

# How Cultural Rhetorics Can Change the Conversation

## *Towards New Communication Spaces For Addressing Human Trafficking*

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### **The Truth About Stories**

Shawn Wilson teaches that imparting our own experiences into academic work is a valuable practice (Wilson, 2008, 32). So I ask the reader to bear with me as I briefly share here a glimpse into my own past. I do so, to start this article, because my story provides both a personalized backdrop and an underlying rationale for the larger arguments I will be making. At the same time, sharing how I came to this work lays bare my biases and orientations while contextualizing the perspectives I put forward about the roles—and limits—of rhetorical scholarship in bringing insight to policymaking, legal debates, and academic interventions on human rights related issues.

Prior to initiating my doctoral studies at Michigan State University, I worked for many years as a Federal Officer and Program Manager at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. My focus area and subject matter expertise primarily revolved around victim protection issues. I handled cases, and eventually held policy and operational decision-making responsibility, in areas relating to asylum, refugee affairs, and human trafficking. In 2010, I was appointed to oversee the Crime Victim Protection program, which provided benefits to human trafficking victims and, in that capacity, I also supported the Blue Campaign Committee, a Homeland Security led public relations and awareness initiative on human trafficking.

I considered my role to be one of applying and enforcing the law. But the more involved I became—across operations, policy making, and public awareness campaigns—the more I developed



growing awareness that the stories the federal government tells about human trafficking are rooted in problematic constructions of race, gender, migration, victimhood, and security. Similarly, in reaching out to various stakeholders, including anti-trafficking activist groups and organizations, I perceived gross oversimplifications of what I had come to increasingly understand as a complex, multidimensional, and fluid issue.

The stories we are told—about heroic federal agents breaking up human trafficking rings, about lives saved and families restored, about the enormity of the problem and the extensiveness of our response—gloss over far uglier and far more complicated realities. Those realities, which I forced myself to face with no small amount of discomfort, included untold stories in which human trafficking survivors faced imprisonment, deportation, and the stigma of permanent criminal records. As one survivor explained, “I always felt like a criminal. I never felt like a victim at all. Victims don’t do time in jail, they work on the healing process” (Phillips *et al.*, 2013, 25). My work in applying the *Trafficking Victims Protection Act* raised within me serious questions about how the concept of legal victimhood was constructed, presented me with thorny problems relating to race and gender, and posed dilemmas about the impacts of an unbalanced enforcement response that tended to focus predominantly on the sex trade rather than other forms of human exploitation falling under the human trafficking umbrella.

I found myself increasingly uneasy with the stories that I was telling and the stories that others were telling about human trafficking. I found myself asking how the stories put forward in legal text, policy documents, and awareness campaigns were “operationalized.” What happened as a result of these stories being “let loose” into the world? In other words, I wanted to know: what was being left out, what was being emphasized, *and why?*

In *The Truth About Stories*, Thomas King cautions that stories, once told, are set free in the world (King, 2008, 10). They can’t be retracted. Once let loose, a story takes on a life of its own. It can be applied in the ways we intend, but it can also reinterpreted, repurposed, and reused. A story, carelessly crafted and carelessly told, can be and become an “awful thing” (King, 2008, 9). As such, the decisions we make about which stories to tell and not to tell, the words we use and don’t use, the underlying concepts and theories we convey or suppress, not only have the potential to *but in fact do* have very real impacts on not just ourselves and our relations, but also to those unseen and unanticipated audience members who come into contact with our tellings. Considering this, King urges attentiveness, encouraging us to thoughtfully consider what stories

we set loose in the world and to listen closely to the stories with which we connect: “...you have to be careful with the stories you tell. And you have to watch out for the stories that you are told” (King, 2008,10).

King’s cautionary words intersect with my experience, and now, situated in an academic setting, the question of how human trafficking stories are operationalized both in and beyond the initial telling continues to be a central concern of my work. In the academic space I now inhabit, I possess a bit more freedom to be attentive to these stories, to thoughtfully evaluate both the stories that I’m telling and to critically analyze those that are already in circulation. As such, I see this article’s task as evaluating relevant scholarship that addresses how accounts of human trafficking arise and circulate while articulating new priorities for academic intervention in anti-trafficking efforts through the inclusion of survivor narratives and community-grounded accounts. It is only by examining how specifically situated individuals and communities engaged in the everyday work of anti-trafficking interrelate with themselves, each other, ideas, and their organizations that we can begin to gain a more nuanced understanding both of what is at play and what is at stake. In the following pages, I lay the groundwork and make an argument for the role that cultural rhetorics perspectives can bring to that work by demonstrating that cultural rhetorics approaches move us beyond plain study and mere critique, encouraging relational accountability and active engagement in making and building—in making new meaning, new knowledge, new language. In that sense, then, cultural rhetorics is *uniquely positioned* to not only help us *understand* anti-trafficking in new ways but to engage in the project of communally *building* new practices and discursive spaces around it.

## Case Studies

Regardless of setting, stories about human trafficking used in anti-trafficking discourse tend to be structured in very specific, identifiable ways. In a cursory review of this narrative form, whether deployed by government agencies, activists, or non-profit organizations, we can see complex lived experiences slip into a reductionistic narrative framework that fails to account for the importance of the humanity of those who *lived* what is being described. The dominant narrative may be identified by the following specific attributes: 1) a reduction of complex individuals into simple actors, often within binaries: moral/immoral,

criminal/noncriminal, victim/agent; 2) an emphasis on the work of institutional actors in the act of rescuing; 3) a use of the language of victimization and vulnerability; and 4) a de-emphasis on the voice of the individual who has been subjected to trafficking. The stories about human trafficking that enter into cultural discourse almost always follow this same format. Ralph Cintron tells us that such simplifications of the complex represent a “desire for a power that enacts a kind of cleansing that washes out” knowledge (Cintron, 2009, 149). These stories seem to be generally plotted in terms of the captivity narrative that played such an extensive role in negotiating Native American/settler relations and the enslavement narrative of African Americans.

To briefly demonstrate, I point to two examples, one from the nonprofit organization *Hope for Justice* and the other from the *Blue Campaign*. Each of these anti-trafficking awareness efforts, like many others, deploys “human interest” stories. In reviewing such stories, we may see the ways in which current discourse is problematic while also identifying potential inroads for intervention.

**Case 1:** Sabina had no privacy; she spent months sleeping on a mattress on the floor with a strange man who had also been trafficked. Her trafficker violently assaulted her and sent her to work in unsafe factories. One day, Sabina was badly injured in a machinery accident. After being rescued by investigators, Sabina’s made a steady recovery. Our team supported her to find a part-time job and accommodation of her own. She proudly keeps her little flat spotlessly clean and delights in spending her small income generously. She bakes something delicious for our team each time we visit her (Hope for Justice, n.d.).

In this example, we are confronted with a third-party voice describing—generally—the experience of the survivor. Note the reduction of complexity into simplicity: what might very well have been an incredibly traumatic experience is reduced to “sleeping on a mattress” with a “strange man” and being “violently assaulted.” There is no contextual information. More importantly, the narrative engages in a rhetorical move that places focus not on the survivor, but rather on the organization itself (“our team supported”; “we visit her”) and emphasizes the institutional act of rescue. We have little sense of who she is; indeed, she has no voice. We are instead relegated to the odd juxtaposition of, within mere sentences, a transition from trafficking scenario, to rescue, to “she bakes something delicious.” There is little sense of closure and even less

sense of the complexity of the individual involved—she has been both flattened as a character in someone else’s narrative and effectively been commodified as a platform to encourage donations to the organization’s efforts. Read one way, this story presents as an unequal transformation in the sense that there’s a clear unevenness in the quality of transformational benefit to the storyteller (i.e., the organization), and the individual whose story is being told.

**Case 2:** At a Halloween party in Oxon Hill, Md., the trafficker met a runaway who asked for his help in finding a place to stay. Instead, the trafficker – a long-time member of the notorious MS-13 gang – forced the young girl into the commercial sex trade the very next day. For more than 3 months, he held her captive, coercing her to have sex for money multiple times a day at a variety of businesses, homes, apartments and hotels in Northern Virginia. Rescuing the victim and successfully prosecuting the perpetrator was the result of collaborative efforts by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement's (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations' (HSI) National Gang Unit (NGU) with assistance from the Northern Virginia Human Trafficking Task Force (Blue Campaign, n.d.).

In this example, a single paragraph describes a runaway girl, who is forcibly taken by a gang-member and sex trafficked. The description encourages the reader to inscribe vulnerability, without any supporting context. *Her* story is told in a mere two sentences. The emphasis, demonstrated by the majority of the content of the paragraph, is on law enforcement’s “collaborative efforts” to “rescue the victim.” What is, in reality, detailed here is the alphabet soup of a governmental process, rather than a human interest story in any true sense of the term. This story is striking for the ways in which the narrative simplifies what was very likely an incredibly complex, multi-faceted series of experiences. Notably, like the first example, the individual who is the centerpiece of the story, *has no voice*. She has no identity, not even a pseudonym, other than that of being someone who, we are told, is vulnerable and a “victim” in need of rescue. Importantly, there is no real closure: the story ends with law enforcement’s act of rescue. We are given no sense of what happened to the human at the center of their “human interest” story. The remainder of the human interest stories on the *Blue Campaign* website are constructed identically: a few sentences describing the trafficking scenario followed by detailing the rescue and criminal prosecution. In none of these do we hear the voices of the individuals who had been trafficked, or have any sense of their

identities other than their status as “victims.” We do not learn what became of them following their “rescue.”

Organizations that use such accounts tend to couch their practices in rhetorics of rescue and liberation, offering up a “compelling yet problematic vision of the liberated slave...as a figure who literally moves from darkness to light, from animal to human” (Govindan, 2013, 514). In the stories about human trafficking shared by *Hope for Justice* and the *Blue Campaign*, we see both of these moves at work. Each of these stories represents the dominant narrative about human trafficking, which breaks down the lived experiences of individuals in a reductionist way: the victim has no agency—and, as such, no voice—and a culturally sanctioned institution rescues or saves the victim from an immoral criminal actor. Considering this, then, we may describe the dominant narrative of human trafficking as rooted in and oriented by the colonizing mindset: operating in a top-down categorizing manner, talking *about* rather than *with*, and not fully considering the informative value of survivors’ lived experiences. As Julie Cruikshank has observed, the colonizing mindset “move[s] forward by devising and reinforcing categories...” (Cruikshank, 2002, 7). In devising and reinforcing these categories, those with power and privilege monopolize and control the human trafficking narrative while marginalizing and silencing, i.e., *writing out*, the voices of those who have experienced it. In other words, such discourse operates as a “particular language” that belongs to “the historical process of colonization” by silencing the individual who has been trafficked (Spurr, 1993, 1). In this sense, the individual of the “human interest” story is rendered as a colonized “other” who is used discursively for the purposes of reinforcing agenda-laden categories. They are “freed” yet slipped into discursive silence while being used yet again. These stories discursively *other* the subjects of human trafficking while reifying the rescuers. The resultantly flawed fictions about human trafficking have real impacts on real lives, and the ways in which these stories facilitate multiple layers of violence upon subjects of trafficking, including women, those identifying as LGBTQ, and racial minorities, cannot be ignored. In many respects, such stories do little to mitigate violence against women and do nothing at all to address the exploitation of racial minorities. Indeed, the multiple oppressions and discriminations that render individuals susceptible to human trafficking are more or less ignored, underscoring how rhetorical practices associated with anti-trafficking can work against the actualization of social justice.

## The Problem: Rhetorical Slippage and Selective Representation

The preceding case studies remind us that stories are the primary means of cultural uptake and understanding of the issue. Indeed, “most of us know trafficking secondhand” through the stories that have made their way into cultural discourse (Soderlund, 2011, 195). One of the problems with this fact, however, is that in trying to give substance and meaning to, and to make legible, a mostly invisible phenomenon, the stories that are let loose tend *less to explain than to reinscribe belief*, the belief that human trafficking is something which people should be both concerned about and invested in. In seeking to connect with specific audiences to enhance that belief, the already problematic dominant narrative is repurposed through the ideological divergence of the competing agendas of law enforcement, victim service providers, academics, and nonprofits, which in turn creates new stories that enter into cultural discourse. It comes as no surprise, then, that scholars have highlighted the rhetoric surrounding human trafficking as confusing, at best.

In a recently published issue of *Social Inclusion*, Siddhartha Kara observes: “Much of the confusion relating to basic terms and concepts on the topic...has been due, in large part, to the lack of scholarly analysis” (Kara, 2015, 1). Kara refers to a dearth of robust scholarship which has hindered informed, thoughtful responses to human trafficking and, by association, anti-trafficking discourse. I lead with Kara’s observation because it presents a problem in need of resolution. The confusion referenced by Kara, which appears—at least in part—to be driven by the impulse to reinscribe belief rather than to enhance in-depth understanding refers to what might be more aptly described as *rhetorical slippage*, the ways in which terms and concepts slip into more simplistic forms that fail to account for important nuance and detail. The ways in which human trafficking is framed and entered into cultural discourse simultaneously presents both a dominant narrative that serves as “a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience” (Stephens and McCallum, 1998, 6), and a plethora of disparate political, religious, and cultural perspectives that influence the dominant narrative itself. Whether looking at digital activism, faith-based work, or non-governmental organizations, one comes away with the uncomfortable sense that across this vast terrain of rhetorical practices, “something is constantly slipping away” (de Certeau, 2011, 77). These slippages might be viewed as ineffectual exercises in the “art of saying” that “produce effects” (de Certeau, 2011, 79). The produced effects are essentially manipulations “of language” that create fictional spaces

of discourse (de Certeau, 2011, 24). Whether looking at the dominant narrative or specifically situated beliefs that influence the dominant narrative, the issue itself is consistently being framed in ways that, because of the emphasis on belief making, have resulted not merely in a lack of understanding but in the creation of fictions.

Such fictions necessarily order and simplify, and, as such, are manifestations of the human “psychological need to navigate complexity and uncertainty” (Kamler, 2013, 89). Examples include, but are not limited to: conflating all sex work with human trafficking; describing all trafficking as slavery; downplaying labor trafficking; ignoring the racial dimensions of trafficking; de-emphasizing historical elements and influences; and reducing trafficking stories into simple binaries (e.g., moral/immoral, criminal/noncriminal, victim/agent). Edward Snadjr writes, “Anti-trafficking accounts...almost always include simple binaristic themes and easily interpretable symbols of morality and immorality, murky, malevolent characters, and unsuspecting and ultimately helpless protagonists” (Snadjr, 2013, 238).

This proliferation of fictions, rooted in belief making and re-inscription rather than causal explanation, is driven less by an emphasis on critical inquiry and more by emotion. Indeed, oversimplification, binarism, and lack of detail in trafficking representations might be viewed as tactical practices that function to blend emotion, authority, and reason to “elicit spontaneous feelings from recipients: intrigue, alarm, and outrage” (Snadjr, 2013, 235). The blending of emotion, authority, and reason repeatedly appears in the literature on human trafficking discourse, particularly the role that emotive language plays in anti-trafficking work. Benjamin Buckland, for example, questions the ways in which activist efforts deploy “the language of victims, of survival, and of heroic rescue” (Buckland, 2008, 47). Buckland criticizes this use of emotive language because it is “less about achieving their stated goals and more about pursuing political ends, or charity fundraising” (Buckland, 2008, 47). While emotion can be an effective tool in creating awareness and to attract attention, it is far less effective at education (Gong, 2015, 100).

The slippages we see in anti-trafficking discourse are not isolated, non-meaningful idiosyncrasies. The questions surrounding terms and concepts are important. Words matter. They frame the issue, shape responses to it, and inform the public in specific ways. Rhetorical slippages result not merely in miscommunication, mixed signals, and inter-dialogic confusion, but also are made manifest through rhetorical rippling across cultural discourse and codified in/by the very structures that are



tasked with ending human trafficking. In looking at how anti-trafficking campaigns negotiate, create, and engage, both through rhetorical slippage and selective representation, we begin to develop a deeper understanding of what is at play. Juliette Hua encourages us to question the narrative spaces through which human trafficking is articulated, and how those narrative spaces are circumscribed (Hua, 2011, 203). In so doing, we can reorient and shift the kinds of questions we ask in order to broaden how we understand issues of exploitation, violence, and justice, as well as surrounding discourses. As Hua notes, how we come to understand human trafficking “has everything to do with the cultural discourses that circulate” (Hua, 2011, 204). Hua encourages us to ask: how are stories operationalized to orient us to see and understand human trafficking in certain ways and not in others?

Current scholarship reflects growing recognition by academics that we need a “more complex communication space” to better address human trafficking (Kamler, 2013, 86). In my own experience, frustration with talking past one another has become a discursive centerpiece in such contexts. Few suggestions offer up what different stories might look like, how they might be constructed, how they might operate, what values they might enact, or how they might address the problems of slippage and selective representation. To be sure, such an endeavor is hard work, especially when considering the ideologically, operationally, and geographically diverse and dispersed nature of anti-trafficking efforts. But this is where, I think, rhetoric scholars can enter the scene for we are, it has been argued, “uniquely positioned to offer particular insights into the language of human rights” (Lyon and Olson, 2012, 2).

## **Human Rights, Rhetoric, and Anti-Trafficking Discourse**

In recent years, rhetorical scholars have demonstrated growing interest in human rights discourse, “particularly narrative types, as well as the politics of representation within written and visual texts” (Lyon and Olson, 2012, 2). Lyon and Olson offer a rationale for a rhetorical approach to human rights discourse by pointing to the rhetorician’s ability to analyze the “implications of language and symbolism by examining the hierarchical significance of words, definitions, re-definitions, symbols designating social groupings, myths, rituals, symbolic images, and the like” (Lyon and Olson, 2012, 3). They note the ways in which rhetorical inquiry is

particularly adept at mapping symbolic action, revealing power relationships, and unpacking how identities and divisions manifest in social contexts, all of which come into play in human rights discourse. The rationale offered by Lyon and Olson presents a clear justification for inquiry into human trafficking within the discipline.

In this sense, rhetoric scholars are better suited for inquiry into anti-trafficking discourse than those situated solely in the social sciences because they “are aware that no single system of explanation is adequate to clarify...the interweaving of (1) human interactions, (2) reactions to those actions, and (3) accounts of those actions and reactions” (Carrithers, 2009, 4). Michael Carrithers argues, “We must account for not just the mental and dispositional things of culture, but also people, relationships, events, and situations” (Carrithers, 2009, 4). Cultural discourse is not a thing in and of itself, but rather a complex, multidimensional, and fluid constellation of forces. Orienting inquiry of this sort around anti-trafficking discourse sheds light onto why a more complex communication space, or even new language, is needed. Carrithers contends that larger concepts taken up into cultural discourse are very rarely, if ever, “mutually intelligible,” that is commonly understood across discourse communities (Carrithers, 2009, 5).

We might consider the standard discourse of trafficking on the part of agents to be effective in creating awareness, but selective representation and rhetorical slippages create new chains of suggestion that reinforce mutual *unintelligibility*, “a disaster...of words and images, and eventually of performance” (Carrithers, 2009, 13). This requires a rethinking of how academics conceptualize human trafficking itself, particularly by considering the ways in which neither the actual experience of trafficking nor anti-trafficking campaigns necessarily fit into neat and tidy recurring patterns: In fact, it requires a sensitivity to the notion and possibility that “things may fall out of a pattern” or never even exist within a pattern to begin with (Carrithers, 2009, 8). Such recognition, driven by a focus on the everyday and of the personal/individual, both narrows the project of a new language and emphasizes intersubjectivity.

As Gretchen Soderlund contends, “The stories we tell are never just stories in a vacuum. These stories have social and institutional effects; and those effects...are facts as well” (Soderland 2011, 208). I seek to demonstrate how rhetorical inquiry can shed light on anti-trafficking discourse while offering a possible way forward for academic interventions into anti-trafficking work to more

effectively—and carefully—deploy the concepts, terms, and issues at play. This work, I believe, must be rooted in and driven by attentiveness to and care in handling stories. Therefore, in placing the rhetorical practices located in anti-trafficking discourse front and center, I aim not only to gain knowledge about currently applied rhetorical practice(s), but also to offer options and opportunities for change.

Malea Powell has written:

If dominant narratives only attain dominance through imagining themselves whole in contrast to other/Other narratives, then we must imagine those narratives differently, imagine ourselves in a different relationship to them. The challenge, then, is to imagine an alternative, not an Alternative, one that confronts difference...in the very discourses that bind us (Powell, 2002, 18).

This, I think, opens the door for rhetoric scholars to intervene by looking more closely at the ways in which individuals think about and construct stories—about themselves, about human trafficking, and about anti-trafficking awareness—particularly since in many cases these are the individuals who are directly working with those who have, or *are* those who have, survived the trafficking experience.

## **An Active Role for Cultural Rhetorics**

It is my contention that, both from the perspective of inquiry and engagement, the lens of cultural rhetorics is most useful to this endeavor. Cultural rhetorics scholarship “focuses on *how* a specific community makes meaning and negotiates systems of communication to disseminate knowledge” (Riley-Mukavetz, 2014, 110). The effort to more fully understand anti-trafficking discourse, then, broadly situates my inquiry in a cultural community that is organized “under a set of shared beliefs and practices” (Powell *et al.*, 2014). It allows for inquiry into more specific, localized shared beliefs and practices in the places/spaces wherein individuals come together to form communities, i.e., when individuals who have been subjected to the exploitation of trafficking come together and tell about their lived experiences. Andrea Riley-Mukavetz describes how she engages in this orientation to research:

Almost five years ago, I started working on two oral history projects with a group of multi-generational, urban Odawa women from Lansing, Michigan. [...] About four weeks into the project, the elder, Geri,

suggested that we do another oral history with more Odawa women from the area. Together, we developed and organized three talking circles where the women shared stories about their lived experiences. [...] I hear the stories these women tell about their lived experiences as rhetorical theories on how to do intercultural research, negotiate institution (re: dominant) discourses, and make visible the roles and responsibilities of [...] women in their language and on their terms (Riley-Mukavetz, 2014, 108).

While Riley-Mukavetz works with/in different communities than those addressed in the this article, the application of a similar approach is critical in moving scholarship on human trafficking away from dominant narratives towards more complex communication spaces. Notice her emphasis on *togetherness*, on *listening*, on letting her research participants *guide* not only the conversation but the research itself. As demonstrated earlier, such approaches have not to date been used to enhance understanding about the lived experience of human trafficking.

Not only do cultural rhetorics approaches provide a specific orientation for this type of work; they uniquely allow for the maintenance of a scholar-activist identity. Indeed, one of the key tenets of cultural rhetorics scholarship is that it emphasizes *relationships*, including those developed between the researcher and the community. Significantly, this lens breaks down the researcher/community distinction. Instead, it encourages the researcher to be an active participant in the community under investigation. Accordingly, an approach to studying and engaging in anti-trafficking discourse requires not just a focus on inquiry or critique, but also active community engagement. It isn't just about telling stories. It is about *experiencing* communities and stories *through the relationships* that make story telling and story hearing possible (Wilson, 2008, 98-99).

Through my experience in developing relationships in and across communities involved in anti-trafficking efforts, I have kept in mind Jen Bacon's observation that, "Meaning is made, not given. No individual can 'persuade' another in a unidirectional way, both must negotiate meaning together, and that negotiation will have to involve a willingness to listen on both parts" (Bacon, 1998, 257). This is one of the more important aspects of cultural rhetorics approaches, as it reinforces the need for both scholarship and community engagement that is rooted in a spirit of *listening to* rather than talking over in the way standard rhetorics of trafficking do. All too often, disciplinary, and especially bureaucratic, frames

require unidirectional persuasion. Instead of engaging in listening practices we academics tend to suffer from an overwhelming need to make *arguments*. I have, in my own attempts to apply a cultural rhetorics orientation to work around human trafficking witnessed the deep skepticism survivors have about academic research. In a follow-up interview with one of my research participants, I queried how she felt about a previous interview and recording session.

**Participant:** In the moment, I don't feel anything I guess. It's after the fact, like when I'm driving when we got done that day. I really didn't feel anything until I was driving home, but it was like, I don't know, just something that came over me a little bit. I was a little uncomfortable, but then it passed.

**JG:** What do you think made you uncomfortable?

**Participant:** I don't know. I guess you never know what you say, how people will take it or use it or anything (Personal Interview, 2016).

These concerns, often lost in a cacophonous deluge of data, became the centerpiece of my research effort. Instead of merely writing *about*, I sought to listen *to* the ways in which my participants wanted their stories to be told, how they wanted them to be shared, and—like Riley-Mukavetz—I allowed the process to be driven by their suggestions rather than my own preconceived notions. While it is not easy, this approach maintained and valued my relationships with research participants. A cultural rhetorics approach, which I've attempted to enact in my own research endeavors with communities related to the human trafficking issue, deploys Shawn Wilson's call for us to “maintain relational accountability in the way in which we present” stories, crucially honoring willing storytellers by applying approaches that “write with” rather than merely “write about” (Wilson, 2008, 107). This approach rejects “the idea that ‘everything’ is a ‘text’ to be read” and instead reorients us towards engaging “with text, bodies, materials, ideas, or spaces knowing that these subjects are interconnected (Riley-Mukavetz, 2014, 109). This emphasizes discovering meaning—and making meaning—via work that embraces multiple forms, acknowledges difference, and recognizes the interconnectedness of anti-trafficking campaigns and associated communities with the tangled web of “human, economic, political, geographical, and historical influences” (Powell *et al.*, 2014).

Moving away from an approach that merely uses and, instead, listening deeply to the communities in which we participate, study, and work should profoundly influence how scholars work in and

around anti-trafficking discourse specifically, and human rights discourse generally. While there is a multiplicity of voices across anti-trafficking the landscape, they do coalesce in a general recognition that a new discourse is needed. In this sense, then, we might view the attempt to craft a “new language,” as an important, critical step to addressing human trafficking, and identify that effort as a direct response to a stated community need.

In addressing this need, a cultural rhetorics orientation also moves us away from a colonizing approach to academic inquiry and towards an orientation less focused on academic disciplinary than on embracing diversity and building meaning with and within communities. But in thinking about the ways in which anti-trafficking discourse is culturally taken up, “We must recognize that the practices that lead to the creation of these discourses cannot be separated from the systems of power in which they are created. We have to study both systems and the practices” (Powell *et al.*, 2014). In this connection, a cultural rhetorics orientation encourages a consideration not just of how anti-trafficking ideas and concepts interrelate, but how relationships between people, systems, and ideas can be mapped. The idea of constellation “allows for all the meaning-making practices and their relationships to matter. It allows for multiply-situated subjects to connect to multiple discourses” (Powell *et al.*, 2014, Act 1 Scene 2). The constellations formed in anti-trafficking discourse prove informative when thinking about mapping and studying the ways in which narratives, power, and symbolic action come in contact and operate. Such an approach is not only useful in studying anti-trafficking and responses to other major human rights issues; it’s *necessary*. By making visible orientations, positions, and frames of reference within anti-trafficking discourse and in systems interconnecting with those communities, we may begin to more fully appreciate how to effectuate change. Jacqueline Jones Royster asks:

How can we teach, engage in research, write about, and talk across boundaries *with* others, instead of for, about, and around them? My experiences tell me that we need to do more than just talk and talk back. I believe that in this model we miss a critical moment. We need to talk, yes, and talk back, yes, but when do we listen? How do we listen? How do we demonstrate that we honor and respect the person talking and what the person is saying (Royster, 1996, 38)?

Royster’s questions are important in confronting anti-trafficking discourse. It is rooted in dynamics of power between the human at the center of human interest stories, audiences, and the institutions

purveying such stories. A cultural rhetorics approach provides a scholarly inroad to intervene in such portrayals by highlighting the ways in which such representations fail to account for and fail to employ relational accountability. Rather than merely *analyzing* the use of survivor stories, we might instead find ways to *partner* with survivors, activists, and organizations to reorient the ways in which stories are considered, constructed, and deployed.

Applying cultural rhetorics to the issue of human trafficking, then, isn't merely about answering a research question or even effectuating change, but about deploying those knowledges and practices across different communities and contexts. It's just here that my proposal comes into view. Cultural rhetorics tells us that scholarly work can move beyond mere study and mere critique. It encourages us to engage in making and building—in making new meaning, new knowledge, new language. In that sense, cultural rhetorics is *uniquely positioned* to not only help us understand anti-trafficking but to engage in the project of communally *building* new practices and discursive spaces around it. This, importantly, is where I see an opportunity to respond to a major problem in contemporary anti-trafficking efforts. To demonstrate, I point again to my own work with survivors of human trafficking. In one interview, I asked an individual who had been trafficked how she felt about the labels affixed to her, and those similarly situated to her, in cultural discourse:

**Participant:** I don't like labels. I'm through with labels.... I don't know. I don't know if I look at myself as a survivor, or as a victim... It doesn't define who I am.

**JG:** What does?

**Participant:** Me being a mother, being a good employee, being a good person, being able to help others. That's what defines me today. I mean, those are just experiences that I went through (Personal Interview, 2016).

In this exchange we witness an individual pushing back against the notion that her identity can be simply labeled: she's not merely a survivor, nor is she merely a victim. Rather, she tells us that she is a human being with agency, and her identity—how she defines herself—is rooted in more than just the experiences she went through. Her articulation of self reflects a complexity and sophistication not afforded by the labels that she's been given within the context of the dominant narrative. This rejection of the “survivor” and “victim” labels is a purposeful move made in an effort to control her own identity and story, rather than permitting

her identity to be determined via external actors or culturally situated discourses. The move she makes to control her own identity and story is an important one, one to which we should be attuned. To fully grasp stories like hers, we must listen and understand that the story here isn't about vulnerability, victimization, or rescue, but rather about her humanity, healing, and self-discovery. She *is* making new meaning, new knowledge, new language. It is the work of cultural rhetorics scholars to engage with individuals to explore that process and to tell the stories that *participants want to be told*, rather than the to tell the stories that *we think* should be told *about* the participants.

### **A Cultural Rhetorics Approach: New Communication Spaces**

I have shown by examples that top-down models used in anti-trafficking discourse are severely prone to rhetorical slippage and selective representation, silencing the very voices most in need of being heard. We cannot begin, in my opinion, to have a real conversation about changes in human rights law and policy without first understanding how the discourses that brought current legal and policy structures into being play out in individual lives. To that end, through my work in and around the human trafficking issue, I advocate for a model that places cultural rhetorics as the centerpiece of human rights related rhetorical scholarship because it places individual lived experience at the center.

Human trafficking stories, as we have seen, tend to be stories *about* others. In this sense, we might identify the core problem of anti-trafficking discourse imposing pre-defined assumptions onto lived experiences. Such discourse operates top-down rather than bottom-up by placing a framework around the issue of human trafficking first rather than constructing it from the stories that are told by those most involved and most impacted. An alternate approach, offered by cultural rhetorics, might more closely consider and account for the stories that individuals tell about themselves, the stories that survivors tell about their lived experiences in their own words, juxtaposing these with the stories that institutions put forward about human trafficking. What happens, for example, when we sit and listen to those who have lived through trafficking and then compare their stories, in all their nuance and humanity, to the dominant narrative?

Instead of simplistic narrative flattening, and merely commodifying stories, we might offer up ways to support



organizations to engage in relational accountability in interactions with survivors and their associated storytelling, helping individuals find and use their own voices. This is work that I am actively engaged in and model in my own research practices. I contend that the application of principles like emphasizes on storytelling and relationality would necessarily lead communities-of-interest to new models of practice by emphasizing grounded stories thereby shifting the basis for “truths” about the human trafficking phenomenon. This is work that has yet been done on a significant scale—and contributions from the scholarly community are sorely needed.

In closing, I point to one non-scholarly, but relevant effort that has centered on survivor voices. I recall the experience that I had in 2015 while viewing Kay Chernush’s art exhibit *Bought & Sold: Voices of Human Trafficking*, which I saw on display at Michigan State University. The exhibit was comprised of twenty-six collaged and layered images, conveying a range of stories encompassing kidnapping, torture, physical mutilation, sexual exploitation, and indentured servitude. I was struck by the fact that the display seemed centered less on the art itself and more on the stories told by the survivors who inspired the art (each piece was accompanied by a word-for-word account from a human trafficking survivor). The emphasis on lived experience forced me to deeply consider those stories—the verbatim accounts of survivors—rather than the dominant narrative about human trafficking with which I’ve become so familiar. The exhibit was not merely an artistic display but rather an exercise in a new model of practice around this issue that re-centered the discussion on the voices and stories of survivors, survivor communities, and activism. Rather than reducing lived experiences into neat and tidy binaries—and rather than ensuring that each story adhered to the dominant narrative—each piece of the exhibit told a separate, unique story that honored the individual who lived it, emphasized that individual’s voice, and brought a multiplicity of exploitative experiences into a shared communal space. I share this, in conclusion, because it exemplifies precisely one model of the type of effort that I’m calling for in this article, an example of a project designed to shift the basis for conversation around human trafficking based on listening to stories at the ground level. Indeed, such stories “are alive and powerful, and we can be listening to, thinking about, and learning from” them (Lee, 2010, 111). In so doing, we might then be better able to evaluate how these stories interconnect and constellate not just with each other, but with a range of cultural influences.

The application of a cultural rhetorics paradigm to this type of engagement proves essential, both for rhetoric scholars and human rights activists, because of its increased recognition of relationships: between self and others, between community members and communities, between materials and bodies, and between bodies and spaces. Importantly, it reflects the significance and impact of experiencing our work and our lives through human relationships rather than institutions and institutionally mediated stories about human rights issues. Such an emphasis on relationality requires significant time and energy for collaborative engagement, a recognition of intersubjectivity, and focus on listening as well as to building, fostering, and maintaining relationships.

Effectively addressing the problems of rhetorical slippage and selective representation in discourse about human trafficking requires an attentiveness to how such stories develop and how those stories might come together to make meaning and build a “new language” that more fully recognizes not just the multiplicity of voices and values, but also the complexity, multidimensionality, and fluidity of human trafficking as a phenomenon. Simply put, *this is an opportunity to rethink the stories we tell*. By being accountable to and building relationships with those most impacted, we can collaboratively tell the stories that need to be heard, rather than the stories that merely serve institutional interests. With enough effort, thoughtfulness, and attentiveness we can, I think, engage in an “activity of hope” that seeks to tell different stories (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, 203) that both convey and embrace a multiplicity of subjectivities of multiply gendered *and racialized* bodies and other ‘others.’

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