

The Erotics of Authenticity: Sex Trafficking and “Reality Tourism” in Thailand

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In this article, our ethnographic focus is a human trafficking “reality tour” of Thailand, a one-week tour of purported trafficking-related sites that the authors jointly attended. This tour was part of a growing number of trips around the world that offer alternatives to mass tourism, taking issues of social justice and humanitarian intervention as their focal orientation. As scholars with an interest in trafficking, labor exploitation, and sex workers’ rights, we chose to take not human trafficking itself, but rather the “reality tour” that claimed to represent it as our ethnographic object, to critically interrogate the reality of the “realities of the global trade in humans” that it endeavored to convey. What do commercially packaged “anti-trafficking” tours reveal about global panics around sexuality and sex work, as well as about the politics of tourism and development in Thailand? Transnationally, how does the notion of “NGOs as experts” interact with local expertise around trafficking, labor, and sex workers’ rights? And how do moral and political economies of authenticity circulate in the “reality tourist” experience? We situate our interrogation of these issues within the expanding literatures on tourism and authenticity as well as the critical literatures on sex tourism and sex trafficking, two terrains of scholarship that have infrequently been juxtaposed.

Upon entering the international arrival terminal at Bangkok’s Suvarnabhumi airport, travelers are greeted by a barrage of placards and eager local guides holding signs for Thailand’s largest hotels, resorts, and an array of private tour companies that operate in Southeast Asia’s principal leisure hub. Amidst the numerous sturdy, professionally designed posters appear a modest plain white sheet of 8.5 × 11 paper with the words “Global Justice Projects” typed in black font. This is a small sign that is easy to miss for a tour whose

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boasts are ample: the “2012 Thailand Delegation to End Human Trafficking and Modern Day Slavery” promises that participants will, over the course of seven days, “[confront] the realities of the global trade in human beings.”¹

As feminist scholars with an interest in trafficking, labor exploitation, and sex workers’ rights, we chose to take not human trafficking itself, but rather the “reality tour” that claimed to represent it as our ethnographic object, to critically interrogate the “realities of the global traffic in human beings” that it endeavored to convey. What do commercially packaged anti-trafficking tours reveal about global panics around sexuality and sex work, as well as about the politics of tourism and development in Thailand? Transnationally, how does the notion of “NGOs as experts” interact with local expertise around trafficking, labor, and sexual commerce? And how do moral and political economies of authenticity circulate in the “reality tourist” experience? These are the primary questions that our research endeavored to address.

The irony of writing an ethnography of a “reality tour” is not lost on us, given that we are well versed in the critiques of ethnographic writing’s own realist pretensions (see, e.g., Clifford and Marcus 1986; Clough 1992; Marcus and Fischer 1986). Although it is not our intention to supplant one realist fallacy with another, it is our claim that ethnographic techniques—however partial, perspectival, and socially located they themselves are—can be useful in illuminating the representational strategies of this emerging commercial variant of humanitarian endeavor.

We situate this exploration within the expanding literatures on tourism and authenticity (see, e.g., Cohen 1988, 2008; MacCannell 1973; Vrasti 2012; West and Carrier 2004) as well as the critical literatures on sex tourism and sex trafficking (Bernstein 2007a, 2007b, 2010, 2012; Brennan 2004, 2005; Hoang 2013; Kempadoo 1999; Padilla 2007; Vance 2012), two terrains of scholarship that have infrequently been juxtaposed. As such, this article is unique in its consideration of how moral and political economies of both tourism and sex can come to reinforce one another and to interactively circulate, focusing in particular upon the contemporary Thai context.

Background and Methods

In this article, our ethnographic focus is a commercially packaged “reality tour” of purported trafficking-related sites in Bangkok, Chiang Rai, and Chiang Mai that the authors jointly attended. Prior to embarking upon this trip, both authors spent several years observing the diverse “helping projects” for sex workers that had recently sprung up around the globe, tracing the on-the-ground effects of contemporary anti-trafficking campaigns and their affiliated organizations (Bernstein 2007a, 2007b, 2010; Shih 2009, 2013, 2014). Although our discussion here takes the one-week reality tour as our primary object of analysis, we also build upon the ample ethnographic research that we

have conducted in related settings—amidst Western volunteers affiliated with other anti-trafficking nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Thailand, and at a variety of gatherings and events held by the tour's sponsoring NGOs in the United States. This article also informs our years of research among sex worker activists who have strived to address some of the manifold injustices that affect sex workers locally and globally, including those forms of violence and exploitation that typically cluster under the banner of “sex trafficking” (see, e.g., Empower Foundation 2012a; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Kempadoo, Sanghera, and Pattanaik 2005).

As researchers with ongoing projects about secular and faith-based anti-trafficking interventions in Thailand (Shih 2013) and the evolving political landscape surrounding human trafficking in the United States and globally (Bernstein 2015), we learned of this reality tour through our long-standing familiarity with the tour's two sponsoring organizations. Although there are multiple organizations that offer similar kinds of tours of Thailand as well as to other destinations in South and Southeast Asia, South and East Africa, and Latin America, we chose to attend this tour because of the sponsoring organizations' prominence in the social justice field and because of Thailand's role as an enduring focal point for global anti-trafficking interventions. Before our departure, we obtained permission from the organizations to write about the reality tour provided that we attended as paying participants. The prohibitively high costs entailed by this arrangement meant that we could not serve as participant-observers on more than one tour.²

Following our arrival in Bangkok, we met the other fifteen tourists who were embarking on the trip; they were primarily North American women ranging from 20 to 70 years of age and spanning a range of middle-class professions. On the ground in Thailand, the tour was led by two male guides: one Cambodian American expatriate living in Phnom Penh, and one freelance Thai tour guide based in Chiang Rai. In addition to participating in the daily itineraries that the guides assembled (which usually consisted of meetings with several nongovernmental organizations, as well as recreational activities and meals), and conducting in-depth interviews with the guides and the tour organizers, we also arranged supplemental trips on our own before, during, and after the tour to visit with activists and organizations that were not included in the official itinerary.³

The tour that we attended has been co-organized since 2008 by the secular left organization, Global Justice Projects, in coordination with the evangelical Christian group, Abolish the Trade.⁴ The fact of this partnership in and of itself offers a fascinating window into the two organizations' shared moral and political understandings of sex, commerce, and responsible travel. They claim that these efforts extend the redemptive effects of humanitarian tourism beyond the parameters of a single visit, that short-term travel will lead to long-term advocacy, and promise that tourists (who are termed “delegates” in the

promotional literature for the trip) will obtain expertise that will embolden them to become anti-trafficking “abolitionists” once they return home.⁵

Founded in the mid-1990s, Global Justice Projects is an international human rights NGO whose declared mission is to “promote social, economic and environmental justice” throughout the world (see note 1). During the U.S.-led anti-sweatshop movement in the mid-1990s, Global Justice Projects contributed public relations resources through their activist network that resulted in sustained mainstream media coverage of exploitative labor practices in the global apparel industry. In the late 1980s, the organization introduced the idea of “reality tours,” driven by the principle that tourism could offer educational and activist opportunities to promote social justice. Global Justice Projects currently offers a wide variety of “reality tours” that are focused on social justice issues in many different destinations, and several tours are affiliated with the organization’s social justice campaigns in the United States. For example, a tour to Nicaragua offers delegates the opportunity to “harvest social justice” through travel by planting and picking coffee with Central American farmers. Upon returning home, the organization stipulates in its materials that participants must demonstrate commitment to “working on a Fair Trade campaign in your own community.”

Although a handful of the participants on the Thailand reality tour were drawn to the trip through Global Justice Projects, we discovered upon arrival that the majority of participants had learned of the opportunity through their partner organization, Abolish the Trade. Founded in the mid-2000s, Abolish the Trade aims to engage the private and public sectors in order to foment social enterprises that “benefit enslaved and vulnerable communities.”⁶ Abolish the Trade has made global campaigns against human trafficking accessible to a growing North American support base that comprised primarily of young evangelical Christian women and students from the United States. In addition to the reality tour, its “Freedom Worship” program has registered over 5,800 churches that pledge to devote a Sunday in February to pray for an end to human trafficking, while its annual “Freedom Forum” draws several thousand individual participants to the Abolish the Trade headquarters in the Pacific Northwest.⁷ Meanwhile, its affiliated Abolish the Trade store offers an opportunity to “buy for freedom” by selling products—including jewelry, handbags, fair trade coffee, and chocolate—that are marketed as “made by victims of human trafficking.”⁸

Secular and Christian, progressive-left and center-liberal, it is curious—but we will argue, not accidental—that these two organizations have joined forces to offer tours of sex trafficking in the Southeast Asian context. In the sections that follow, we demonstrate how “reality tourism” has emerged amidst a growing number of alternatives to mass tourism that reflect the increasing commercialization of “humanitarian reason” (Fassin 2011), a trend that also has important implications for the global politics of sex and gender. We will show how anti-trafficking reality tours cloak their commercial objectives in a moral agenda, which collapses sex work and disparate social ills, relying upon

Thailand's touristic infrastructure and burgeoning NGO sector to confirm tourists' preexisting ideas of rampant sexual slavery in the region.

"Reality Tourism" and Its Precedents

Tourism is a backbone industry throughout Southeast Asia, for which Bangkok is the unrivaled tourist hub. Revered for its pristine beaches, well-preserved historical sites, diverse indigenous and ethnic minority communities, and relative political stability, Thailand has been an ideal destination for mass tourism from the West for decades (Cohen 1988; Peleggi 1996). The hospitable tourist environment is supported by significant funding from the Thai government through the Thai Ministry of Tourism. Since the 1960s, Thai development strategies have been closely linked to international economic policies, and in 1975, based on the recommendations of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF), Thailand instituted a National Plan of Tourist Development that implemented a shift from agriculture-based development to tourism. Following the Asian financial crisis in 1997, the Thai government invested 1.5 billion baht (39.5 million USD) in the "Amazing Thailand" tourist campaign as a strategy for economic revitalization and as an effort to repay IMF loans incurred during the crisis (Kontogeorgopoulos 1999).

Given the tourist industry's prominence as an engine of financial growth in Thailand, the Thai government has been an avid supporter of all forms of touristic development. Its success as a tourist destination can be attributed to several structural factors, including the mammoth Suvarnabhumi airport (which serves as a crossroad for air transport in the region), the availability of international-standard hotels, advanced in-country transportation networks, pervasive English-language signage, and relatively low rates of crime, war, and conflict. These factors have contributed to Thailand's prolific presence in international tourism: it is ranked third in international visitors by MasterCard's Global Destination Cities Index, after London and Paris; and *Travel and Leisure Magazine* has named it the number one travel destination in the world for several years in a row.⁹

Critical responses to "mass tourism" in the region trace back as far as the 1960s, stemming from indigenous and NGO critiques of tourism for contributing to the decay of local resources (Lacher and Nepal 2010; see also Coleman and Crang 2002; Rojek and Urry 1997; Smith 1989; Sturken 2007). Although tourism has been advocated for as a strategy of national development, critics have argued that profits typically tend to benefit international tour operators, foreign investors, and large hotel chains, with financial gains rarely trickling down to local communities. Alternative forms of tourism have sought to remedy some of these inequities by designating social justice, humanitarianism, and volunteerism as their foci (Higgins-Desbiolles 2008; McGehee and Santos 2005; Stronza 2001; Wearing 2001). Ecotourism, for example, has

emerged as a form of alternative tourism that aims to leverage tourist resources into local communities, redistributing profits that are conventionally paid to corporate middlemen (Stronza 2001). Volunteer tourism is another emergent strategy of alternative tourism that arranges community development projects (typically short-term volunteer opportunities) for tourists who pay for travel, placement, housing, and organizational costs.¹⁰ The growing popularity of slum tourism and disaster tourism in destinations across the world further illustrates the desire of tourists to witness the realities of social suffering and poverty through leisure-time travel (Bloul 2012; Linke 2012; Steinbrink 2012).

Yet critiques of mass tourism, as well as of the emergent forms of tourism that aim to replace them, note that *both* variants partake in asymmetrical relations of power and access between insiders/outsideers, and natives/others (see, e.g., Mathers 2010; Mowforth and Munt 2009; Urry and Larsen 2011; West and Carrier 2004). For instance, the recent popularity of British volunteer tourism to wildlife rehabilitation centers in Borneo reproduces unequal relationships of power and risk across national identities and across species, creating what Juno Parreñas has called a “postcolonial economy of volunteer tourism” (Parreñas 2012, 673). Wanda Vrasti has similarly argued that the escalating interest in “global voluntourism” in the neoliberal age has fostered a highly profitable economy of prepackaged volunteer opportunities as “all-inclusive commodities” (Vrasti 2012, 27). Such commodities include not only the operational costs of travel and volunteer placement, but the fulfillment of expectations around the presumed authenticity of the volunteer experience and the value of aid work to recipient communities. According to Vrasti, volunteer tourism may be less about the material impact of social change than it is about “exposing young adults to the adventure and authenticity they believe they are missing from modern capitalist life” (Vrasti 2012, 28). Significantly, when volunteer tourists are confronted with the fact that they may not be able to effect substantive change during their brief volunteer tenure, they assuage feelings of disappointment by finding alternative meanings in the “authenticity” of their experiences. As Vrasti argues, participants find unique value in the tourist experience, because it cultivates a worldly outlook and equips them with the “social capital” required of citizens, students, or potential employees in the global marketplace (Vrasti 2012, 52).

The Global Justice Projects/Abolish the Trade anti-trafficking reality tour similarly reflects upon the changing nature of tourism and the intertwined socioeconomic, moral, and geopolitical tensions that it represents. It suggests a brave new world in which humanitarian interventions and market transactions are understood to be mutually reinforcing, rather than contradictory (or even supplementary) modes of worldly engagement. Premised upon an updated “protestant ethic” which locates morality in the consumptive, rather than the productive, moment of capitalist exchange (see Weber 2002 [1930]), this model is distinct from earlier market paradigms that situate sentiment and morality outside of it (see, e.g., Boltanski and Chiapello 2005). At the same

time, and as we shall demonstrate below, anti-trafficking reality tours suggest an additional way in which these tensions can be simultaneously maintained, yet never made fully legible: through the morally charged circulations of gender and sexuality that structure the “reality tourist” experience.

Sexual Imaginaries and Touristic Infrastructures

As the anthropologist Rosalind Morris has persuasively argued, “Few nations have been so thoroughly subject to Orientalist fantasies as Thailand. Famed for its exquisite women and the pleasures of commodified flesh, the Thailand of tourist propaganda and travelogues is a veritable bordello of the Western erotic imaginary” (Morris 1994, 15; see also Manderson 1997). It should thus not come as a surprise that among the four “reality tours” that Global Justice Projects currently offers, the human trafficking tour in Thailand is currently its most popular destination.¹¹

Although the sale of sexual services is currently illegal in Thailand, the Thai government does little to curb the existence of businesses that cater to sex tourists.¹² In fact, the government has historically supported sex tourism due to its military and economic positioning in the area. U.S. military presence during the Vietnam Wars, including the stationing of American troops in Thailand, and the flow of other foreign troops for “Rest and Recreation” (R & R) bred one of the earliest infrastructures for tourist exchange and commercial sex tourism in the world (Cohen 1996; Wilson 2004).¹³

Following the formal exit of U.S. military troops from Southeast Asia in the early 1970s, commercial sex has remained central to the Thai tourist industry’s expansion. Scholars of Thai political economy note that this export-driven economy—planned and funded by the IMF and World Bank loans—privileges exports, tourism, and corporate expansion, primarily in Bangkok (Phongpaichit and Baker 2002; Skrobanek, Boonpakdi, and Jantakeero 1997; Truong 2000; Wilson 2004, 75). Bangkok’s rapidly developing economy, alongside Thailand’s relative political stability compared with the neighboring countries of Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos, has also initiated significant undocumented migration from these regions (see Feingold 2003; Huguet and Punpuing 2005). Within Thailand, disparities in wealth between rural and urban regions have led to successive phases of internal migration to Bangkok for a range of low-wage service sector opportunities. Alongside other jobs such as waitressing, domestic work, and retail sales, sex work is just one of many forms of service-oriented employment for female labor migrants within Thailand (Empower Foundation 2012a; Jeffrey 2002; Molland 2012; Wilson 2004).¹⁴

The changing complexion of sex work in Thailand is historically situated between the Thai government’s robust support of tourism, public health concerns around HIV/AIDS, and ongoing legal restrictions pertaining to

prostitution.¹⁵ Prostitution in Thailand is currently illegal under the [1996 Suppression and Prevention of Prostitution Act](#), which penalizes sex workers with a maximum 1,000 baht fine or 30 days imprisonment for prostitution offenses. The corresponding Entertainment Place Act, amended in 2003, requires entertainment establishments—including karaoke bars, massage parlors, and go-go bars—to be formally registered. The formalization of registration under the Entertainment Place Act intends to limit the employment of underage and undocumented workers, and to formalize employment in the entertainment sector, although only a third of entertainment venues have ever bothered to register ([Hilton 2013](#); [Jeffrey 2002](#); [Roux 2009](#)). Under these legal mechanisms, the majority of Thai sex workers are currently employed in public entertainment venues (including Karaoke clubs, pool halls, massage parlors, and bars) and provide sexual services off-site.

While many popular mass media accounts and early scholarship have discussed the archetypical relationship between male (typically “Western”) sex tourists and female Thai sex workers, commercial sex venues in Thailand cater to a wide range of customers, including patrons from East Asia, the Middle East, Australia, Africa North American, and Western Europe, as well as domestic Thai patrons (See [Cohen 1986](#); [Hamilton 1997](#); [Jeffrey 2002](#); [Wilson 2004](#)). Like other service industries, these entertainment businesses cater to the preferences of the clients they wish to attract, including all-inclusive escort tours for Japanese clients, go-go bars for American and Australian tourists, niche hotels for Middle Eastern men, and a handful of bars that even forbid patronage by Thai men ([Cohen and Neal 2012](#); [Visrutaratna et al. 2010](#)). Clients have been drawn to commercial sex in Thailand for a host of reasons, including the wide range of commercial sex establishments, relatively lenient legal restrictions against prostitution, and attraction to the “stereotype of beautiful, pliant, and docile Oriental women who offered more than paid sex” ([Montgomery 2001b](#), 198).

Writing about sex tourism in the contemporary Vietnamese context, the sociologist Kimberly Kay [Hoang \(2013\)](#) has described the ways in which Western sex tourists have come to seek out not only sex but also “virtuous third world poverty” in their travels, where sex workers’ poverty alongside Western clients’ helping capacities are both deemed fundamental to the erotic encounter. Below, we shall argue that Hoang’s notion of “virtuous third world poverty” is also useful for describing the melding of racialized eroticism and humanitarian sentiment that congeal in Southeast Asian sex tourist experiences more generally, including for the reality tourists that we encountered. The pursuit of eroticized virtue and abjection is not only a central pursuit of conventional sex tourists, but is also key to the ambitions of their successor cohort of “alternative” travelers. Preconditioned by anti-trafficking NGOs and by popular representations of human trafficking, reality tourists interpret commercial sex as a deplorable symptom of third-world poverty and regard sex workers as victims-by-definition who lack meaningful voice and agency.

(Anti-)Sex Tourism as Humanitarian Endeavor

Scholars such as Bernstein (2007a, 2007b, 2010, 2012), Soderlund (2005), Cheng (2011), and Agustín (2007) have pointed to the various ways in which moral agendas around sex work have become intricately interwoven with contemporary anti-trafficking campaigns. They have also observed anti-trafficking activists' frequent equation of even adult and voluntary forms of prostitution with "sex trafficking," and the tendency among activists (including when their focus is expanded to include forms of trafficking into other labor sectors) to single out sex trafficking as the most devastating case.¹⁶

The tour operators on our trip frequently reproduced such assumptions and elisions, as did the promotional materials for the tour. For instance, the photo that advertises the Thailand tour in the Global Justice Projects Reality Tour in the organization's promotional materials invokes the simultaneous moral and erotic allure of the enigmatic industry. It depicts an interracial couple embracing in a public balcony ensconced in bright red light. The blurry image, never explicit in its caption of what viewers are actually witnessing, suggests a clandestine peek into what is referred to in the accompanying text as "the global sex trade" (see Figure 1).

This photo foregrounds the "red light district" as evidence of the realities of human trafficking, despite the fact that brothel-style sex establishments such as the one depicted have all but disappeared from Thailand due to the aforementioned combination of changing local market economies, public health concerns around controlling HIV/AIDS, and legislation around prostitution (Empower Foundation 2011a).¹⁷ Furthermore, the district that the photo is meant to portray would likely include a diverse range of beer bars, go-go bars,



Figure 1. Promotional photo for Global Justice Projects/Abolish the Trade human trafficking reality tour. *Source:* From the organization's web site, 2012.

massage parlors, and karaoke bars, all distinct types of commercial establishments where sex workers are employed to provide various forms of entertainment. Reality tourists are thus not encouraged to see the vast array of possible labor arrangements and power relations that encompass commercial sex work, or the particular political and economic factors that make the situation of the Thai sex industry unique.

Both the tour leaders and the participants on our reality tour shared the conviction that commercial sex and human trafficking cannot be easily distinguished, as evidenced by the emphatic interest they expressed in the global sex trade during the initial round of group introductions. During our first dinner together, over a table of Thai tourist staples like Pad Thai and Singha beer, the tour leaders asked participants to introduce themselves and to briefly explain their interest in the anti-trafficking tour. Several of the young women named popular movies on both sex work and sex trafficking, like *Born Into Brothels* and *Taken*, as their primary motivation for joining the tour.¹⁸ As one Masters' degree student from a university in central California eagerly shared: "We watched *Born into Brothels* in one of my classes and that just opened the door for me." The deeply felt significance of this film was shared by a journalist from Atlanta, who echoed: "I am very passionate about ending human trafficking. *Born into Brothels* was also the film that really introduced me to the sex trade." Other participants attributed their interest in the issue to the 2004 Hollywood film *Taken*, which tells the story of an American teenager who is kidnapped on a vacation to Paris and forced to become a sex worker. Regarded as a "wake-up call" as to how pervasive global sex trafficking has become, another female tourist noted that movies like *Taken* alerted her to "just how real" the problem of human trafficking was.

The grounding of knowledge claims in sensationalist films about sex trafficking had thus shaped tourists' visions of "reality" and led them to broadly define all sex works as human trafficking before they had even left U.S. soil. The reality tour that they embarked upon in Thailand did nothing to disabuse the tourists of these notions. In her research on volunteer tourism, Vrasti found that tourists had established certain expectations of travel prior to departure, including levels of poverty that deem a tourist destination worthy of aid, and a gracious and welcoming recipient population in the host country. She also discovered that volunteer tourists frequently expressed disappointment when their expectations failed to mesh with the realities they encountered on the ground: "Travelers repeatedly complained of 'not feeling needed,' either because local communities were not deemed 'poor enough' to require foreign assistance or because these programmes were not equipped to deliver humanitarian support" (Vrasti 2012, 28). Unlike volunteer tourism that places tourists in communities with the purpose of fulfilling certain need-based projects (such as building homes, organizing libraries, teaching English, or repairing dams), reality tourism steers clear of direct participant engagement with local populations, mediating tourists' contact with local communities through

NGOs and tour guides. While volunteer tour organizers have limited control over how volunteers subjectively experience the tour, organizers of reality tours are better equipped to manage tourist experiences of “reality” through the explicit crafting of all aspects of the travel experience.

One of the chief ways that tour organizers’ shaping of reality is accomplished is through the allocation of time on the itinerary to particular NGOs, as well as through the omission of the perspectives of other organizations that might provide alternative views. For example, although most participants cited sexual exploitation as their principal interest in human trafficking, neither tour organizers nor participants on our tour deemed it important to visit sex workers’ rights organizations or to speak directly with sex workers. When we asked the tour organizers why such opportunities were omitted, we were offered two different, and somewhat contradictory, explanations. The first was that organizers were unaware of the existence of such organizations—a gap in knowledge which is noteworthy, given that Thailand is the base of several pioneering organizations which support sex workers’ rights, including The Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, the Empower Foundation, and the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers.¹⁹ The second explanation we were offered for the lack of sex worker perspectives was that the vulnerability of sex workers had already been sufficiently well documented. For the organizers as well as the attendees, sex workers had already been adequately spoken for—not by the pimps and *mamasans* who allegedly controlled them—but by the prevailing narratives in the mass media with which participants were already well acquainted, as well as by the advocacy campaigns of organizations such as Abolish the Trade.

The prevalent media narrative equating sex work, poverty, and human trafficking set the tone for the reality tour during our tour guide’s brief introductory remarks on the issue. The guide posed a hypothetical scenario in which a young Thai woman from an impoverished rural area faces enormous financial pressure to provide for her family and thus accepts a job as a sex worker in Bangkok. Our tour guide tried to encourage our group to understand how this could be considered a case of human trafficking even in light of the woman’s choice to pursue sex work, posing the rhetorical question, “Do you *really* have a choice if you are living in poverty and have no other options?” The implicit framing of this hypothetical young woman’s dilemma conditioned tourists to understand sex work as the worst of all possible occupational outcomes, as an inevitability rather than a choice. Beyond the moral objection to selling sex and the narrow understandings of poverty and choice that our guide posited, no sustained explanation of the concrete connections between sex work and human trafficking was offered.

Throughout the trip, the tour guides’ tactic of definitionally collapsing sex work, poverty, and human trafficking directly impacted how some reality tourists framed and made sense of Thai sex workers’ experiences. By framing sex workers as choiceless victims, tourists were able to reiterate the narratives they

had heard prior to arriving without any concern to how workers themselves spoke of their employment. The definitional ambiguity concerning the parameters of human trafficking—and the unclear links between human trafficking, sex work, and poverty—also allowed the predominantly white reality tourists to hopefully profile all the young Thai women they encountered as sex workers or as potential sex workers (and thus as victims of some kind), a humanitarian variant of the hypersexualized gaze that apprehends Asian femininities in cinema and beyond (see, e.g., Shimizu 2007).

This hopeful profiling of potential trafficking victims was consistent with the behavior of Western volunteers in anti-trafficking rescue projects in Bangkok, who frequent go-go bars and other commercial sex establishments on a weekly basis, hoping to recruit sex workers to participate in anti-trafficking rehabilitation projects. During participant observation on one such evening of “outreach” to several go-go bars in Bangkok, volunteers were instructed to buy drinks in order to make contact with “younger girls,” who may appear “shy or awkward” dancing on stage. The director of the NGO explained that this profiling was helpful for identifying dancers who were new to sex work, and that shyness or discomfort would typically signal a victim in need of “rescue.” Despite the consistent profiling of young-looking and “innocent” women as ideal victims in need of rescue, it is actually older sex workers who seek out alternative employment outside of sex work, particularly those for whom sex work becomes less lucrative with age (Shih 2013).

As previous analysts of sex tourism have noted, being on vacation also allows tourists to partake in certain liberties that they would not take at home (O’Connell Davidson and Sanchez Taylor 2005; Padilla 2007). For instance, passing through a bar district where hostesses stood at the entrances to bars to greet and attract customers, one reality tourist pointed her finger in the direction of a young woman in a red sequined dress and gasped audibly, “Oh no, look at that poor thing . . . [I can’t imagine] standing there every day, dressed like *that*, having to sell yourself.” Unable to conceive of bar hostessing as a job with advantages as well as limitations, the tourist could not transcend her own horror at the thought of placing herself in this sex worker’s shoes. This blend of repulsion and attraction was common to many of the reality tourists on our trip, even as the “realities” of sex trafficking remained as blurry as they appeared in the trip’s promotional photo.

NGOs as Experts and Authenticators

Human trafficking’s allegedly illicit and hidden nature—the very features which make it difficult to empirically assess—would seemingly make it an unlikely subject for a reality tour.²⁰ Researchers have cited profound methodological challenges in attempting to estimate the prevalence of trafficking, obstacles that include safety for both the researcher and research subjects, unique

definitions of human trafficking in different countries, and a lack of political will to provide transparency around the issue (Chapkis 2005; Feingold 2005; Kelly 2005; Tyldum and Brunovskis 2005). Furthermore, trafficked persons themselves often do not grasp the vocabulary of trafficking, as Brennan (2005) has highlighted in her review of the methodological challenges of studying trafficking. As Brennan writes, “Even when trafficked persons enter emergency rooms, police stations, or call service providers, they usually do not describe themselves as trafficked, but rather seek help for other issues such as for immigration or domestic violence” (Brennan 2005, 41).

The methodological difficulties inherent in documenting cases of human trafficking ought to present a robust challenge to a “reality tour” that seeks to provide empirical evidence of its existence to consumers. Without access to the perspectives of trafficking victims themselves, reality tours must supplement participants’ preexisting stereotypes and convictions with a reliance on the accounts of NGOs. As our guides advocated and as other scholars have noted, NGOs have served as brokers of knowledge for a slew of outsiders, including researchers, journalists, volunteers, and alternative tourists. The anthropologist Paige West observes that reliance on NGOs is also a strategy that has been employed by ethnographers seeking to gain insider knowledge without disrupting local realities (West 2006, 8). Reality tourists may similarly assume that visiting NGOs is a reliable form of knowledge-producing activity that can provide them with access to the “back stage” of social interaction (MacCannell 1973).

The Echo Foundation, a Thai NGO that focuses on the social and economic concerns of ethnic minority and stateless persons, was the focus of our group’s visit to Chiang Rai, Thailand’s northernmost city sharing a border with Myanmar. Our delegation was housed for one evening at the Echo Foundation’s guesthouse, a social enterprise that supports the foundation’s work by directing guesthouse profits to cover organizational costs. Additionally, handicraft items made by the organization’s various recipient/beneficiary populations are sold in their expansive gift shop. The largest profits gleaned from social enterprise are the foundation’s hill tribe tours, which promise ethical and sustainable itineraries for traveling through northern Thailand.²¹ Since 2008, the Echo Foundation has also dedicated time and resources toward a human trafficking project, claiming that “the extreme poverty of the region is fertile ground for those wishing to traffic women and children to wealthier areas of the country and the world” (Echo Foundation website 2013).

One day of our anti-trafficking reality tour was subcontracted to the Echo Foundation, which agreed to provide us with an ecotour of the region, including an elephant ride, dinner, and participation in a dance performance in an ethnic minority village. Our group was driven down a bumpy unpaved road located about twenty minutes from the nearest highway and deposited at the foot of a local Akha community.²² As we disembarked from our car, half a dozen Akha women stood waiting at the entrance to the village, adorned in

colorfully woven headpieces and dresses, unveiling baskets full of handicraft items for sale. After completing their purchases, our group was ushered to sit in a giant circle of chairs where we were given the opportunity to direct questions to the village leader. Eager to have this opportunity, a social worker from Boston, MA, asked earnestly: “Have you had any cases of human trafficking here?” Through a translator provided by the Echo Foundation, the Akha village leader told us he had never heard of the term “human trafficking,” and after some clarification of the terminology, told the group that this was not a key problem in the village. Disregarding his response, other reality tourists persisted with similar lines of questioning: “What about migration? Do people from this village leave to work?” The village leader, once again said that this was not their primary problem (figure 2).

As the discussion circle disbanded and we headed to a meal that had been prepared for us (described by tour guides as a “typical” Akha dinner of seasoned pork, stewed vegetables, and rice spread elaborately across a bed of banana leaves), tour participants huddled together and agreed that the village leader must have been lying. They easily dismissed the village leader’s claim that *in lieu* of human trafficking, the more pressing issues of concern were securing Thai citizenship for ethnic hill tribe populations, and the aggressive infringement of land by corporations and the Thai government.²³ While they appreciated the Akha village’s food, handicrafts, and costumes as an “authentic glimpse” into hill tribe life, they quickly dismissed as fabricated the village leader’s claim that his village was not vulnerable to human trafficking. As Vrsti (2012, 52) found in her study of volunteer tourism, the cultural authenticity of the tourist



Figure 2. A startling proclamation for the reality tourists to an Akha village, as the village leader claims that there is no human trafficking. Photo by Elena Shih.

experience and the validity of insider claims were only called into question when they violated tourists' preexisting notions of social realities. Significantly, the tourists ignored the most "authentic" voice they had heard so far—that of the Akha village leader himself—because it did not conform to the understandings of human trafficking that they already harbored, accounts which had been confirmed for them by the Echo Foundation's "experts."

Selling Sex and Trafficking: Conflations and Contestations

In contrast to the Akha village leader who claimed that human trafficking was not as relevant as were concerns about citizenship and land rights, the reality tour's insistence on the pernicious and pervasive nature of human trafficking was explicitly asserted during our visit to the Worker's Rights Program (WRP) in Bangkok, an organization that focuses on the labor rights of migrant workers in the Thai fishing industry. Founded in 2004, WRP was one of the earliest advocates and service providers for victims of labor trafficking in deep-sea fishing and the shrimp peeling industries (see, e.g., [Olivie 2008](#), [UNIAP 2009](#)). Alongside the growth of global anti-trafficking campaigns, WRP has received a significant amount of international attention for addressing the problems of severe labor exploitation within the Thai fishing industry. WRP has also received a steady stream of funding to pursue research, advocacy, and direct interventions in human trafficking.

During our visit to the organization, we huddled around a large table in WRP's meeting room while WRP's Director of Human Trafficking programs described the basic parameters of three recent trafficking cases that they had worked on: a labor trafficking case, a case of trafficking for domestic servitude, and a case of sex trafficking.²⁴ When describing the "sex trafficking" case, WRP pulled up photographs of a raid that they had conducted in collaboration with the Thai Department of Special Investigations (DSI), one of the government anti-trafficking agencies. The majority of photographs focused on the special team that had been assembled to deal with the case: a large group of first responders including cameramen, note-takers, social workers, and police agents converging on a room where several sex workers lived. One blurry photo that briefly flashed on the screen depicted eight women sitting in a simple living room adorned only with heavily worn furniture. The presenter explained that the squalid living conditions in this home represented a clear indication of human trafficking. Aside from the brief and occluded glimpse into what appeared to be only a room full of Asian women, the presenter never indicated to us why this case was considered a case of trafficking under current Thai law.²⁵

Puzzled by the still unspecified particulars of the "sex trafficking" case, we queried the WRP representative further, hoping to get a better sense of how the organization identified trafficking cases and how they distinguished consensual

from coerced forms of sexual labor. Frustrated by our persistent questioning, one reality tour participant shook her head grimly and whispered to her neighbor: “Why don’t they believe that it’s trafficking? Did you see the conditions they were living in?” Like the other tour participants, she was already schooled in the cinematic language of what the anthropologist Carole Vance has termed “melomentary,” a cinematic genre in which “the horror of sex is amplified by the horror of poverty” (Vance 2012, 208). In melomentaries, Vance notes, the camera visually attributes “residential crowding, lack of clean water, TB, poor hygiene, disease, and living on the street specifically to brothels, prostitution, and sex trafficking, rather than to the more general and widespread living conditions of impoverished people” (Vance 2012, 208). Fluent in the cinematic languages of melomentary that Vance describes, the tour participants required no proof of human trafficking beyond the photos of the dimly lit and crowded living conditions in a brothel located in one of the poorer sections of town.

In fact, we were soon to discover that the actual case turned out to be significantly more complicated than initially presented. When we interviewed the WRP presenter on our own following the larger group meeting, we learned that the case concerned a group of migrant Laotian sex workers, many of whom, WRP admitted, were working willingly. Given that they were undocumented, the police raid that was done in the name of “combating human trafficking” left the majority of workers facing deportation. Meanwhile, those workers who were under the age of 18 were automatically classified as “victims of trafficking,” because as minors, they legally did not have the right to choose to be sex workers. This latter group was taken to government shelters where they would remain until the legal proceedings against their brothel owners were completed.

Through our own supplementary research with Thai sex worker organizations, we would also later learn that many sex workers find such protectionist interventions to be even worse than jail or deportation, because the “sentences” are indefinite, and because once they are deemed to be “victims of trafficking,” apprehended sex workers are subject to a number of forms of discipline and control. During our visit to the Can-Do Bar in Chiang Mai, a sex worker-owned and managed bar that is one of the Empower Foundation’s projects, sex worker activists described how, in Thai government shelters, victims may wait up to two years to testify as witnesses against their “traffickers,” and while awaiting trial, are forbidden from seeing their families or leaving shelter premises.²⁶ We also heard the stories of apprehended sex workers who had their mobile phones confiscated while in state custody. Although state officials claim that this is done in order to maintain the anonymity of shelter locations and in order to protect all residents from the possibility of being located by their “traffickers,” the consequence for apprehended sex workers is that they have no way of getting in touch with legal representatives or with friends and family members (including their dependents and young children) for the duration of their stay. Required to surrender numerous personal freedoms as “victims of trafficking,” many sex workers prefer swift

deportation to lengthy periods of detention in shelters. Empower has even published a manual entitled *I Came On My Own*, which explains human trafficking and prostitution laws so that sex workers are better equipped to understand the potential consequences of being identified as “trafficking victims” during police raids (Empower Foundation 2012b).

Had the delegation accompanied us to Can-Do Bar to meet with local sex worker activists, it would likely have been an unwelcome surprise for them to hear from women who had ample experience working in the industry and who fundamentally understood exploitation and trafficking better than our so-called “expert” guides. For instance, Malee Buyu, a “35 plus”-year-old sex worker and staff member of Empower, who conducts outreach to other sex workers in seven languages and dialects, shared some of her experiences with us. Malee explained that she had endured years of exploitation in numerous low-wage jobs in both Burma and later in Thailand after fleeing her country because of violent armed conflict and poverty. Eventually she had the opportunity to start to do sex work: “For years I had been exploited and abused,” she explained. “All that time I had avoided ‘selling my body’ because I understood it to mean cutting off bits and literally selling my flesh. [Then] I discovered it simply meant sleeping with a man and getting paid for it! I had wasted a lot of time” (see also Empower Foundation 2011b, 53).²⁷

The disjuncture between the perspectives of sex workers at Empower and those of the anti-trafficking reality tourists was also highlighted by the stunned reaction we received when we produced some of our pictures from the tour. Although many of our photographs met with reactions of bemusement or dismay, it was the last photo we circulated that especially caught their attention. It was a nighttime shot of the anti-trafficking tour participants walking through the Chiang Mai red light district with knitted brows and worried faces. The sex workers’ astonishment reached a pinnacle when they noticed that our photo had also captured a murky image of their friend Nong in the background, who had been standing in front of one of the massage parlors when the anti-trafficking advocates filed past. “But that’s Nong—she is a worker, a mother, not a trafficking victim!” the women in the Can Do bar exclaimed. What’s more, they noted that Nong was an active Empower member who herself had been at the Can Do bar earlier that evening. And just last week, she had accompanied them to the annual sex workers’ conference in Kolkata, India, where thousands of women, men, and transgendered people had joined together to advocate on behalf of sex workers’ rights.²⁸ A committed activist, Nong was hardly the pitiable victim that the tourists imagined.

The first-hand accounts that were shared with us by sex worker activists illustrate that the definition of human trafficking is still widely contested by a diverse array of stakeholders, including Thai law enforcement officials, local and international NGOs, individual village chiefs, sex workers, reality tour operators, and the tourists embarking upon “reality tours.” What is certain, however, is that sex workers’ perspectives—which often oppose the well-

rehearsed narrative that all sex work is human trafficking—were ignored by our tour, because these alternative narratives did not confirm the realities that tourists had paid to witness.

New Experts

As the culminating and most eagerly anticipated event of the trip, the director of City Hope, a newly founded NGO that works with “boys” in the sex industry (most of the young men are in fact in their early 20s), led the group through one of Chiang Mai’s principal bar districts.²⁹ The director, a recent graduate of an evangelical Christian University in southern California, shared her own experience of coming to Thailand on a previous reality tour where she had observed the “indignities of the slave trade” for the first time. Upon returning home to California, she felt compelled to leave her husband and to return to Chiang Mai to fight the scourge of human trafficking. She described to us how, armed with nothing but passion for the issue, she came to Thailand to find her organization for “sex trafficked” boys.

The City Hope director led the group to Loi Kroh Road, one of the primary commercial sex districts in Chiang Mai, and one of the areas where she “came to understand the issue of trafficking” for the first time.³⁰ Passing by a variety of bars where sex workers had positioned themselves outside to attract clients, the reality tourists marched briskly down the street, making sure to avoid eye contact so as to indicate their disapproval of the industry. Once we arrived at an intersection, the director pointed out several bars that she referred to as “boy bars” (locally referred to as “beer bars,” common workplaces for male, female and third gender sex workers, where clients purchase drinks for sex workers in exchange for time and companionship) and instructed the group that she would not be able to accompany us inside the bars, because this would draw too much attention to her and compromise her ability to provide future assistance. Four group members also abstained from entering the bars, asserting that they did not want to contribute to the industry that was supporting the sex trade, and as an alternative, chose to shop for Thai silks and ethnic minority handicrafts in a nearby night market.³¹

The following morning was the last day of our trip, and participants were gathered in the lobby of the guesthouse to recount their experiences walking in Loi Kroh Road the night before:

Tourist 1: The boy-girls were talking to me.

Tourist 2: There were boy-girls?!

Tourist 1: Whoa you didn’t see the boy-girls? They were boys who look like girls—got boob jobs.

Tourist 3: How was it talking to the transsexuals?

Tourist 1: Oh everything that we learned . . . nailed it! One boy told me: “I came down here and I paid off my parents and I don’t have to work anymore and I’m freeeee,” and you know just really charismatic, everything we learned. And another one also wasn’t flamboyant but he was like rubbing up on this old man—sitting with this really nasty crusty old man.

Group: Oh, so gross.

Tourist 1: He was trying to talk to me, he was saying that—he was using his hands—“I run from Burma boom boom boom boom boom. No mama, no papa and I have to beg, and now I’m here.”

Tourist 3: Was that a she-man or just a boy?

Tourist 1: It was a boy.

Amidst the narratives of sexual slavery that participants were intent on recreating, they often missed the claims that came directly from the voices of the sex workers themselves. In the conversational extracts recounted above, the first young man that the tourists spoke with actually described his pride in being able to send money back home to his family; he explained that now that he is “free,” he has chosen to work in the bar. For the reality tourists, however, the excitement that “everything we learned” was true overpowered the alternative realities that the subjects they encountered had actually expressed. As other theorists of late-capitalist consumer culture have noted, familiarity with mass-mediated cultural scripts is precisely what enables people to identify “the authentic” when they encounter it in their own experiential worlds (see, e.g., Illouz 1997). These criteria for establishing authenticity may lead people to overlook the ways in which mass-mediated narratives are actually contradicted by the testimony of those who recount other life stories.

For most of the participants, fulfillment of the fantasy of discovering the “truth” of rampant sexual slavery, even in the face of empirical evidence to the contrary, was the point of the tour in the first place (just as specific fantasies of sexual “openness,” or erotic submissiveness, or virtuous third-world poverty may be projected onto local populations when people travel to “exotic” settings to participate in other forms of sex tourism). In the case of the reality tourists we traveled with, their own fantasies of sexual slavery and humanitarian intervention were premised upon a particular sexual morality (one which posits prostitution as unfree by definition) as well as a latent ethnocentric heteronormativity. For reality tourists, the importation of a particular set of normative convictions around gender and sexuality precluded the possibility that sexual labor could be an effective means of providing for the assertion of subjectively desired and, in fact, emic forms of gender and sexual identity.³²

Tourism as Advocacy

Upon return, Global Justice Projects will integrate the insights of the trip directly into an understanding of the nature of human trafficking in the United States and the meaning of working globally on . . . abolitionist activities ([Global Justice Projects 2012](#)).

This boastful claim made on the “Reality Tour” web site assures participants that their experiences in Thailand will enable them to become effective anti-trafficking advocates once they return home. It expresses Global Justice Projects’ conviction that the reality tourist experience is not meant to stop at the site of consumption, but rather to be brought back to the United States through activism opportunities bred from expertise that tourists have acquired first hand. Indeed, after the culmination of our trip, many group members joined together to create a webpage of reflections, notes, and photos, while several others announced that they would be attending the “Freedom Forum” (paying the hefty sum of \$200 for the privilege) hosted by Abolish the Trade in the coming Fall.

Some reality tour participants crafted blog entries to raise awareness about the issue, and still others organized fundraisers. For example, a group of social work students from a southern California state university attended the same reality tour that we did one month prior to our trip. In October 2012, they held a wine-tasting fundraiser in Los Angeles for City Hope, where they raised \$1,200 to cover City Hope’s operating costs. In addition to funding City Hope, proceeds from this fundraiser also went to the Californians Against Sexual Exploitation (CASE) Act, also known as Proposition 35, a highly contentious bill that stipulates increased criminal sentencing for sex traffickers and sex trafficking-related crimes.³³ The founder of City Hope, the same woman who had led our reality tour through the commercial sex district in Chiang Mai, was able to attend the event, having allocated about half of her year to speaking/fundraising tours around the United States. Speaking to the group of just over fifty people who had gathered at this upscale wine bar, the majority of whom had never traveled to Thailand, she retold the stories of sexual victimization that she had narrated to our group in Chiang Mai. The reality tour participants who organized the event affirmed the director’s narrative and chimed in with their own corroborating observations from their trip to Loi Kroh Road earlier that year.

These examples of subsequent activist engagement in the United States illustrate how the sex-trafficking narratives crafted by particular individuals and organizations in Thailand are reinscribed as truth once reality tour participants return home. Through fundraisers such as the one described above, tourists translate their travel experiences into expertise that can be leveraged into new forms of consumer-based advocacy. They do so because, as Vrasti points out, their continued participation in anti-trafficking networks serves to augment forms of social capital and of “civility, social responsibility and cosmopolitan citizenship” that have become essential ingredients of success in the global

economy (Vrasti 2012, 96). To enact this global citizenship, tourists-turned-advocates must participate in the anti-trafficking discourse that reaffirms the hegemonic moral and political agendas of NGOs that are supported by dominant funding streams.³⁴

Conclusion

“Human trafficking” may seem an unlikely candidate for a reality tour because the term is not only definitionally contested, but describes a multifaceted process lacking a concrete, physical site for visible witnessing and analysis. Enigmatically, it is the alleged invisibility of human trafficking that makes it an alluring object of consumption for tourists seeking to experience a meaningful alternative to mass tourism. The Global Justice Projects/Abolish the Trade’s “Reality Tour” compensates for the invisibility of human trafficking by offering participants a glimpse into a world of deviance and more visible social problems, such as poverty, migration, and most importantly, commercial sex. The focus on commercial sex, we suggest, is important not just for “selling” the tour to potential participants, but in providing an affective substratum of desire, disgust, and moral outrage, which serves to occlude other social contradictions.

In this way, “reality tours” also serve to confirm what participants have already learned to feel and to believe prior to traveling, perhaps because commercially packaged tours, by their very nature, must resist political complexity in order to appeal to a dedicated market niche of consumers. Fascination with sex and poverty drives Westerners to Thailand; however, once they arrive there, they avoid sustained interactions with sex workers—and in particular, with sex workers’ rights organizations—so as to not challenge the already-cemented imaginaries of what sexual commerce in Thailand consists of. Critical of commercial sex for its purported ties to human trafficking, reality tourists are drawn to Thailand for the very same reasons as other sex tourists—for sun, sex, and life-altering adventures, to paraphrase the title of a well-known academic volume (Kempadoo 1999). Anti-trafficking reality tours occur squarely at this intersection, while also appealing to late-capitalist yearnings for sexual and moral authenticity. Although reality tourists attempt to distance themselves from the pervasive networks of sex and capital that have driven Thailand’s global reputation and popularity as a destination of leisure, their motivations for travel are intertwined in the same erotic and economic circuits that have made Thailand a desirable touristic destination for decades.

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Notes

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1. [Global Justice Projects website, 2012.](#)

2. The tour cost \$1200, excluding airfare, making it in fact less expensive than similar tours offered by some of its NGO competitors. Other recent offerings to Thailand include a "See Human Trafficking Photography Expedition" and a tour focused upon social entrepreneurship projects aimed at combating human trafficking. In neighboring Cambodia, undergraduate college students at the Christian Bryan College may participate in a "Human Trafficking Study Tour," while business school students at University of Southern California's Marshall school are given the opportunity to visit Phnom Penh as part of a special anti-trafficking tour for MBAs (see, e.g., <http://www.bryan.edu/studytour>, http://www.marshall.usc.edu/faculty/centers/ciber/projects/study_abroad).

3. Herein and with their approval, we use the actual names of the following organizations, with whom we have had close working relationships for many years: the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women, Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers, and the Empower Foundation. We use pseudonyms to refer to the tour's two sponsoring organizations and to all other organizations visited during the trip.

4. Abolish the Trade is a registered 501c3 nonprofit organization and is not officially listed as a faith-based organization in the World Bank's Database of Faith-based organizations. However, based on our research at numerous Abolish the Trade's events and our evaluation of their printed materials, we consider it to be a primarily evangelical Christian organization. Although it also strives to appeal to a broad secular audience, Abolish the Trade's primary source of outreach consists of evangelical churches globally and within the United States.

5. Abolish the Trade also offers a U.S.-based training program, in which participants "learn how to map cases of human trafficking," generally by locating brothels and street prostitution in their own communities.

6. Abolish the Trade website, 2012. The practice of social enterprise involves the blending of for-profit business development with public interest goals. This model of business practice has existed since the 1960s (see [Banks 1972](#)), and the designation can apply to organizations whether they are registered nonprofits or private corporations. Recently made famous by Muhammad Yunus' Nobel Prize

winning Grameen bank, social entrepreneurship has gained popularity with a diverse range of actors ranging from large corporations to small evangelical missionary groups. Karim (2011) provides a powerful critique of this model.

7. The annual “Freedom Forum” invites speakers for a weekend of talks, workshops, concerts, and art that shows about human trafficking. Proponents of an “abolitionist” perspective on human trafficking, Abolish the Trade considers all commercial sex work to be tantamount to slavery.

8. As explored by Shih (2014), the conditions of employment in these vocational training programs are often characterized by protectionist policies that aim to discipline workers as a part of their rehabilitation. Workers in these programs also frequently contest being labeled as “victims of human trafficking,” asserting instead that their decision to do sex work was the best choice available to them amidst a limited menu of low-wage options.

9. See <http://newsroom.mastercard.com/digital-press-kits/mastercard-global-destination-cities-index-2012-2/>; <http://blog.travelandleisureasia.com/destination/2010/07/15/bangkok-tl%E2%80%99s-world%E2%80%99s-best-city-the-why%E2%80%99s-and-how%E2%80%99s/>.

10. Often these experiences cost tourists more than their predecessor forms of mass tourism, and some commentators have voiced concerns over the inaccurate designation of these experiences as “volunteerism” (McGehee and Santos 2005; Vrsti 2012; Wearing 2001).

11. Interview with Global Justice Projects reality tours coordinator, April 9, 2012.

12. We use the term “sex tourist” advisedly, aware of Laura Agustín’s caution that the distinctions between those who travel for work, sex, and other forms of leisure are never absolute (see Agustín 2007).

13. At the urging of U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, the Thai government supported seven “R and R” facilities for foreign military servicemen stationed in Indochina (Dassé 1978). By 1969, over 49,000 military personnel were based in Thailand full time, while as many as 71,000 military personnel frequently visited Thailand for “R and R” (Meyer 1988). Each military station was surrounded by a which offered diverse settings for intimate encounters ranging from restaurants and bars to massage parlors and brothels (Meyer 1988, 70).

14. While the Thai sex industry comprised mainly of female sex workers, men and third-gender individuals also work in commercial sex establishments.

15. In the late 1980s, rising rates of HIV infection among sex workers and injecting drug users caused public alarm about a potential HIV/AIDS epidemic. The Royal Thai government responded with political commitment at both national and regional levels, launching a “100% Condom Programme” in 1991, demanding condom use in all commercial sex establishments. Public health organizations like the World Health Organization and UNAIDS joined Thai research universities to promote education and awareness about HIV transmission. The public alarm around HIV/AIDS led to the increased legislative patrol over sex work.

16. As commentators such as legal scholar Jennifer Chacón (2006) have noted, “trafficking” as defined in current federal law and in international protocols could conceivably encompass sweatshop labor, agricultural work, or even corporate crime, but it has been the far less common instances of sexually trafficked women

and girls who have stimulated the most concern by conservative Christians, prominent feminist activists, and the press.

17. Empower's overview of the history of sex work in Chiang Mai further cautions that "red light districts" are an inaccurate moniker to describe commercial sex establishments in Thailand, which originally used green lights and other modes of advertisement (Empower Foundation 2011a).

18. *Taken* was the first major American motion film about trafficking, starring Liam Neeson as a father trying to save his American daughter from becoming a victim of sex trafficking during a vacation to Paris. *Born into Brothels*, which won the 2004 Academy Award for best documentary film, does not focus upon trafficking but rather upon the children of Calcutta's sex workers.

19. The Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) is a network of organizations concerned with the human rights of trafficked persons, while the Empower Foundation and the Asia Pacific Network of Sex Workers (APNSW) promote sex worker rights, organizing, and advocacy in the Asia Pacific region. See www.gaatw.org, www.empowerfoundation.org, and www.apnsw.org.

20. The 2000 UN Palermo Protocol defines trafficking as a crime consisting of "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power . . . for the purpose of exploitation" (UN Palermo Protocol 2000).

21. Hill tribe trekking in Thailand is a prevalent type of ecotourist offering that dates back to the early 1970s, attracting tourists to hike through diverse geographical and cultural landscapes and often includes overnight stays in hill tribe villages. As Erik Cohen points out, tour companies offering hill tribe trekking have been known to engage in staging of villages to appear remote and untouched (Cohen 1989, 1996).

22. The Akha are one of six indigenous hill tribe populations in Thailand. They are located in rural mountainous areas in northern Thailand and their ethnic and geographic dislocation from central Thailand has led many Akha persons to be without Thai citizenship (and thus ineligible for land, services or social protection under the law; see Toyota 2005). Traditionally practitioners of subsistence farming, Akha communities now participate in cash cropping for sale and increasingly participate in the tourist economy by hosting ecotours and producing ethnic handicrafts (Kammerer 1989).

23. See also McKinnon (2005), Gillogly (2004), and Toyota (2006).

24. Sex workers' rights organizations have objected to the oft-employed distinction between "sex trafficking" and "labor trafficking," arguing that it implies that the sale of sex is intrinsically different from other forms of work (Bernstein 2010).

25. Under the Thai Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act B.E. 2551 (2008), all commercial sex workers under 18 are considered to be victims of trafficking, while all those over the age of 18 are criminals—either arrested and placed in prison (if Thai nationals) or deported (if not Thai). Some over the age of 18 can also be considered trafficking victims if they can prove they were victims of "force, fraud or coercion" and are willing to testify against their traffickers in court.

26. The sinister portrayal of "traffickers" as participants in organized criminal networks ignores the fact that trafficking and migration are often facilitated by the

“combined effort of family, friends, agents, entrepreneurs and small-time delinquents” (Desyllas 2007, citing Agustín 2001, 3). Molland’s recent research in Thailand has found that “trafficking is not an organized crime but more of a localized affair governed by informal family ties and networks” (Molland 2012, 59).

27. Roux (2007) has argued that the HIV epidemic, which began in the mid-1980s, led Empower to import certain Western scripts about sex worker agency in order to survive amidst competitive international funding requirements. He further contends that by advocating for labor rights on the basis of sex worker identity, Empower’s approach may obscure the needs of the majority of sex workers who do not work in legal commercial establishments, including street-walkers, brothel-based sex workers, and other workers employed in unregistered venues. Although we take Roux’s cautions seriously, Shih’s ongoing research with the organization makes us more inclined to agree with Jeffrey (2002, 121), who documents the ways in which the organization, since its inception, has strived to distinguish itself from prevailing versions of the Western “sex workers’ rights position” through its emphasis upon economic issues rather than sexual freedoms. Roux’s argument, furthermore, is based primarily on fieldwork in the Bangkok Patpong location of Empower, whereas our interactions are based on participatory observation research with Empower, Chiang Mai. During a supplementary four-month stint of ethnographic fieldwork with Empower, Chiang Mai, Shih became well acquainted with the sex workers affiliated with the organization and directly witnessed the myriad forms of advocacy and service provision the organization offered to sex workers on a daily basis—including outreach to the small handful of brothels with undocumented workers, which require long-standing relationships to access.

28. The Sex Worker Freedom Festival was held from July 21 to July 26, 2012 and was organized as an alternative to the 19th International AIDS Conference held in Washington, DC. The event was conceived by the Darbur Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), a collective of 65,000 sex workers in West Bengal, and by the Bangkok-based Global Network of Sex Work Projects. The festival was organized because U.S. travel restrictions bar anyone who has practiced prostitution in the last ten years from entering the country, thereby prohibiting all sex worker activists from participating in discussions on AIDS (see <http://www.nswp.org/page/iac-2012-kolkata>).

29. On the Western fantasy of the Orient as the antithesis of potent, adult masculinity, see, e.g., Eng (2001) and Fung (2005). On Western tourists’ infantilization of Thai persons more generally, see Montgomery (2001a).

30. Notably, sex worker activists at Empower suggested that Loi Kroh Road’s ample bar scene and foot traffic make it one of the safest places in the city to work.

31. Significant throughout the anti-trafficking tour was the erasure of our own reliance upon multiple forms of exploited labor. Ethnic handicraft industries have been critiqued by scholars and activists for inducting communities into exploitative labor markets, while promoting uneven distribution of profits (Novelli and Tisch-Rottensteiner 2012). Additionally, the Thai silk found in night markets in Chiang Mai has been shown to be part of capitalist commodity chains rife with exploitation of human and natural resources (Graham 2011).

32. Classic works on Thai genders and sexualities include Morris (1994), Jackson and Sullivan (1999), and Jackson (1989).

33. The bill passed in November of 2012 and is currently being challenged by the American Civil Liberties Union and the Electronic Frontier Foundation who argue that the bill imposes limits to free speech (Almendrala 2012). Opponents of the law have argued that the definitions of sex trafficking contained in the law are so broad that many sex workers and their families would also be criminally liable (Musto and Boyd, forthcoming). In January 2013, the court granted a preliminary injunction blocking enforcement of the law on the grounds that Proposition 35 may be unconstitutional (Fakhoury 2013).

34. Since 2005, the U.S. government has stipulated that internationally based NGOs, which do not explicitly denounce prostitution as a violation of women's human rights, are to be disqualified from federal funding (see, e.g., Saunders 2005; U.S. Congress 2005).

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