

ANTI-TRAFFICKING REVIEW 9 (2017): 14-30

Black Suffering for/from Anti-trafficking Advocacy

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Abstract

This article analyses the images that Antislavery Usable Past creates to promote its cause of ‘making the antislavery past usable for contemporary abolition’. Drawing on collective memory studies, I discuss the political implications of how pasts are used for present issues. I argue that Antislavery Usable Past appropriates black suffering by reducing the memory and imagery of slavery to objects that are compatible with the anti-trafficking narrative, without regard for the ongoing black liberation struggle. I conclude by discussing the troubling trend of incorporating anti-trafficking exhibitions into institutions that preserve the history of slavery and abolition. Such inclusions redirect the history lessons of slavery away from understanding and addressing anti-blackness in the present and towards supporting advocacy campaigns articulated in the logics that underpinned racial chattel slavery in the first place.

Keywords: anti-blackness, appropriation, anti-trafficking, memory of slavery, museums

Please cite this article as: L P Beutin, ‘Black Suffering for/from Anti-trafficking Advocacy’, *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 9, 2017, pp. 14—30, www.antitraffickingreview.org

Introduction

A new UK-based humanities initiative called Antislavery Usable Past aims to make ‘the antislavery past usable for contemporary abolition’.¹ This multi-faceted project draws upon the images and strategies used by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century mobilisations in the UK and the US to end the transatlantic slave trade. The project endeavours to make this historical archive ‘usable’—relevant and useful to changing current affairs—by making it resonate with images of contemporary examples of extreme exploitation and human trafficking throughout the world.

¹ Antislavery Usable Past, website, <http://www.usablepast.ac.uk/>.

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The project's homepage features a prominent and startling visual comparison that appears to substantiate the power that the antislavery past holds for raising awareness about human trafficking today. The first image is the iconic eighteenth-century print of the hold of the slave ship *Brooks*, rendered by an artist working for British abolitionists and widely circulated as abolitionist propaganda in its time.² The website overlays the image with the caption '1788...'. It is immediately followed by an image captioned '...2007' that pastes the historic image of the slave ship *Brooks* into the passenger area of a commercial airplane. The image of the airplane-slave-ship comes from the organisation Anti-Slavery International and bears the slogan: 'Trafficking is Modern Slavery. The methods may have changed but people are still suffering.' Below the images, the website asserts: 'There are approximately 36 million slaves alive today: more than at any point in history.'

The juxtaposition of these images speaks to the problematic discourse of the contemporary anti-trafficking movement. In order to justify its importance, anti-trafficking advocates appropriate the history of racial chattel slavery and its abolition to gain urgency, legitimacy, and moral outrage for their cause, but then minimise that same history to make trafficking today the most pressing social problem to address. Such appropriations of black suffering have important stakes for how we understand what racial chattel slavery was, the ways in which it continues to structure contemporary culture through its legacies of anti-black racism and oppression, as well as for how we understand what causes trafficking, and thus, what would be effective approaches to ending it. The *Brooks* print garnered outrage in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries because it revealed the inhumanity of the slave trade to citizens who had the privilege of turning a blind eye. It was an abolitionist fabrication, and yet still represented an actual slaving ship and a horrific situation that black Africans were being subjected to. What does the airplane represent?

In the essay that follows, I describe how Antislavery Usable Past minimises the history of racial chattel slavery and I outline the risks such a project poses for the ongoing black liberation struggle. Drawing on collective memory studies helps us understand how and why histories are used in the present. All histories are usable—there is nothing special about antislavery history that makes it specifically useful to ending trafficking—but there are important political implications for who uses which pasts how. My analysis includes a close reading of the imagery that anchors the Antislavery Usable Past's website which reveals the ways racial chattel slavery has to be manipulated and 'made' into an object that fits into the anti-trafficking discourse. In other words, simple juxtapositions of exploited bodies arranged in similar poses does little to help viewers understand the various systems

² J Francis, 'The Brooks Slave Ship Icon: A "Universal Symbol"?', *Slavery & Abolition*, vol. 30, issue 2, 2009, pp. 327–338.

of oppression that produce such images and that continue to value different lives differently. I conclude by discussing the troubling trend of incorporating anti-trafficking exhibitions into institutions that preserve the history of slavery and abolition. Such inclusions redirect the history lessons of slavery away from understanding and addressing anti-blackness in the present³ and towards supporting campaigns, however well intentioned, that are often articulated in and reproduce the racialising and capitalist logics that underpinned racial chattel slavery in the first place. My research raises concerns that the predominantly white and well financed anti-trafficking movement has invested in the wrong history lessons: using any rhetorical means available to advocate for its cause and, in so doing, reproducing the commodification of black suffering for its own gain.

Collective Memory Studies

The study of collective memory is the study of how history is deployed in the present. The field starts from the orientation that scholars must think through the meaning of representations of history in the present and take those representations as culturally significant in and of themselves, rather than languishing in debates about a present representation's fidelity to a factual past.⁴ Images of the past are selectively reinterpreted in the present to address a host of political and social issues including group identity formation, nationalism, state legitimacy, social cohesion, conflict resolution, historical trauma, and amelioration.⁵ Practices of historical and collective memory are socially useful precisely because they are partial, mutable, flexible, and endlessly adaptable to changing political circumstances and social needs. As such, groups with competing interests use and appropriate historical imagery at cross-purposes, mediated through asymmetries

³ Anti-blackness circulates globally and is a global issue even as racialisation is also shaped by local contexts. The black liberation struggle has been and continues to be a global struggle with myriad manifestations. See for instance: J Pierre, *The Predicament of Blackness: Postcolonial Ghana and the politics of race*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2012. For the purposes of this article, my analysis of the negative implications of anti-trafficking on the black liberation struggle primarily focuses on the US context because of the hyperpresence of anti-black racism in the US, the US context of several images on the website that I analyse, and my academic training in the US.

⁴ J Le Goff, *History and Memory*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1992; M R Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the production of history*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1995.

⁵ M Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1992; P Nora, *Realms of Memory* (vol. 1), Columbia University Press, New York, 1997; B Zelizer, 'Reading the Past Against the Grain: The shape of memory studies', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, June 1995, pp. 214–239.

of power. Collective memory works in unexpected ways because it is always about the social position and relation of the rememberers.⁶ ‘What memories tell us, more than anything, is the stakes held by individuals and institutions in attributing meaning to the past.’⁷ It is not surprising, then, that history becomes appropriated for various political purposes; rather, it is crucial to understand what the appropriation does, for whom, and to what ends.

The politics of the collective memory of slavery are complex. Like other historical traumas, redeploying the history of slavery can serve many purposes. State-produced representations of slavery might recuperate evidence of state-sanctioned violence to tell a story of national progress and inclusion. As remembering is also related to forgetting,⁸ memorials to traumatic pasts can sequester the oppression in the past, making it easier to move beyond, consider finished, visit selectively or avoid completely.⁹ In contrast, counter-memories of slavery, those deployed by marginalised groups affected by the histories and legacies of slavery, might be used to explain contemporary oppression, agitate for redress for the past, or bolster a sense of group resilience and empowerment in the midst of contemporary threats to undermine it. Memories of slavery have also been ‘whitewashed’ by various non-state actors from dominant groups, including scholars and religious groups. For instance, many American historians, in the aftermath of the Civil War, retold the history of slavery as a benign institution. The role of white religious abolitionists in ending slavery has also been over-emphasised to shore up moral superiority in the present across former colonial empires.

Because differential social relations are produced through power, some representations of the history of slavery gain more traction, visibility, and legitimacy than others. This does not mean that counter-memories are not powerful—indeed they become even more so in the face of their erasure and co-optation. But it does mean that well-intentioned but still structurally privileged actors’ representations of slavery have important political stakes. As such, those actors should interrogate carefully their own reasons for using memories of slavery and must be held accountable for the political outcomes that their uses might allow.

⁶ L. Passerini, ‘Afterword’ in S Radstone and B Schwarz (eds.), *Memory: Histories, theories, debates*, Fordham University Press, New York, 2012, pp. 459–464.

⁷ M Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS epidemic, and the politics of remembering*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1997, p. 9.

⁸ B Zelizer, *Remembering to Forget: Holocaust memory through the camera’s eye*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1998; A Huyssen, ‘Monumental Seduction’, *New German Critique*, vol. 69, 1996, pp. 181–200; A Assman, ‘Canon and Archive’ in A Erll and A Nunning (eds.), *Cultural Memory Studies*, Walter de Gruyter, New York, 2008, pp. 97–107.

⁹ P Connerton, *How Modernity Forgets*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2009; S Marschall, *Landscape of Memory. Commemorative monuments, memorials and public statuary in post-apartheid South Africa*, Brill, Leiden, 2010.

As my larger research project elucidates, this includes the ways that a competing discourse of new slavery, one that is very much in line with state projects and neoliberal logic, can work to undermine other black political claims based in histories of racial chattel slavery. As I show in the next section, the history and anti-black legacies of racial chattel slavery are mortgaged for the cause of anti-trafficking, a discourse that still very much relies on and reproduces the ‘white savior industrial complex’.¹⁰

The Reduction of Slavery

Critical scholars of human trafficking and anti-trafficking discourses have pointed out that using the term ‘slavery’ to describe human trafficking helps render the problem in an individual harm paradigm that erases the structural causes of trafficking.¹¹ While there is no question that anti-trafficking discourse normalises the criminalisation of individuals¹²—and leaves global capitalist systems intact—it is important to also note how much discursive work must be done to ‘slavery’ in order to make it understood as primarily about interpersonal violence. In other words, it is not just that ‘slavery’ helps turn human trafficking into an individual crime discursively; the memory of slavery has also been forced into an individual harm paradigm through image selectivity and circumscribed historical context. For instance, one image on Antislavery Usable Past simply features a cropped historic drawing of a single young black male subject holding his head in his hands in apparent dismay as evidence of what slavery looked like. The structural forces that underpinned and proliferated racial chattel slavery—namely racial capitalism¹³ and

¹⁰ T Cole, ‘The White-Savior Industrial Complex’, *The Atlantic*, 21 March 2012; J Quirk, ‘Uncomfortable Silences: Anti-slavery, colonialism and imperialism’, *Historians Against Slavery* blog, 13 February 2015.

¹¹ J Chuang, ‘Exploitation Creep and the Unmaking of Human Trafficking Law’, *The American Journal of International Law*, vol. 108, issue 4, 2014, pp. 609–649; R Weitzer, ‘Human Trafficking and Contemporary Slavery’, *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 41, 2015, pp. 223–242.

¹² N Sharma, ‘Anti-Trafficking Rhetoric and the Making of a Global Apartheid’, *NWSA Journal*, vol. 17, issue 3, 2005, pp. 88–111; E Bernstein, ‘Militarized Humanitarianism Meets Carceral Feminism: The politics of sex, rights, and freedom in contemporary antitrafficking campaigns’, *Signs*, vol. 36, issue 1, 2010, pp. 45–71; J Musto, *Control and Protect: Collaboration, carceral protection, and domestic sex trafficking in the United States*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2016.

¹³ My theoretical commitments in this argument and my larger research project build upon and are indebted to scholars who have thoroughly explicated how the formations of capitalism and liberalism are fundamentally constructed through racialisation. See for instance: C J Robinson, *Black Marxism: The making of the Black radical tradition*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1983/2000; E Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1944/1994; W E B Du

racial liberalism¹⁴ and the myriad violences that make them possible—are excised, undisclosed, or recovered as banal, benign, or even emancipatory systems (one anti-trafficking group promotes ‘the free market to free people’).¹⁵

Anti-trafficking advocates also rely heavily on reusing imagery produced by white abolitionists as the evidence of what racial chattel slavery was, which is one of the main ways that the reduction of slavery into an individual harm paradigm occurs. Zoe Trodd, one of Antislavery Usable Past’s investigators, has previously argued that contemporary advocates ‘repeat the same mistakes’ of paternalism, sensationalism, objectification, and ‘white emancipatory fantasy’ by recycling the abolitionist tropes of supplicant slaves, scourged backs, auction blocks, and slave ships.¹⁶ To her cogent list of ‘mistakes’ I add minimisation. The first three tropes historically pictured a single enslaved person who is or has been the victim of interpersonal physical violence or maniacal greed. In these tropes, both the victims and the perpetrators are individualised, excised from the larger social contexts that produced them. Diminishing the significance of slavery to individual acts of sadism and greed edits out the societal systems of racialised social control and reproductive management that racial chattel slavery created and relied on, many of which inhere in the present. Considering the magnitude of the terror of the system of racial chattel slavery and its global structuring power, reducing it to predominantly interpersonal violence is a large feat. It raises the question: in whose interest is it to understand racial chattel slavery in the good versus evil frame so widely promoted by anti-trafficking advocates?

Turning slavery into an individualised evil that is out of place in civilised and modern societies has been an ongoing discursive project, compounded by the centuries-long denial and erasure of how racial chattel slavery co-constituted

Bois, *The World and Africa*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1946/2007; W Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, Bogle-L’Ouverture Publications, London, 1972; N Singh, ‘Racial Formation in an Age of Permanent War’ in D M HoSang, O LaBennett and L Pulido (eds.), *Racial Formation in the 21st Century*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2012, pp. 276–301; J Melamed, ‘Racial Capitalism’, *Critical Ethnic Studies*, vol. 1, issue 1, pp. 76–85.

¹⁴ See for instance: C L R James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo revolution*, Vintage, 1938/1989; C W Mills, *The Racial Contract*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1997; S Wynter, ‘Un-settling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the human, after man, its overrepresentation’, *CR: The New Centennial Review*, vol. 3, issue 3, pp. 257–338; S Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, slavery, and self-making in 19th Century America*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997.

¹⁵ Made in a Free World, website, <https://madeinafreeworld.com/>.

¹⁶ Z. Trodd, ‘Am I Still Not a Man and a Brother?: Protest memory in contemporary antislavery visual culture’, *Slavery and Abolition*, vol. 34, issue 2, 2013, pp. 338–352.

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modernity,¹⁷ to name just one aspect. I focus here on how this discursive project manifests in the Antislavery Usable Past not to attribute full blame to that project or identify it as the root of the problem. Antislavery Usable Past offers one of many examples of this phenomenon within the anti-trafficking discourse. This initiative bears special attention, though, because of its stated investment in bringing the anti-trafficking message to public institutions of black history in Britain and the US, which in the US context have been historically underfunded and under-visited by dominant groups, and have faced undue struggles to justify their importance within American society.

Antislavery Usable Past

The Antislavery Usable Past is a project funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Council's programme called 'Care for the Future'. It brings together a constellation of stakeholders interested in 'making the antislavery past usable for contemporary abolition', including history scholars, anti-trafficking NGOs, public history organisations, lawyers, artists, and museums that preserve the history of chattel slavery and abolition in the US and the UK. Its project investigators are the well-known anti-trafficking scholar-advocates Kevin Bales, Zoe Trodd, Jean Allain, and John Oldfield. Through a series of videos on the project website, viewers are introduced to a wide range of initiatives that the investigators are launching, including: building and digitising archives of the commemoration of the abolition of the slave trade in Britain, creating a postdoctoral programme, generating new visual culture about anti-trafficking, producing an exhibition about Congolese nineteenth-century abolition, developing workshops for museums and historic sites to incorporate anti-trafficking, and promoting new legal parameters about slavery, among others. Although the project is based in the UK, it circulates through and has implications for the American present for several reasons: organisations from both the UK and the US are involved in carrying out component projects; some of its visual representations of racial chattel slavery depict scenes in the US and/or come from both US and UK abolitionist producers which circulated widely in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; and several of its contemporary images were created by US-based artists or organisations.

¹⁷ See for instance: P Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and double consciousness*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1993. Julia O'Connell Davidson also takes up this point in *Modern Slavery: The margins of freedom*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

The breadth of the push to institutionalise and legitimise the language of slavery within anti-trafficking is alarming, especially in light of the preview the website offers about the visual and affective strategies Antislavery Usable Past will utilise to suture the terms, and their histories, together. I unpack the website's promotional images below to show how they reduce, decontextualise, and flatten complex histories in order to make them appear visually similar. The primary strategy is to simply juxtapose images of racial chattel slavery and images suggestive of human trafficking. But what exactly is being compared? The pairs appear to show that anti-trafficking advocates are using the same rhetorical strategies as nineteenth-century abolitionists because the problems are both 'slavery'. But all that the pairs really show is evidence that the anti-trafficking apparatus has appropriated the imagery of abolition for its own reasons. Advocates then use those appropriations as visual evidence that the issues themselves are the same. It is a self-fulfilling argument that uses and creates archives as its alibi.

Image Selectivity

Antislavery Usable Past makes the past usable for the present by comparing still frames of individuals from different centuries in similar poses, devoid of circumstantial information. Several paradigmatic image pairs populate the banner head of the website's pages. In one, a historic etching of seven young black boys huddled together wearing only loincloth is juxtaposed to a contemporary photograph of seven young shirtless South Asian boys posing together in a doorway. The comparison implies young boys have been enslaved then and now (in different places). Their poses and the similar image composition imply that their conditions are the same. Yet, the ambiguity of the images, compounded by a lack of image captions, means that viewers actually learn almost nothing about either group's situation, not least the conditions under which the images were made.

Other pairs follow the same format: an image of enslaved black people from the eighteenth or nineteenth century precedes an image of exploited individuals from the twenty-first century. While all the historic images feature black subjects, the contemporary images feature white, brown, and black subjects in situations that have become paradigmatic of the trafficking discourse: sex work in the US and South Asia, brick kilns in India, mines in Africa. The choice of the contemporary images renders today's injustices as multiracial and not race-specific, unlike the injustices of the past, while signalling that human trafficking spans many sectors of the economy. Several of the image pairs are not about the relationship between past and present exploitation, but about the similarities in past and present abolitionist visual culture. The pairs that focus on advocacy efforts are doubly layered: they draw attention to how advocates are using similar rhetorical schemes to agitate for change but the website does not note that this tactic is intentional. What the image similarities show is simply that anti-trafficking has, in fact, repurposed key abolitionist imagery for its own agenda. These comparisons are especially troubling because Antislavery Usable Past's website is reproducing some

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of the exact same images and same limiting tropes that Trodd has criticised and that I further analyse below—slave ships, supplicant slaves, and auction blocks.¹⁸

White Paternalism

A prominent image pair on Antislavery Usable Past's main page features two adjacent medallions. On the left, the famous nineteenth-century image of a black woman kneeling with her bound hands stretched upward is pleading for recognition. The words 'Am I not a Woman & a Sister, 1838' are carved on the token. On the right, a digital reproduction of the token displays a young white girl wearing torn clothing sitting with her face buried in her lap in shame. The contemporary token bears the message, 'Am I not a daughter and a sister? 2010'. Both of these images depict abolitionist strategies for appealing to white moral conscience to end exploitation. As such, they compare both the abolitionist strategies and the exploitation that the strategies aimed to ameliorate. The pairing materialises the Antislavery Usable Past's mission that the successful activist methods of nineteenth-century anti-slavery campaigns can be directly applied to human trafficking.

In comparing the communication strategies of the two campaigns, the project also equates the issues and the types of violence, which problematically instrumentalises black suffering. The nineteenth-century token makes the critical claim of 'Woman' a demand for the recognition of enslaved people as Human.¹⁹ The twenty-first-century appropriation changes this ontological demand into the moral sentiment of 'daughter', which is a rhetorical tool to sentimentalise the innocence of young white women who need to be saved (by white men and white women). To be sure, sentimentalism also punctuated white abolitionist texts of the nineteenth century, including depicting enslaved people in inferior positions to signal their victimhood, helplessness, or passivity,²⁰ attributes of the visual culture that derived from the white male gaze itself.

¹⁸ My study is analytically focused on how the website is composed because that is the primary, and in some cases only, information that viewers will receive about the images. Some of the images referenced in Z Trodd, 2013 are cropped on the website. In one case, a human rights organisation's logo and campaign slogan is completely removed from the frame, furthering the visual confusion about what the image represents.

¹⁹ On slavery and the Human, see S Wynter, 2003.

²⁰ Z Trodd, 2013 makes this point specifically about the same medallion in order to argue, importantly, for representations of contemporary victims as survivors who represent themselves, which she characterises as more agential and as part of a 'less abusive usable past'. Similarly, in her *To Plead Our Own Cause: Personal stories by today's slaves*, co-edited with Kevin Bales, 2008, the editors argue for using the genre of the slave narrative to increase agency in representation. However, 'contemporary slave narratives' can be problematic in their own ways. They are often elicited by NGOs or government agencies that have their own political or fundraising agendas

Presenting organising campaigns as if they are instantly transferable to other social issues, and framing such transfers as good and effective, does nothing to help audiences understand how power works in different situations of exploitation, nor what will be effective ways to intervene on and shift such oppressions. What it does do, however, is claim that the prostitution of white girls is just as bad, just as widespread, just as morally egregious, and just as urgent as the centuries-long systematic enslavement and racialised social and reproductive control over black women. As a black woman begs to be recognised by a white patriarchal society that secured its wealth and power through her rape and forced reproduction,²¹ a white woman sits ready to be rescued and protected by that same powerful white man, who rescues his conscience and complicity in the process. Such juxtapositions erase the ways that white male domination over black women actually creates and upholds white female innocence. It is that same innocence which makes white women rhetorically available to be objects worthy of being rescued from sexual defilement. White male heroic protection, the alibi of the US slave state, is constructed through the figure of the agentless white female, who depends on the security that white men can provide, a security that is accumulated and granted to those men through the history of racial chattel slavery, ideology of white supremacy, and the system of white privilege it produced and depends on. Despite deriving from drastically different, although entwined, systems of oppression, the juxtaposed medallions communicate the sameness of the issues by utilising interpretive closure. Two women, two tokens, two slogans, make the case that these issues are similarly important; two different media and two different subjects on the coin alert viewers to the newness of the contemporary cause and the closed case of the past issue.

White Accumulation

A second set of images on the website compares women being sold at auction in 1864 and 2009. The first is a nineteenth-century drawing of an African American woman standing on an auction block with a downcast gaze, while two bidding white men gesture towards and sneer at her, and another calls for bids on her. The historic image is cropped from an American political cartoon but that context is not made available. It is followed by a contemporary photograph of a young South

for being involved with anti-trafficking. The narratives also produce particular types of victims that are deemed worthy of help, which leaves out other types of exploited individuals and other types of agency, most saliently, the various types of agency exhibited by sex workers who do not want to be 'rescued' by the anti-trafficking industry. See L M Agustín, *Sex at the Margins: Migration, labour markets and the rescue industry*, Zed Books, London, 2007.

²¹ J L Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and gender in New World Slavery*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2004.

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Asian woman in a Plexiglas box. The placard attached to the box reads, 'Child Prostitute, Bangladesh, c. 2009'. Neither image is captioned or credited. The historic image turns out to be a small section of the *Harper's Weekly* illustration titled 'The Chicago Platform. Union Failures'. That political cartoon critiqued the Democrat Party in an election year during the American Civil War by juxtaposing its platform with scenes of the violence those policies upheld, including slave auctions and slave floggings.²² The production of the image matters in order to understand what work it was intended to do in the past and what representational liberties the artist might have taken. Still, we know that such scenes did in fact take place and in ways quite similar to the one depicted. Enslaved black women, like other enslaved people, were frequently sold at auctions, inspected like cattle, and fondled and humiliated in the process.

A black woman on the auction block was an important mechanism of how the system of slavery was reproduced, especially after the abolition of the import of additional slaves. Rather than being simplified to 'women are sold, then and now', this image could convey that slavery was the engine of capitalism (rather than driven by a few sadistic, greedy, or misguided individuals) and that the black enslaved woman and her womb served as both the means of (re)production and the site of primitive accumulation. That is, the white slaver dispossessed black enslaved women of full autonomy over their wombs and then accumulated through expropriation the wealth produced therein (another enslaved person).²³ While rape fuelled the capitalist slave society and economy, it cannot be elided with 'the sex trade' where sexual encounters are exchanged for money. One system generated the wealth and power—and cognate systems of dispossession—that more developed countries still enjoy today; the other is an experience of exploitation, sometimes to the extreme, and/or an occupation that is often, but not always, entered into under coercive conditions.

By contrast, the contemporary photograph of a young South Asian woman in a Plexiglas box is not indexical to how sex work or sexual exploitation function in Bangladesh. It certainly does not represent how child prostitution transactions take place, nor how or why they become systematised. While no context is provided, the photograph turns out to be a closely cropped portion of Save the Children Australia's 2009 campaign entitled 'We must make this a thing of the past'. That campaign created highly sensationalised photographs to raise awareness about injustices children face in the Congo, Kenya, and Bangladesh.

²² Library of Congress object file, accessed at: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2008661665/>.

²³ H Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe', *Diacritics*, vol. 17, issue 2, 1987, pp. 64–81; S Hartman, 1997; J L Morgan, 2004.

The woman is staged in the box with the placard to make a point. The box symbolises being trapped, objectified, shipped, and commoditised for sale, which are all implicit references to the transatlantic slave trade. The box and placard also suggest the dehumanising ethnographic displays of various human ‘species’ at nineteenth-century Worlds Fairs (many of whom were black). These historic references to situations that were actually endured by black people are repurposed as metaphors to explain how immoral and terrible child prostitution is. Child prostitution is certainly terrible, but such rhetorical sensationalism does nothing to help us understand what causes it or how to end it. It only implies that (1) not enough attention is being paid to this issue and (2) child prostitution should be fought against as vociferously as the transatlantic slave trade. Using the museum labelling convention ‘c. 2009’ further suggests two things: first, that these advocacy efforts could end such practices, relegating them to ‘history’²⁴ and museums; and second, that Bangladeshi culture participates in barbarous practices from the past that have no place in a modernised and civilised future. The latter reiterates racist stereotypes of the global South, including the idea that brown women from less developed countries need to be saved by white feminism.²⁵

Two women, both being objectified and sold, are rendered the same through their juxtaposition. They are both positioned in the frame as auctionable items. Yet, this positioning is only possible because the second image comes out of using the metaphor of slavery and its imagery to advance the cause in the first place. Placing images side by side purports to show visual evidence of something, but what it confirms is only that anti-trafficking advocates have a long history of appropriating the imagery of racial chattel slavery and its abolition. The systems of oppression are not the same; the strategies to end them will not be the same; the points that do converge—the effects of capitalism’s accumulation through dispossession via colonialism or enslavement—are not discussed. So, what work do these appropriations *do* for anti-trafficking?

²⁴ Although cropped from view, the original Save the Children Australia posters that this image comes from bear the slogan: ‘We must make this a thing of the past.’ Full campaign viewable at: <http://adsoftheworld.com/campaign/save-the-children-mc-saatchi-10-2009>.

²⁵ C T Mohanty, ‘Under Western Eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses’, *Feminist Review*, vol. 30, 1988, pp. 61–88; K Kempadoo, ‘The Modern-Day White (Wo)Man’s Burden: Trends in anti-trafficking and anti-slavery campaigns’, *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 1, 2015, pp. 8–20; G C Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ in C Nelson and L Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, 1988, pp. 271–313.

White Comfort

The Antislavery Usable Past is not only concerned with trafficking for sexual exploitation. A third image pair presents exploited labourers in 1845 and 2009. The first appears to be a nineteenth-century etching of enslaved African American men and women working on a Southern cotton plantation. It is followed by a twenty-first-century photograph of brown men making bricks. Although neither is captioned or located in space (only in time), both images depict the difficulty of the manual labour that the subjects are engaged in. The first image is a classic representation of racial chattel slavery in the southern United States, where enslaved African Americans work the land and heave large baskets of picked cotton onto their shoulders. The second image is framed similarly, but the distressed working conditions are not as iconic or identifiable, although they are quickly becoming paradigmatic of ‘modern day slavery’ through NGO promotion of this type of exploitation.²⁶

The image juxtaposition uses literal, repeating visual cues to heighten the comparison of the exploitation. In both images, individuals have their heads adorned with cloth wraps and are using tools. The central figure in both images, a male, is captured mid-action: in the nineteenth-century carrying a basket of cotton and in the twenty-first century, swinging a hoe overhead. In the foreground of the photograph, men squat with bricks piled on their heads, a visual convention that communicates difference to western viewers due to its association with the practices of poor people in Africa and Asia. The images communicate the sameness of these systems and experiences of labour exploitation by depicting the conditions as visually similar and magnifying their similarity by framing the labouring bodies in the same poses. The images suggest that ‘slavery still exists’ by situating the viewer in a familiar scene of racial chattel slavery—which cues the word ‘slavery’ in a viewer’s imagination—and then jumping to a completely different scene of dire working conditions abroad in the present. Not only is this new slavery the same as racial chattel slavery, the image suggests, it continues to happen in less civilised places than the US. This comparison, then, works to consign racial chattel slavery to the completed past; a historic mistake that the Americans and the British can feel good about ending 150 years ago. It appeals to the would-be abolitionists’ sense of non-racism by encouraging them to get involved today to free people in places more backward than the global North. It also names a new racialised victim in relation to

²⁶ The historic image labelled 1845 is elsewhere captioned *Picking Cotton, U.S. South, 1873-74* (in University of Virginia archive), potentially making it an image of labour after emancipation. The photograph of the South Asian labourers was taken by Lisa Kristine in the Kathmandu district of Nepal and appears in her photobook *Slavery*, which she produced through her partnership with the NGO Free the Slaves.

racial chattel slavery: not the black American who endures anti-black racism structurally and interpersonally today, but the brown global Other, implicitly seen as a more worthy and less threatening victim, precisely because of how anti-blackness shapes white American consciousness.

The image pairs on the Antislavery Usable Past website attempt to ‘give meaning to new instances of horror by contextualizing them against earlier brutality. Yet, in so doing, they flatten the complexity of the original event’²⁷ while also misinterpreting the contours of human trafficking by trying to fit it into familiar narratives of slavery. Such pairings do a lot of discursive work to render both the history of racial chattel slavery and the problem of human trafficking into histories and presents that are not threatening to white subjectivity: racial chattel slavery was bad, but is over and has no relevance to contemporary American and British life. Contemporary work conditions abroad are upsetting, but not caused by me, my structural position, or my country’s policies. However, these pairings teach viewers very little about either injustice, the systems that proliferate and support them, or how we might work to end, ameliorate, or intervene on the present-day manifestations of both.

The project, then, makes the past usable by hollowing out the rich stories and contemporary structural connections the archives of slavery hold. Such reductions, decontextualisations, and appropriations have large stakes for how we understand the histories that have produced our worlds, and to what ends we use them. Why are the anti-trafficking uses of abolitionist history so thoroughly legitimised, funded, and institutionalised? Why do histories of black suffering more easily gain mainstream political traction when they are used as a metaphor or a cautionary tale for other oppressions? Rather than ‘care for the future’, such appropriations demonstrate a profound lack of care for, and towards, black humanity and the ongoing black liberation struggle.

The Public History of Slavery

The promotional images that I have analysed provide a window onto how Antislavery Usable Past mobilises history for its cause. While it might be tempting to dismiss a few images on the website as opportunistic rhetorical sensationalism, the interpretive closure that Antislavery Usable Past’s website uses excises the contours of the history of racial chattel slavery to make it more easily appropriated for anti-trafficking advocates. The project also sees its mission as working in the reverse direction. One of the arms of the Antislavery Usable Past project aims to bring the

²⁷ Zelizer, 1998, p. 206.

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anti-trafficking message to historic sites and museums of slavery and abolition through a series of seminars that will encourage museums to think ‘about the use of contemporary slavery in exhibits that would otherwise be focused only on historic slavery’.²⁸ These scholars see the need to ‘emphasize contemporary slavery’ because it is ‘often neglected’ in spaces focused on historic slavery.²⁹

Such statements raise several concerns. The use of the word ‘only’ suggests the history of slavery does not merit its own institutions. In a political environment where it remains difficult and controversial to address histories of slavery at all, let alone fund and build institutions or monuments focused on them, such dismissal of the struggle for the public history of slavery is inappropriate, careless, and self-aggrandising. Further, naming ‘contemporary slavery’ as an object of *neglect* suggests that the history of racial chattel slavery has received more than enough attention (it has not), when in fact, it is human trafficking that continues to garner the attention and investment of billionaire philanthropists and lawmakers alike. These anti-trafficking claims raise important questions: Why should public museums of history and abolition add trafficking exhibitions? Is it only because anti-trafficking advocates have effectively conflated the terms trafficking and modern day slavery through extensive public relations and lobbying? And what is at stake if those public history institutions take up this new mandate?

The Antislavery Usable Past lists memory institutions among its partners, including the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool, England, and the Slave Trail in Richmond, Virginia. The International Slavery Museum has already incorporated anti-trafficking materials into one of its exhibition spaces. Anti-trafficking exhibitions and/or materials have been incorporated into other public history institutions as well, including The National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, Lincoln’s Cottage in Washington, D.C., and the Oberlin Heritage Center in Oberlin, Ohio. The exhibitions and materials at all of these institutions have focused on advertising the mission and imagery of anti-trafficking NGOs and the US Department of State. In addition to the interpretive closure and conflation already operating within the practice of comparing racial chattel slavery and human trafficking, the presentation of evidence within the museum space is further distorted by the often sensationalised and Othering depictions of trafficking victims in NGO materials. Displaying these types of exhibitions alongside the careful historical documentation of many museums of slavery and abolition threatens to undermine the latter while magnifying the horror of the former.

²⁸ Trodd video, available at <http://www.usablepast.ac.uk/projects/index.aspx>.

²⁹ Oldfield video, available at <http://www.usablepast.ac.uk/projects/index.aspx>.

My ultimate concern about the adoption of anti-trafficking in sites of history of slavery and abolition is how the connections threaten to ‘cannibalize’³⁰ histories of oppression that remain crucially relevant to understanding contemporary structures of anti-blackness. The desire to compare different historic and contemporary violences in order to promote action has very real stakes in this instance, where the referent pain and injustice is not confined to the past but is ongoing, where attempts at redress have not been triumphant, only contested and controversial, and where the simple assertion that black lives matter has been labelled terrorism. Public institutions of the history of slavery and abolition play an important role in connecting anti-black pasts with anti-black presents. Since anti-blackness is an ongoing structural problem, histories of slavery can help audiences understand how the systems of oppression shift post-Emancipation. The American historiography charts out several: the Black Codes, convict leasing, segregation, racist exclusions from social programmes and unionisation, and mass incarceration.

Yet, using ‘modern day slavery’ as the contemporary connection to such histories redirects attention, energy, space, and money to other social causes. ‘Contemporary anti-slavery’ campaigns are most often represented in museums through the vision of major western-based NGOs and US and British laws and policy, which tend towards punitive measures, criminalisation, law enforcement training and reform, supply chain transparency, and business-based solutions. All of these proposed solutions are supportive of industries that uphold anti-blackness. In the case of police and criminalisation, these institutions and discourses were explicitly co-constituted with slavery and anti-blackness.³¹ By inserting anti-trafficking discourse in spaces of historic memory, not only is education about why and how anti-blackness endures in the present displaced, potential exhibitions that link ending slavery to ending mass incarceration, for instance, are converted into exhibitions that promote, normalise, and enhance criminal legal systems. Ceding the central, accessible, and public pedagogical space of the museum to causes that bolster institutions premised upon anti-blackness is a stunning display of recuperation. Doing so through the memory of slavery manifests a long-voiced critique from black movement leaders, rearticulated as recently as the US Women’s March on Washington in January 2017: ‘Here they go again...adopting the work of black people while erasing us.’³²

³⁰ B Zelizer, ‘Cannibalizing Memory in the Global Flow of News’ in M Neiger, O Meyers and E Zandberg (eds.), *On Media Memory: Collective memory in a new media age*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, pp. 27–36.

³¹ See for instance: K Muhammad, *The Condemnation of Blackness: Race, crime, and the making of modern urban America*, Harvard University Press, 2011; L Beutin, ‘Racialization as a Way of Seeing: The limits of counter-surveillance and police reform’, *Surveillance & Society*, vol. 15, issue 1, 2017, pp. 5–20.

³² A Garza, ‘Our cynicism will not build a movement. Collaboration will’, *Medium.com*, 26 January 2017.

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It remains to be seen how the various components laid out on the Antislavery Usable Past's website will play out on the ground and what will come of the project, including the public history initiatives. It is my sincere hope that such projects will not re-centre trafficking in these critical memories of slavery. My point in this article has been to raise the following meditations on the stakes and implications of such archival projects. What we can lose in the conflation of these discourses is necessary and continued attention to how and why anti-blackness manifests in the United States and across the globe. What we lose sight of is how the structural exclusions that colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade forced upon the global South create systems of poverty and oppression that help facilitate human trafficking. What we potentially gain, instead, is another project that does not fully consider, nor take accountability for, the political stakes of the appropriation of black suffering, the implications of its imagery on other people and other causes, or the collateral damage (always already racialised) a well-intended project can cause. Perhaps, then, the lesson that anti-trafficking advocates need to learn from history is that the commodification of black suffering may increase the freedoms of some, but has not, and will not, lead to freedom for all.

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