherisation of victims and their perception as foreign.

By emphasising victims’ places of origin as foreign (even if their place of origin is only steps away in Rio Viejo) victim advocates often position Stanton as a superior, domestic and familiar space, and therefore as capable of providing the path into a more ‘normal’ life than the one victims had left behind in Mexico (this even though the majority of women assisted by advocates had a history of residing in both countries, had a long history of US residence, or on occasion had even lived and/or worked in cities larger and even more cosmopolitan than Stanton). Otherness is further constructed by describing the victims’ places of origin as lacking the perceived advantages and comforts of the more civilised society, which allows for women to be depicted as in need of an intensive process of socialisation at the hands of the advocates:

‘Being in a place where they can sleep and have food is foreign to them. They would rather be in the street, that is what they know. We teach them how to brush their teeth, to put on pyjamas to go to bed, to chill. One victim was even crying because she did not want to be [at the shelter].’

Advocates’ statements also infantilise victims, who are described as being unable to conduct ordinary, everyday activities without their support. Women are systematically infantilised and described as having lacked social interactions allowing for a normal socialisation. Furthermore, being foreign is articulated as a disadvantage that renders women unable to function adequately in the context of an American city.

'You have to guide them by the hand. She can't make any appointments she needs. She does not know what she needs to do.'

'Before they arrived to Stanton, they did not even own a phone. We must guide them by the hand so that they learn how to take the bus on their own. We take them to school. We try to engage them in school, to [foster] whatever interest that they may have.'

Conclusion

While the global panic over the spread of human trafficking has reached the US-Mexico border, it is reflective of its local communities' anxieties. In this paper, I described a series of observations involving the activities of a local anti-trafficking coalition seeking to generate awareness in the community of Stanton, a large city on the border in the US state of Texas, over the spread of 'modern-day slavery'. I sought to identify how the coalition—constituted in part by a group of Mexican American women—constructed the persona of the trafficking victim. On the surface, it appeared as if the coalition was simply mobilising the common trope of the young, naïve and foreign women at the mercy of exploitative networks of pimps operating in the shadows. Yet documentation from news coverage on anti-trafficking meetings, participant observation and archival research revealed that the contemporary narratives of trafficking were in fact a reflection and a continuation of the long standing historical anxieties over the presence of Mexican nationals in the US. Trafficking victims were in fact identified—and racialised—as Mexican in a fashion that situated their country as underdeveloped, even primitive. This effort has also relied on the mobilisation of a pseudo-scientific trope which designates the brains of trafficking victims as abnormal.

Who are the women who enter into contact with the anti-trafficking advocates? They do not appear to fit into the simplistic categories created by the advocates. Most often they were women who were arrested during police raids at their places of employment or in the course of an investigation related to immigration violation charges prior to being referred to the advocates for case management purposes. Despite the narratives mobilised in victim advocates' awareness meetings, the majority of the women identified by the local anti-trafficking groups were not in trafficking situations, but had maintained long, stable periods of residence on both sides of the border alongside friends and family members through the effective use and knowledge of legal border crossing strategies. In other words, the women receiving services were far from simplistically falling within the narrow categories of 'recently arrived migrant' or 'forced sex slave'. Rather, most have managed to live in Stanton in a fashion that allowed them to strengthen longstanding, bi-national social ties. These dynamics were not foreign to the victim advocates.

The observations suggest that the trafficking victim created by the prostitution abolitionist discourse is in most instances not only inaccurate but in-existent. Human trafficking awareness trainings in Stanton reflect the city's collective anxieties over the presence of Mexican residents, rather than concerns over the spectre of trafficking. This is evidenced by the ways in which the figure of the trafficking victim involves not only the image of the young, naïve woman prone to exploitation and manipulation, but instead a specific body—that of the female, Mexican migrant. In a community where the large majority of the population shares the same ethnic background despite the existence of the border, human trafficking rhetoric mobilises a racialised hierarchy that seeks to restore an apparent 'social order'. Human trafficking advocacy efforts emerge therefore as a new way for Mexican Americans to reassert a sense of racial, ethnic and moral difference over Mexican nationals without having to address the very conditions of inequality both groups have historically faced as people of the border. Furthermore, by identifying victims as such, conversations over migrant rights and the need to provide protection to those with valid asylum cases become at least on the surface, unnecessary.

Advocacy around human trafficking on the border does not constitute an attempt for social justice or to address moral wrongdoings, but rather seeks to socialise the poor into new roles and obligations, perceived as appropriate by the majority. In this sense, the sudden interest in human trafficking in Stanton reveals the collective anxiety over the presence of Mexican nationals and constitutes an effort to restore and preserve idealised notions of victimhood, but also of American identity amid the collective struggles over race and class relations in the US.

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