

# Not in My “Backyard Abolitionism”: Vigilante Rescue against American Sex Trafficking

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## Abstract

In 2008, the San Francisco-based antitrafficking nonprofit organization *Not for Sale* launched a campaign advocating “backyard abolitionism,” training American citizens to seek out and identify victims of human trafficking as part of their everyday activities. Based on two years of ethnographic participant observation with two evangelical Christian human trafficking outreach projects in Southern California, this article examines the processes of what I term *vigilante rescue* in human trafficking. The enthusiasm around this brand of civilian vigilantism mirrors contemporary trends in urban governance, including community policing and civilian neighborhood patrol as modes of law enforcement engagement that operate outside the formal dictates of “state control.” The nonstate actors discussed in this paper are empowered not through professional skills or legal authority, but rather through merging American concern with human trafficking with moral panics concerning race, class, and migration as markers of sex trafficking. Situating new trends in human trafficking vigilante rescue within the extant literatures on neoliberal governance globally, this article argues that vigilante rescue enforces state goals of surveillance and policing of working-class immigrant women in Los Angeles. These activities further racial, gender, and class divides that extend sexual state politics and privilege criminal justice rather than social welfare solutions to human trafficking.

## Keywords

human trafficking, sex trafficking, abolitionism, antitrafficking, civilian vigilantism

On a brisk Thursday evening in Fall 2010, a group of fifteen middle class women have gathered together at the Coffee Bean on the corner of Wilshire and Western Avenues, a busy commerce and transportation hub in Los Angeles’ Koreatown. They clutch lattes and clipboards as they await instructions for the “human trafficking outreach” they are about to embark on, a weekly event organized by a local antisex trafficking organization. Outreach participants are reminded of the characteristics that they are to look for as they patrol the streets of Koreatown, a laundry list of social phenomenon provided by the US Department of Health and Human Service’s Campaign to Rescue and Restore Victims of Human Trafficking that state evidence of sexual commerce, poverty, and migration as proxy indicators of human trafficking. The organizer gathers the group for a brief prayer, asking the Holy Spirit to “shed light on the darkness of Koreatown,” and small groups of 3-4 women break out a one square mile radius of these East Los Angeles streets seeking to identify and rescue victims of human trafficking.

—Fieldnotes, November 2010

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## Introduction

In 2008, the San Francisco-based antitrafficking nonprofit organization *Not for Sale* launched a campaign advocating “backyard abolitionism,” training citizens to seek out and identify victims of human trafficking as part of their everyday activities. Such rescue and raid efforts to discover cases of sex trafficking have existed for the greater part of the past two decades throughout the world (Agustín 2012; Soderlund 2005), but the turn to “backyard abolition” marked a dedicated strategy by both the U.S. government and many American antitrafficking organizations to mobilize American civilians to identify victims of trafficking within U.S. borders. In 2009, two independent evangelical Christian rescue groups in Southern California began conducting weekly civilian outreach activities to identify human trafficking in several of Los Angeles’s prominent immigrant neighborhoods. Drawing on ethnographic data from two years of participant observation with these organizations, this paper asks how such “vigilante rescue” efforts reveal a carceral extension of neoliberal U.S. state power through human trafficking’s urban governance.

Situated within a larger research project on American antitrafficking activism in China and Thailand (Bernstein and Shih 2014; Shih 2013a, 2013b, 2015), this article charts the effects of transnational efforts to combat human trafficking within immigrant communities in the United States. Global initiatives that mark human trafficking as one of the most pressing concerns of the contemporary era have emboldened American citizens to seek meaningful experiences in direct rescue. While these different citizens groups lack formal authority and training to conduct such rescue and policing efforts, their strategies are justified through state, nonprofit, and mass-mediated claims of human trafficking’s prevalence (see, for example, Bales 2001, 2012; Haugen 2009; Kristof 2011; Polaris Project 2015). Rescue group efforts are also legitimized through their collaborations with local law enforcement, though as demonstrated in this paper, such relationships are not formally sanctioned by law enforcement and rarely yield arrests or prosecutions. Rather, simply the acts of outreach to and surveillance of immigrant women’s sexuality have become the key tenets of vigilante abolition rescue in Southern California.

While surveillance and policing efforts have typically been in the realm of formal law enforcement, these new forms of nonstate civilian and vigilante patrol suggest new modes of carceral activist engagement, where U.S. citizen and predominantly white middle-class abolitionists seek criminal justice protection and punishment rather than social welfare or social justice approaches to addressing human trafficking (Bernstein 2010; Musto 2013). Betraying their stated humanitarian motives, citizen’s actions contribute to a larger state project of the control and surveillance of immigrants. Such negative consequences of rescue work are either deliberately ignored or erased as “unintended consequences” of social action and are masked by the larger allegations of humanitarianism, morality, and rescue that belie contemporary antitrafficking sentiments.

## Modern-Day Abolitionism in the United States

The contemporary American social movement to abolish “modern-day slavery” is rife with complexities and contradictions across national-states and ideological positions. The 2000 United Nations Palermo Protocol defined trafficking on the global scale,<sup>1</sup> and in the same year, the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), passed bipartisan legislation that scripted the international definition of human trafficking into U.S. law. In addition, California state legislature has passed additional assembly bills and propositions that address human trafficking in different ways including the 2010 California Supply Chain Accountability Act, the 2012 Case Act, and various other legal instruments that increase criminal penalties for sex trafficking-related crimes, and aim to provide services for victims of trafficking. These new laws have paved way for the founding of new administrative entities ranging from the U.S. State Department’s Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons to the Los Angeles

Metropolitan Human Trafficking Task Force, facilitated by new public- and private-sector funding streams for antitrafficking initiatives.

As one of the United States's largest immigration hubs, Southern California has historically been the destination of labor migration into a range of industries. Since 2000, the aforementioned investment in combating human trafficking has led to public awareness of cases of trafficking in which immigrants are subject to deplorable working conditions, frequently have passports retained by third parties, and are often working against their will. Within California, these cases have included cases of forced domestic servitude in which an employer confiscated a Thai worker's passport and subjected her to 24-hour-a-day employment without pay for six years; girls under the age of 18 forced to perform sex work without pay and under guarded supervision to prevent their escape; and workers forced to work in construction, agriculture, garment, and restaurant work with very little or no pay, mobility, and under squalid living conditions.<sup>2</sup>

Reports of trafficking have become so prevalent that a veritable moral sex panic surrounds them, which conjures contemporary anxieties about immigration, politics of border control, race, class, and gender inequalities (Agustín 2007; Bernstein 2008; Chapkis 2003; Cheng 2005; Doezema 2003; Hoang and Parreñas 2014). As scholars have demonstrated, such anxieties elicit state responses that target women's sexuality as a site of either policing or rescue to alleviate anxieties about migration. Some groups focus exclusively on *sex* trafficking, framing all commercial sex work as inherently exploitative, while others acknowledge sex work as one of many other legitimate forms of women's employment, including domestic work, manufacturing, and service professions. The varying definitions of trafficking also diverge on the issue of consent, and one attempt to reach consensus has been to broaden the definition of trafficking to include all under the age of 18.

The surge in American concern around human trafficking has roots in antitrafficking policies inducted during the Bush-era political regime. In particular, the 2000 TVPA reflects fundamentally conservative sexual politics through its focal attention to sex trafficking cases as opposed to other forms of labor trafficking, and the creation of funding streams especially for faith-based organizations that ideologically oppose all forms of sexual labor (Bernstein 2007b; Zimmerman 2013).<sup>3</sup> Research has found that a growing contingent of American evangelical Christian organizations co-opt the antitrafficking movement to promote the sexual politics of "new abolition"—reframing a long-standing moral objection to sex work and prostitution within the newer lens of human trafficking (Bernstein 2008). Abolitionist organizations tend to focus exclusively on *sex* trafficking; these groups find the sale of a woman's body to be distinct from other kinds of work because it is morally corrupt and thus fundamentally exploitative (Raymond, Hughes, and Gomez 2001).

This moral panic around sex work has framed sex trafficking as a more urgent concern than labor trafficking. This framing has very real policy consequences: despite ongoing research that concludes that cases of labor trafficking far exceed those of sex trafficking, the majority of U.S. human trafficking visas (T-visas) have been made available to victims of *sex* trafficking (Agustín 2003; Srikantiah 2007).<sup>4</sup> Legal scholars have argued that state policies such as the T-visa, which grant citizenship or residency rights to those who courts ascertain are victims of human trafficking, have consequences for other migrant groups (Chacón 2005). Humanitarian policies that anoint a select few human trafficking victims as deserving of state assistance, also create exclusionary pathways for migration and citizenship for nonvictim categories—typically men and victims of labor (as opposed to sexual) exploitation (Anderson and Andrijasevic 2008). In a similar vein, others have charted the rise of the human trafficking rescue industry alongside the expansion and privatization of the American deportation industry. This definitional ambiguity surrounding human trafficking is highlighted through distinctions between human smuggling and human trafficking, forms of sex versus labor trafficking, and numerous methodological challenges to studying human trafficking (Bernstein 2008; Chuang 2010; Doezema 2002; Hoang and Parreñas 2014; Parreñas 2011).

## *Genealogies of Sex Trafficking Rescue*

Renegade efforts to find and rescue victims of human trafficking have been pursued internationally for the greater part of a decade, for instance, undertaken by controversial groups like International Justice Mission, and by individuals like *New York Times* journalist Nicholas Kristof, or self-proclaimed “slave hunter” Aaron Cohen.<sup>5</sup> These rescue efforts are made up of “self-styled American posses to fill the vacuum left by local law enforcement” (Soderlund 2005:64) exemplifying the renegade character of such rescue efforts for pursuing justice outside of the law. Gretchen Soderlund’s forceful feminist analysis of U.S. raid and rehabilitation campaigns argued that the tactics of sex trafficking rescue in the United States had a direct correlation to Bush-era conservative sexual politics abroad. Nearly a decade since Soderlund’s piece was published, U.S.-based sex trafficking rescue efforts have expanded tremendously, both globally<sup>6</sup> and now, as this paper illustrates, within U.S. borders.

The enthusiasm around this brand of civilian vigilantism is rooted in recent efforts to end “modern-day slavery”; however, as numerous scholars and practitioners have noted, the majority of these efforts have done little to address trafficking and instead lead to the policing and punishing of sex workers and immigrants (Cheng 2011; Shah 2008; Sharma 2005).<sup>7</sup> Such consequences of state and punitive control have been best captured by Elizabeth Bernstein’s (2010) concept of “carceral feminism,” which outlines the different ways in which antitrafficking activism—and in particular a puzzling strange bedfellows coalition of radical feminists and evangelical Christians—has amplified state power and criminal punishment for sex workers. Bernstein illustrates that under new configurations of neoliberal power and feminist governance, nonstate actors frequently, and often inevitably, serve the interests of the nation state. Another negative consequence of their popular and seemingly ubiquitous solutions is that they draw resources away from service agencies and community-based organizations that serve labor rights issues as opposed to prostitution’s abolition, for instance, sex worker rights organizations, migrant labor organizations, housing, and other social service agencies. In addition, Jennifer Musto’s (2010) engagement with “carceral protectionism” reveals how even the most extreme and punitive forms of law enforcement policing and control are always discussed within the putatively benevolent interests of protecting victims. These two scholarly interventions reveal how carceral projects are an inherent part of neoliberal governance, in which individual citizen action both supplements and complements formal state policing.

What distinguishes the nonstate actors in this study is that they are not formally trained in any capacity, but rather are lay people drawn from religious communities who are impassioned to act. Lacking the legal authority to conduct such vigilante rescues, they justify their participation by highlighting partnerships with the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), Department of Health and Human Services (HSS), and Homeland Security. Although these law enforcement entities do not publicly sanction or act on the information provided, the goal of the organizations is to motivate law enforcement against these populations, rather than provide services to them.

## *Vigilantism and Neoliberal Governance*

Global attention to the problem of modern-day slavery has created a unique lacuna for American citizens to enact surveillance and patrol over what are publicly deemed as dangerous or victimized bodies. These outreach projects mobilize the language of human trafficking rescue to justify civilian vigilantism and surveillance over predominantly working-class immigrants in Los Angeles. These practices reflect an underlying pathology of what urban planners have called NIMBY-ism (“Not in My Backyard” syndrome), an effect that describes community aversion to undesirable elements—in this case, crimes associated with immigration, low wage and informal work, and errant sexuality (Dear 1992; Tewdwr-Jones and McNeill 2000).

Vigilante abolitionism described herein may be understood as a key feature of neoliberal governance for several reasons. By prioritizing surveillance and policing objectives as alleged social welfare engagements, vigilante rescue highlights Loïc Wacquant's (2012) observation of the neoliberal double—"social-cum-penal"—regulation of the poor. In addition to prisons, immigration detention centers and human trafficking victim shelters have become contemporary sites of "prisonfare" and "workfare" (Shih 2015; Wacquant 2012), in which American citizen vigilante rescuers are empowered as citizen agents to police state order.

While earliest research on vigilantism has been interested in social action outside of or antagonism to state power (Abrahams 1998; Brown 1975; Johnston 1996), this paper provides empirical evidence that antitrafficking vigilantism extends a state agenda formed through moral panics around sex work, immigration, and the visibility of these intersections in public space. Contemporary dynamics in vigilante justice originate within discussions of community policing over a variety of social ills. Following a post-1970's era of heightened police corruption and brutality in urban areas across the United States, methods of community policing were introduced as more democratic models of patrol, aiming to provide a system of checks and balances over police misconduct (Trojanowicz and Bucqueroux 1990; Herbert 2001). Such community partnerships described a range of relationships in which "police, organized residents and, at times, other relevant government agencies [came] together to develop problem solving projects as a fear reduction and crime prevention strategy" (Muniz 2011). However, critical research on such community policing measures has revealed that despite community groups' intention to provide checks and balances over formal policing, they have frequently become co-opted by state actors to serve carceral state objectives (Crawford 1997; Garland 2001; Muniz 2010).

Within such early models of community policing, vigilantism was not a desired goal, and in fact, *partnerships* with law enforcement intended to explicitly dissuade civilian vigilantism (Johnston 1996). Forrest Stuart's ethnography of policing in Los Angeles's skid row demonstrates the particular partnerships that form between police and social service providers in relegating homeless residents to rehabilitation schemes that enforce residents' subordinate race and class positions. This disciplinary model of what Stuart terms "recovery management" is implicitly designed to coercively shepherd homeless people into rehabilitative programs that attempt to address the perceived—yet often inaccurate—"pathologies" of homelessness (Stuart 2014).

In addition to homelessness, scholars have identified numerous other social problems that have demanded unique partnerships between law enforcement and nonstate entities in the United States, including disaster response, illegal border crossings, and the war on terror. Writing about the post-hurricane Katrina flooding response, scholars have explained that emergency disaster management is a natural landscape for state and nonstate partnerships because the dire state of emergencies and lack of resources require citizens and law enforcement to work together (Deflem and Sutphin 2009; Villmoare 2007). In her ethnography of both law enforcement and citizen response to trafficking in Texas and California, Musto has demonstrated how the state's perceived impotence to properly manage human trafficking has been a major source of vigilante authority. The individual citizen's assumption of state responsibilities forms a cornerstone of neoliberal agenda by emboldening individual citizens to restore social order in light of insufficient state response to trafficking rescue and rehabilitation.

Moving away from a model of mere "partnerships" between state and nonstate actors, the rise of civilian vigilantism over the past decade may be attributed to the framing of social concerns as exceptional and seemingly outside of law enforcement's control. For instance, following the September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center, former President Bush urged American citizens to be "vigilant" regarding terrorism (Russ 2004, citing Bush 2001). Placing the demand for vigilance in the hands of U.S. citizens has led to increased instances of racial profiling of South Asian and Arab diaspora, civilian patrol of undocumented migration on the U.S.-Mexico border, and formally institutionalized search and seizure laws in several states, all examples of

what Bill Ong has labeled “racial vigilantism” (Ong 2002). Pardis Mahdavi’s (2013) recent manuscript has specifically called attention to the impact of the war on terror on the U.S. anti-trafficking response, aligning racially motivated and xenophobic panics into the global governance of human trafficking. Finally, deviant sexuality has traditionally been a site in which moral panics and fear establish regimes of public policing. Global research on sex work has identified abolitionist moral panics around sex as conduit for spreading panics about contagion, disease, and a threat to public health (Bliss 2010; Brents and Hausbeck 2005, 2010; Jenness 1990), and is also evident through the pervasive use of sex-related crimes as significant sites of public patrol, most notably, the publics’ control over sex offenders through the mandatory institutionalization of publicly accessible sex offender registries, and citizen’s arrest of sex offenders in public space (Tewksbury 2005).

Faith-based communities are a cornerstone of state and nonstate partnerships in urban governance. They have emerged as an important actor during recent environmental and natural disasters (Adams 2013) based on their capacity to provide aid with tremendous manpower and very little bureaucratic oversight. This has been particularly true for evangelical Christian organizations, which use funding and direct action to influence policy issues ranging from sex trafficking to the conversion of gays and lesbians, and mobilization of antiabortion politics to name a few (Erzen 2006; Medoff and Dennis 2011). Religious organizations have historically enhanced the social welfare activities of the state, yet are now also bolstering its criminal justice functions. Social justice activism has become a priority of new evangelicals, who align their theology with social justice concerns (Bernstein 2008; Cooper 2014; Zimmerman 2013).

Vigilante abolitionism is a new tactic in the antitrafficking movement, but more importantly further evidence of a new instance of neoliberal governance more generally. Building on literatures on aforementioned literatures, I argue that rescue vigilantism is also fundamentally entrepreneurial. It is a market-based enterprise that sells the experience of abolitionism, akin to other forms of antitrafficking intervention including, purchasing “slave-free goods,” participating in human trafficking reality tours, purchasing digital prostitution surveillance technologies, and more generally through its affiliation with the widespread nonprofit industrial complex that has to define antitrafficking engagement. State and penal regulation is thus filtered through eager consumers via “the educational and cultural cultivation of a new kind of self-promoting and self-policing entrepreneurial individualism.” (Sparke 2006:154). The entrepreneurial individualism that characterizes vigilante rescue is facilitated by certain privileged set of identities: their status as middle class concerned American citizens. This concern over trafficked women is mobilized through social panics around migration and sexual commerce, generating new affective public economies of policing. Finally, this paper also extends work on neoliberal vigilante governance by outlining how race, class, gender, and citizenship identities reinforce divides between middle-class white citizen rescuers and working-class immigrants and people of color.

## Methodology

Since 2009, two evangelical Christian antitrafficking nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)—Project Rescue LA (PRLA) and Thai Red Light Rescue LA (TRLR)<sup>8</sup>—have embarked on monthly outreach on the streets of Los Angeles. I participated as a monthly participant with each of these groups, attending over twenty-five human trafficking outreach efforts in Los Angeles. I learned about both organizations through ethnographic research on the movement to combat human trafficking in Southern California between 2008 and 2013. PRLA was a student group affiliated with a local Southern California evangelical Christian university and consisted primarily of young men. Thai Red Light Rescue LA was a branch of an organization that claims to

rescue and rehabilitate victims of sex trafficking in Bangkok—who themselves self-identify as sex workers—by providing them vocational training as jewelry makers. It was comprised primarily of female participants who were drawn to the activity after purchasing some of the organization’s jewelry. In addition to attending training and weekly outreach, I also attended monthly awareness-raising events that each group held to recruit new members, and raise funds for their efforts.<sup>9</sup> I made attempts to triangulate ethnographic observations with formal interviews with law enforcement officials that the organizations claimed to work with, but was never able to secure interviews with police.

As one of the only nonwhite outreach participants, and one who can speak Chinese and some Thai, outreach participants were always hopeful that my language skills would come in handy during outreach to immigrant communities. It is these particular forms of ethnic social capital, and my stated interest and research on human trafficking programs in China, Thailand, and the United States, that made me an acceptable member of the outreach teams. This trade-off between personal skills and experience in exchange for access occurred frequently throughout my research. Accompanying that trade-off was always a tension that to be immersed, I engaged in practices with which I disagree, ethnographic acts that were facilitated all too easily by my own mobility, class standing, and privilege. In the name of research and immersion, and to uncover the subjective motivations and tactics of the actors involved, I occupied public spaces in the same manner that I critique in this paper, and as demonstrated in a fieldnote excerpt herein, I have even enacted specific moments of my own surveillance through outreach as ethnographic encounter. At the same time, I voiced my concerns of problematic activities as they arose in context, as is also discussed in a fieldnote excerpt herein, with the hopes of sharing research findings with both organizations.

## **Authority and Identities of Vigilante Abolition**

The following data section is comprised of four sections: the first documents the historical antecedents of vigilante abolitionist efforts through examining U.S. domestic antitrafficking policy; subsequently, I focus on two distinct forms of rescue undertaken by different groups in Southern California, and I conclude with a broader snapshot of rescue efforts happening on a national scale.

### *Civilian Vigilance in U.S. Antitrafficking Policy*

The 2003 Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPRA 2003), a renewal of the 2000 TVPA, introduced the “Campaign to Rescue and Restore Victims of Human Trafficking” to identify victims of human trafficking in the United States. Launched by the U.S. HHS, this effort focused on raising public awareness of human trafficking, and encouraging victim identification by vigilant and aware American citizens. It promoted the American moral imperative<sup>10</sup>—a rhetoric employed by many U.S. politicians in the fight against trafficking—to “rescue” victims of trafficking through educating the public about the legal provisions and social policies available to trafficked persons. Public awareness posters and pamphlets compel viewers to “Look Beneath the Surface,” featuring photos of men and women of color—presumably recent immigrants as corresponding text suggests—in a range of working situations including agricultural work and dishwashing. One campaign poster simply features an Asian woman walking in public space with the same cautionary tale to the public: “A victim of human trafficking may look like many of the people you help everyday.” The poster campaign highlights a 24-hour human trafficking telephone hotline that provides referrals to law enforcement, or local nonprofit organizations that provide services to victims of trafficking.



Photos from U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Campaign to Rescue and Restore Victims of Human Trafficking.

This federal policy initiative has been matched by nonstate sponsored efforts focusing on civilian identification of cases of human trafficking in the United States. In 2008, The San Francisco-based organization *Not for Sale* launched a campaign advocating “backyard abolitionism,” and offered a paid course to train citizens to seek out and identify victims of human trafficking in their neighborhoods, near their homes and places of work. This program was not federally funded, though it used much of the same language of the HHS public rescue and awareness campaign that preceded it. Citizens are taught how to identify characteristics of slavery, and are instructed to both alert local police and identify local social service agencies that may assist trafficked persons.

The *Not for Sale* (NFS) Backyard Abolitionist Academy, once available in over six cities throughout the United States, offered five courses<sup>11</sup>: Strategic Investigation, Just Market Supply Chains, Active Faith Communities, Innovative Aftercare, and Effective Healthcare. Used together, these five modules claim to empower civilian community members who have no background in immigrant rights, human trafficking, or social service provision, an opportunity to pursue hands-on and engaged activism. The course on strategic investigation promised students education in “how to identify and document public cases of modern-day slavery by examining the anatomy of human trafficking cases,” and “how to work with fellow abolitionists to eradicate slavery in your own backyards.” Although they espouse public safety and humanitarian assistance goals, these efforts, like others described in this paper, are in their own right, profitable commercial undertakings. NFS generated a considerable amount of income from such efforts; Mengjun Li’s (2009) study of the academy, generated from her experience as a temporary staff member, reports that the *Not for Sale* Backyard Abolitionist Academy in Georgia brought in over \$20,000 for the two-day activity, comprising workshop fees, donations, and NFS (Not for sale) merchandise.

The methods of victim identification outlined by the HHS “Rescue and Restore” campaign were inspired by several early cases of human trafficking in the United States that were identified by “good samaritans.” In particular, the famed 1995 El Monte sweatshop case,<sup>12</sup> in which 72 undocumented workers were held in a Southern California garment factory under conditions of extreme labor exploitation and through threats of debt bondage. Located in a primarily residential area outside LA County, this case was exposed because a local resident reported suspicious and unusual behaviors to local law enforcement. Building on the prior efforts of concerned citizens, the language of “backyard” rescue establishes the boundaries of the U.S. community in opposition to the foreign figure of the trafficked “immigrant,” or “other” woman. Although located



within U.S. borders, the term *backyard abolitionism*, is perhaps an incorrect moniker, as citizens police what is happening in *other* people's backyards, typically working-class immigrant neighborhoods.

Both state and nonstate interventions are sutured through the National Human Trafficking Resource Center, a 24-hour hotline founded through the HHS campaign. The hotline is now run by the *Polaris Project*, a nonprofit abolitionist organization that receives government financial support for the hotline, and its other antitrafficking programs.<sup>13</sup> In 2008, the hotline logged just over 5,000 calls, and by 2010, the number of calls escalated to over 19,000 per year. On January 27, 2014, the number of total calls reached 100,000—though fewer than 1,000 human trafficking crimes have been pursued by local law enforcement since the hotline began. This gap, that only 1 percent of hotline calls have resulted in follow-up by law enforcement, is alarming and should raise questions about gaps between public perceptions of what constitutes human trafficking and its legally enforceable definitions in practice. While the *Polaris Project* monitors the hotline's call logs and produces data on types of calls received (Polaris Project 2015), research has yet to explore the effectiveness and impact of these particular rescue efforts in communities where they are undertaken.

The escalation of calls to the national antitrafficking hotline has accompanied a shift away from a good Samaritan model of identification, in which a citizen *happens* across a case of exploitation, into a response where targeted outreach trips in which groups throughout the country take to the streets to *actively* seek and find cases of human trafficking. Faith-based organizations in particular have stepped into the space of civilian rescue, articulating new forms of social activism outside of the state, made possible through vast networks of social and material capital that facilitate the organization of such activities.

### *Average Abolition*

I had been hearing a lot about human trafficking, and wanted to get involved. I tried to get involved with the Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking,<sup>14</sup> but they kept telling me that the best way to get involved was to fundraise for their organization. Fundraising is fine, but when every organization tells you to fundraise, you feel like aren't making an impact. I really wanted a way to get my hands dirty, and make a real difference. (Jim, 20-year-old outreach participant, student)

PRLA's mission was attuned to such sentiments as the one described by Jim above and the desire to pursue rescue as a form of public engagement of human trafficking. Their mission statement read,

As it stands, there is a massive gap between professional abolitionist organizations and abolitionist activists. While the professional abolitionist organizations are doing amazing work, there is often little opportunity for the average abolitionist activist to join in these operations beyond fundraising and awareness building. The result of this gap is a massive waste of resources with thousands of potential justice seekers standing idle at the sidelines. (PRLA Web site)

These objectives echo *Not for Sale* executive director David Batstone's call to marry "movement with intelligent action," or what he has alternatively coined "open source activism," harnessing public concern about human trafficking into concrete rescue opportunities. Twice a month for about two years,<sup>15</sup> PRLA gathered a group of roughly a dozen college-aged men to take to the streets for "Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Sweeps," referred to simply as "TIP Sweeps." The sweeps were conducted in the evenings, during which volunteers gathered to observe a targeted location and take notes on "suspicious" activities as outlined by the HHS toolkit, and eventually turned these notes over to law enforcement. The TIP Sweeps appealed to a large volunteer base of young men who wanted to become involved in combating human trafficking. This

opportunity required limited prior experience or time commitment—just a two-hour-long training and 30-minute debriefing session before each sweep.

PRLA's two male directors, recent graduates of the local evangelical university that housed the project, spent their weekdays perusing erotic services forums to identify the locations of each week's sweep. The directors created user profiles and searched online erotic services forms, ranging from Craigslist,<sup>16</sup> redbook, truthsayerz, and the erotic review, among others. On their own, they would each patronize a select number of the sites to visit individually and report back to the group. If they discovered suspicious activity, they would designate the site the location of future group "TIP Sweep."

Describing one visit to a massage parlor in the Mid-Wilshire area of Los Angeles (a primarily commercial district with many high-rise buildings), one of the organization's directors, Matthew, a 23-year-old white male and recent graduate from a local Southern California evangelical Christian university, recounted this typical outreach effort:

I found this massage parlor on one of the erotic services sites. Clients kept mentioning it, and sharing prices they had paid for sex, along with really graphic reviews of sexual experiences—I mean you don't want to see what some of this stuff said about these girls. I decided I wanted to check this place out for myself and went last Wednesday around 8 o'clock. I walked in pretending I just wanted a massage and tried to talk to the receptionist about the different services they offered. She really wasn't friendly and mainly seemed interested in what I was going to buy. I realized that I would just have to pay for a massage if I wanted to talk to anyone. I saw on the menu that the massage cost \$70, and I paid. The receptionist took me back past numerous other closed doors. I tried to listen and peek inside any of the doors, but I couldn't hear anything. She brought me back to a room and introduced me to a young girl . . . couldn't have been more than sixteen (years old). After she closed the door, I told the girl that I didn't want a massage, and I just wanted to talk. She seemed really relieved, but her English wasn't that great, so we couldn't really communicate. I think she was from Vietnam and she said that she was 18, but trust me, she looked a lot younger than that. We tried to make small talk, but after about 20 minutes that wasn't really working, so I shared with her the brochure about human trafficking, and gave her my cell phone number, and told her to call me in case she ever needed anything. (Fieldnotes, February 2009)

Matthew's disappointment at the limited information he gained from this visit was overshadowed by his adamant skepticism over the worker's age, the only concrete indicator that would allow him to mark this as a case of human trafficking. As the Empower Foundation, a sex worker rights organization in Thailand has critiqued, many human trafficking first responders refuse to believe a sex worker when she shares her age because they either long for the fantasy of discovering a case of human trafficking, or because they face pressure to produce human trafficking victims and prosecutions—and under many nation's laws, sex workers under the age of 18 are automatically classified as victims of trafficking by law (Empower Foundation 2012; Fieldnotes, March 2013).

Like others before him, Matthew saw a virtuous behavior in entering a room through the premise of an intimate commercial encounter, but disavowing the sex industry by indicating to the massage worker that he just wanted to "talk." Journalists like Nicholas Kristof, who has conducted a series of exposés, raids, and rescues of alleged child sexual exploitation in Cambodia, and elsewhere, have used this method of paying for intimate and sexual services only to use the time to conduct interviews, or as the premise for extractions. Commonly, such consumers believe that they are doing sex workers a favor by paying, though not requiring them to engage in sexual intercourse; however, sex workers in Thailand, well accustomed to such tactics from a wide range of students, clients, journalists, and researchers, now request that such clients pay double or triple the amount of time needed for such an "interview," as it requires a greater emotional investment than other sex acts (Fieldnotes, February 2013).

When recounting these individual outreach efforts, the two directors warned outreach participants not to take such rescue efforts lightly, and mentioned threats to personal safety, and the potential criminal networks that facilitate human trafficking rings. Prior to embarking on these outreach trips, participants were required to attend a mandatory two-hour training session, in which the organization's directors explained the safety issues and repeated to the group that the project worked closely with local law enforcement as a testament to the seriousness of the issues.

With the sufficient allure of danger surrounding these rescues, PRLA convened bi-monthly surveillance events at different locations mentioned on the erotic services Web sites to conduct surveillance of illicit activities. One winter evening in 2011, a group of eight male college students and myself gathered in Santa Monica, a predominantly white, upper-middle-class neighborhood in West Los Angeles. We were instructed to surround, surveil, and profile a massage shop, which was identified only by a small sign in neon purple lights that read "MASSAGE" in the window. Easy to miss amid high-end restaurants, grocery stores, and numerous other stores, the organizers were eager to point out how deceptively human trafficking can "lurk where we least expect it."

Crouching behind garbage cans, and underneath construction scaffolding, the outreach director instructed our group to record the number of people who entered the establishment, their race/ethnicity, gender, age, and how long each individual stayed in the building. A separate group of outreach participants was in the back of the establishment, with a view of the back door, hoping to observe and record any suspicious activity in the back of the establishment. Just before outreach began, the directors reminded us of a list of suspicious behaviors that are delineated in the U.S. "Rescue and Restore Victims of Human Trafficking" Toolkit for Identifying Victims of Trafficking.

A victim of trafficking may look like many of the people you help every day. You can help trafficking victims get the assistance they need by looking beneath the surface for the following clues:

- Evidence of being controlled
- Evidence of an inability to move or leave job
- Bruises or other signs of battering
- Fear or depression
- Non-English speaking
- Recently brought to this country from Eastern Europe, Asia, Latin America, Canada, Africa, or India
- Lack of passport, immigration or identification documentation. (U.S. HSS 2013)

Providing this context to our outreach team, the leader cautioned us to look for the aforementioned suspicious behaviors in the parking lot. He explained, "We are looking for women who get out of a car together to see if they may be coerced as they are coming and going." Another experienced outreach worker chimed in: "Don't forget to note if you see someone who looks underage, women under the age of 18 are definitely victims of trafficking."

Small groups of two to three "teams" dispersed around the establishment to obtain a 360-degree view of who was coming and going. Outreach efforts were always held for an hour, typically between 8 p.m. to 10 p.m., when the sun had already set, so that the surveillance would not be conspicuous. However, this also meant that the darkness made it fairly difficult to discern details about activities witnessed. Across several months of outreach notes, the group's characterizations of events were always blurry. For instance, when trying to list details about patrons of the establishment, participants often had a difficult time profiling certain racial demographics, resulting in recurring several annotations: "Dark bald man, Arab (maybe), entered massage parlor for 33 minutes"; "Dark man, probably Hispanic, entered brothel, did not exit" (Fieldnotes, April 2010).

Typically college-age white males, these participants modeled their vigilante efforts after other males before them who accessed the rescue field through their identities as potential consumers to penetrate spaces of commercial sex without arousing suspicion. These forms of human trafficking outreach were facilitated primarily through gender difference and consumptive identity as males, and who accessed the space with equal parts sexual titillation and fantasy over rescue.

### *PRLA Partnerships with Law Enforcement*

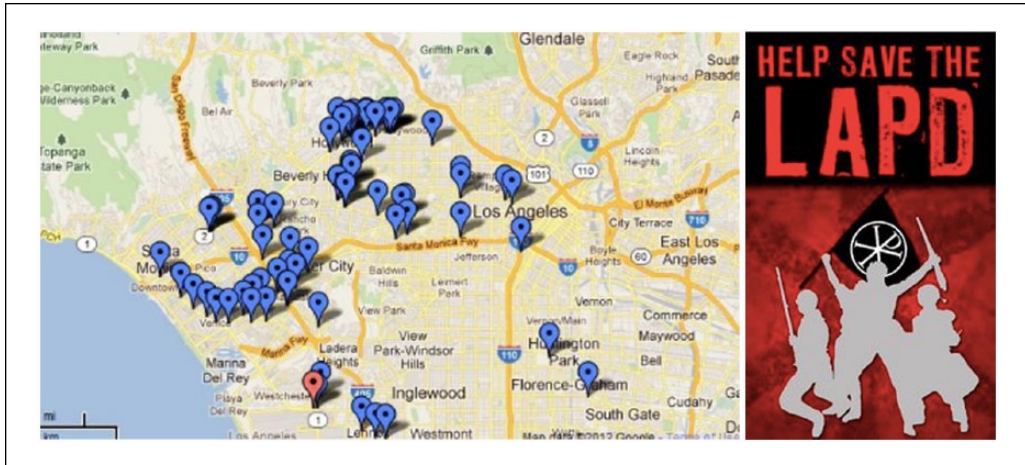
For the past two decades, the LAPD's vice unit and police departments across the United States have conducted similar "undercover" operations to expose street-based prostitution, as well as prostitution in select indoor venues (see Bernstein 2007a; Weitzer 1999). Predating the focus to human trafficking, the LAPD's vice unit was primarily tasked with addressing prostitution, drug, and gang-related crime, and following the directives of the 2000 TVPA, prostitution became the target of interagency collaboration between state and nonstate actors. Between 2004 and 2010, the U.S. Department of Justice and California Emergency Management Agency funded the creation of nine regional task forces to combat human trafficking in California (State of California Department of Justice 2015). In 2005, The Los Angeles Metro Area Task Force<sup>17</sup> on Human Trafficking established an "inter-agency" network of social service providers, law enforcement officials, and prominent community members with the aim to "improve tactics for identifying and rescuing trafficking victims, provide assistance to victims and prosecute those responsible for human trafficking" (Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking [CAST] 2015).

In 2006, the U.S. Department of Justice awarded the LAPD a \$450,000 grant to develop and implement a series of mandatory trainings for first responders to identify victims of trafficking. The efforts to include law enforcement in antitrafficking intervention shifted the LAPD's surveillance of vice from a lens of punishment toward a rhetoric of protection. Although contemporary police intervention is increasingly marked by partnerships with social service agencies (Musto 2016; Stuart 2016), the LAPD did not formally condone the relationship with civilian vigilante groups discussed in this paper, nor did they verify such relationships after numerous attempts at requesting information.

Following each "TIP Sweep," PRLA outreach participants are asked to submit notes documenting their observations. These notes were eventually compiled into a report that contained over 400 different locations of sexual service in Los Angeles and were presented to the LAPD in 2012. This report provided the following information about the following categories: Name, Address, Hours, Happy Ending, Full Service, Age Range, and Ethnicity. The majority of locations listed featured Chinese, Korean, Thai, and Latino employees. The organization's promotional materials describe their methods:

Once PRLA has finished with its observations, a detailed report is created describing the situation. PRLA then ranks the likelihood of trafficking at the location and delivers the report to the local anti-trafficking division at the police. The goal of these observations and reports is to gather enough indisputable evidence that the police will be able to accurately move on the situation, rescue the girls and arrest the perpetrators. (PRLA Web site)

The report included a visual map that located "brothels" amid different locations, and was posted and made publicly available on the organization's Facebook page. At each outreach and publicity event, PRLA organizers were proud to note that their mapping materials and the products of outreach were "useful to the LAPD." However, the CAST, the largest formal NGO partner of the LAPD, derided PRLA's operations as dangerous and uninformed. During an interview with a CAST shelter staff member, I learned that CAST maintained a close working partnership with the LAPD, and the Offices of Homeland Security and Immigration Control and Enforcement to arrange for



Human Trafficking Rescue as Surveillance and Carceral Vigilante Coalitions; Images from Project Rescue LA's Facebook page.

social services at the site of an antitrafficking raid or victim “extraction.” CAST staff shared that vigilante operations circumvent this formal procedure by “jeopardize[ing] existing long-term law enforcement investigations into places of possible exploitation” and endanger victim’s rights because vigilante groups do not have access to immediate social services (Fieldnotes, April 2010).

In response to such critiques, PRLA organizers accused CAST of being “gatekeepers” of activist efforts in Los Angeles, allowing very few opportunities for concerned citizens to “make a difference.”<sup>18</sup> They maintained that they had a direct connection to LAPD vice officers and to Homeland Security officers in Southern California. Although I was personally unable to verify these partnerships, the authenticity of such relationships did not matter for outreach participants, who understood their confidentiality as validation of the importance of their work. Boasting about their cordial and collaborative rapport with law enforcement, the lead organizers would often share paraphrased examples of law enforcement approval:

These guys were amazed by the type of data that we are able to get. They would tell us that their hands are tied because they need to follow so much protocol, and that they never have enough manpower to do the kind of detailed legwork that we do. . . . We are the real footsoldiers of justice because we are not constrained by funding or bureaucracy to pursue justice for the enslaved. (Fieldnotes, March 2010)

Without public support from the LAPD, PRLA demonstrated their organization’s links to the LAPD in numerous ways. In late 2011, they used their social media site to launch a campaign to “Help Save the LAPD,” whose human trafficking and prostitution vice crimes unit were in danger of being shut down due to lack of funding following budget cuts to state infrastructure during California’s economic recession of 2011–2012. Such advocacy efforts were never reciprocal, as the LAPD and Homeland Security never formally disclosed a relationship with PRLA, nor did they step out to support PRLA before their operations closed in 2012. In a meeting with the PRLA director several years following the end of their operations, he shared that they ultimately closed down because of a collective fatigue and sense of futility:

The system is so messed up. We compiled hundreds of pages of reports, which both the LAPD and Homeland told us was really good stuff. But in the end, they were never able to free any of these

girls or prosecute any of these cases because the system is so messed up. Unless someone is literally bound to a bed, you are not going to be able to prove that she is a victim of sex trafficking, and with all the proof we gave them—I'm talking binders and binders of data—they would often tell us that they just didn't have enough "evidence" to pursue a case of sex trafficking. (Interview, February 2015)

## Mobilizing Rescue through Difference

While young men who directed and participated in PRLA efforts relied on their race, class, and gender identities as white middle-class male consumers to gain access to sites of commercial sex, Thai Red Light Rescue Project's (TRLR) outreach volunteers were unable to assume client identities because their outreach team was comprised almost exclusively of female participants. In 2009, Thai Red Light Rescue expanded their social enterprise that trained sex workers as jewelry makers in the name of human trafficking rescue and rehabilitation, and introduced a strategy that offered weekly human trafficking outreach opportunities as a "more direct" way to become involved in antitrafficking activism. This opportunity appealed to jewelry consumers, many of whom found the act of wearing the jewelry meaningful because it visibly demonstrated a commitment to abolitionist politics; participating in human trafficking rescue promised an additional opportunity to "live" abolitionist politics through direct rescue (Shih 2015).

Los Angeles's Koreatown and MacArthur Park, respectively, predominantly Asian and Latino working-class immigrant neighborhoods, were the primary targets of Thai Red Light Rescue Project's outreach during my participation between 2009 and 2011. Every Thursday at 8 p.m., a group of fifteen to twenty women assembled at the Coffee Bean on Wilshire and Western in Los Angeles's Koreatown, a transportation hub that sits at the nexus of several working-class immigrant neighborhoods. Rescue participants mapped outreach routes, broke up into groups, and prayed before setting out to an hour of civilian patrol on the streets. The organization called the outreach "Tread"; the organization's director explained the biblical and missionary origins of tread: "it means that whenever you step foot somewhere, you claim the land" (Fieldnotes, March 2010). Small groups of about four to five people typically dispersed onto a 10 × 10 block radius in Koreatown and around MacArthur Park to claim justice and "shine a light" on these supposed places of darkness and human trafficking.

Equipped with neither language skills in Spanish or Korean, the two primary languages spoken on these densely populated immigrant enclaves, TRLR activists train outreach volunteers to look for suspicious activity, which included everything from homeless individuals sleeping at bus stations, a group of migrant workers gathered together eating in front of a taco truck, or most perilously, an attractive Asian or Latina woman walking alone—a not unusual sighting in what Anna Kim (2012) describes as a highly popular "entertainment enclave" (Kim 2012). Each night following outreach, each group is responsible for filling out a form that documents (1) the route they had chosen, (2) any unusual behaviors present, (3) any suspicious establishments to keep an eye out for in future weeks of outreach efforts, (4) individuals encountered, and (5) where, to whom, and how many pamphlets were given.

During one fall evening outreach in Koreatown, just after finals had finished at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), an outreach group witnessed an Asian woman standing alone on Wilshire and 7th Streets near a prominent "booking club," a Korean-owned club where a formal negotiation process allows men to buy the company of women through drinks and other commercial exchanges. A discussion ensued. Volunteers speculated on the possibility that the woman was a victim of human trafficking, using as their evidence discussion on her dress and appearance. Dressed in a tight fitting mini-skirt, high heels, and an equally snug-fitting tank top, the group collectively mulled over their approach:

A: Look at what she's wearing . . . and she's standing alone, what should we do?

B: It might be dangerous, her trafficker might be in that club, we've profiled it before on outreach. Some really shady stuff happens in there.

C: Well we should really do something because, I mean, she's tiny! She must be freezing.

B: Look [points to woman], She's getting on her phone.

D: Well maybe one of us can go over and give her some of these pamphlets [pamphlets that provide information about the emergency hotline for identifying victims of trafficking].

B: Ok, good idea, but be very, very careful.

As outreach participants gathered the pamphlets that the organization had ordered from the Department of Health and Human Services website in the language they assumed this potential victim needed (Korean, Chinese, Vietnamese, and English language pamphlets were chosen), a silver Honda Civic drove up, the window rolled down and some indistinguishable voices shouted back and forth. The woman got in the car, and as the car drove away, the outreach group was shocked and stimulated by the possibility that they had just witnessed an instance of street prostitution. They looked to one another and then quickly settled down from their arousal to begin musing about the unimaginable and undesirable fate that was awaiting this woman. What they did not take note of however, was a back seat filled with college-aged men and women, a UCLA license plate and UCLA parking tag hanging off the rearview mirror. (Fieldnotes, June 2010)

To other observers, who were not intent on discovering human trafficking, this scene might plausibly seem like a group of Asian American college students gathering to celebrate the end of finals week. As the car pulled away, I mentioned that the parking hangtag looked familiar to me as a UCLA graduate student and suggested to the group that this may have been a group of students celebrating the end of finals. After a contemplative pause, the group's director said that she would pray that was the case, but that it was hard to know because of the "dark spirits that rule over this area." Another member nodded and added, "even if she was a student, she still could be a victim of exploitation. I have heard of students that go to these clubs and become victims of exploitation." The director closed out the discussion by remarking that our objective was to reach as many people as possible in hopes that our efforts made a difference.

Details that suggested observed phenomenon were not cases of human trafficking were frequently ignored or discarded, as the outreach group had already determined human trafficking was present in Koreatown. This was the narrative that had been sculpted by the organization through mandatory trainings that described Koreatown's high density of immigrants and reputation as an entertainment enclave with karaoke, bars, massage parlors, and booking clubs. As the target of our outreach drove away, all that was left to do in her absence was to indicate in the outreach notes that we may have potentially witnessed an act of human trafficking. These notes are mandatorily completed after weekly outings and, as with the case with PRLA, were systematically given to the LAPD every few months in the name of assisting law enforcement. As in the case of PRLA, the LAPD did not sanction Thai Red Light Rescue's collaborations, and I was unable to verify how law enforcement used the materials.

As outsiders to these communities, I suggested that Thai Red Light Rescue LA collaborate with local area social service and immigrant rights organizations. The organization's director responded with hesitation: "We don't really know which organizations we would reach out to, and we don't have enough resources. Plus, we check in with the police after each rescue opportunity, so someone in the community does know what is happening." On one occasion, the

organization did partner with a local Korean American church during one sermon that focused on trafficking, but failed to liaise with some of the larger well-established community-based organizations like the Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance (KIWA), Pilipino Worker's Center (PWC), Thai Community Development Corporation (TCDC), or Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of LA (CHIRLA). These local area nonprofits provide a range of services to ensure worker's rights and immigrant social welfare, including organizing legal and advocacy campaigns against wage theft, community organizing for undocumented students, household workers, and day laborers, and provide language-specific direct services to assist undocumented persons to obtain drivers licenses, find employment, access affordable food, and file taxes.<sup>19</sup> Uninformed about these local community resources, the group of outreach volunteers was unaware of the challenges and constraints to immigrant workers in Koreatown, and potentially divert resources from existing organizations. Justifying their response through the LAPD once again demonstrates that carceral institutions and approaches are bolstered over social service interventions.<sup>20</sup>

On a different outreach occasion in Koreatown, outreach leaders encouraged me to engage a Chinese-speaking older woman at a busy bus stop on Wilshire Blvd. The outreach group observed Asian script on her shopping bag and asked me whether the characters were Chinese—I replied that they were, and all were enthusiastic that our team would have the opportunity to conduct outreach in a non-English language. I approached the woman and introduced myself with the script we were instructed to use translated to Mandarin:

Hello, my name is Shi Linlin<sup>21</sup> and I am a volunteer with a non-profit organization here in Los Angeles. I was wondering if you had ever heard of human trafficking?

This brazen introduction was almost always met with a startled pause, a dash of confused skepticism, quickly followed by what seemed to be annoyance with the random solicitation from a stranger. Accustomed to such a disinterested response, outreach teams were always heavily armed with antitrafficking pamphlets from the Office to Rescue and Restore Victims of Human Trafficking. My teammates on outreach eagerly handed several Chinese language brochures to me.

I held the pamphlets in my hand and continued in our typical manner of engagement, “Here is some information about human trafficking. It is a really important problem in the United States, and there are laws that can protect people you may know.”

The woman scanned our group, looked back at me, looked down to the pamphlets lying in my extended hand, and shook her hand and in Mandarin curtly replied: “*Bu yong, bu yong*” [“No need, no need”], warding off the unwanted brochures. As an outreach team, we had encountered this response frequently and had prepared a response: “Even if you don't need it for yourself, perhaps you know someone else who does? Please take one and give them to friends or people you work with.” At this particular moment, I held back from delivering this final retort, which seemed unrealistic given that the woman's bus was arriving and she had already turned her back to us to position herself to board. Her hands were also fully occupied with the grocery bags that had allowed us to identify her as a likely Chinese speaker in the first place. And as second best option, our group decided to leave pamphlets on the bus stop bench with hopes that future travelers might find them useful.

Outreach participants frequently interpreted pauses or looks of confusion as affirmations of the importance of their work. A response of confusion was met by assurance that this community was unaware of the perils of human trafficking, while a response of pause or recoil was met by confirmation that the subject herself could be a victim of trafficking, whose “pimp” was watching nearby. More often than not, it seemed that many of those we approached did not speak English, did not have the time to read through the materials as they were in a hurry to get home



or to work, and did not want to be bothered by a group of young and exceedingly bubbly women clutching informational pamphlets and lattes from Coffee Bean. The fact that the outreach populations did not speak English, and were often busy in transit, provided the sole affirmation that outreach teams needed—that of the subject’s immigrant status, evidenced by skin color, clothing, and language skills. This conflation of women’s immigrant working-class status with victimization was prompted by the Rescue and Restore Campaign’s cues to find victims of human trafficking among “immigrants,” and “non-English speakers.”

In 2010, Thai Red Light Rescue LA expanded its outreach to Los Angeles’s MacArthur Park, a busy public space with a circumference of about half a mile surrounded by shops, informal food vendors, families on picnics, and pedestrian passers-by in a primarily Central and Latin American neighborhood. Outreach participants to MacArthur Park were warned about the dangers that lurked beneath the surface at the park, noting public media reporting of cases of violent crime, muggings, and drug dealings. In light of its dangerous reputation, most outreach to MacArthur Park happened on weekend afternoons, in broad daylight for safety.

While outreach in Koreatown focused on identifying potential victims, outreach workers in MacArthur Park seemed more intent on observing and recording markers of illicit or underground economic activity. As a result, the notes focused on single black and Latino men who appeared to be idly standing by, with “no apparent purpose” in the park. Outreach workers marked these men as potential pimps, traffickers, drug dealers, gangsters—a wide array of possible identities fitting in the general category as criminal. They surveyed and documented what activities such men were involved in and submitted their findings monthly in a portfolio to the LAPD.

An unpublished ethnography of MacArthur Park conducted by a UCLA undergraduate sociology major revealed that many of the informal vendors standing idly by were not the criminals that police, local media, and concerned onlookers were so intent on finding, but were rather individuals who assumed different roles in assisting immigrants. This paper explained that undocumented students forged relationships with agents in MacArthur Park to secure false social security cards to facilitate their formal employment. Although outside the law, this productive network of informal services and support deemed dangerous and criminal ironically assists migrants in accessing jobs with *more* security and formality (Barrera 2010).

Both Project Rescue and Thai Red Light Rescue relied heavily on racial profiling to identify those in need of rescue and those who may be perpetrators of trafficking. Such racially motivated surveillance has existed across other forms of community policing, for instance, the profiling of Latino recyclers by West Los Angeles neighborhood watch, the profiling of graffiti and gang behavior, and on a national scale, through the violent racial profiling and acceptable vigilante and community “justice” over undesirable populations. The 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin, an African American teenager killed by a former police officer and neighborhood watch member conducting civilian surveillance is just the most recent example of the use of civilian force and authority.<sup>22</sup>

Existing methodological insights into the challenges of researching human trafficking are instructive for problematizing methods of street outreach. Pointing out the difficulties in studying trafficking in persons, Liz Kelly has written that research on human trafficking allows the researcher to “find anything you want” (Kelly 2005). Because it is allegedly “hidden beneath the surface” as the popular Health and Human Service campaign claims, researchers, activists, journalists, and concerned citizens are equipped with the justification to imagine the “melodramatic” (Vance 2012) horrors and possibilities of human trafficking, often lacking substantial empirical evidence of its reality. Vigilante abolitionism is thus paradoxical: concerned citizens are told that human trafficking is pervasive yet they cannot see it because it is by nature an illicit criminal enterprise. As such, proxy markers of poverty, recent immigration status, sexualized femininity, and racial and ethnic difference become the symptoms of human trafficking that allow vigilante rescuers to target already marginalized groups in the name of victim identification. In two years

of outreach with both organizations, never did I encounter a situation of human trafficking with outreach teams.<sup>23</sup> However, for outreach participants, *failing* to see what they set out to identify week after week simply served as confirmation that they needed to take to the streets more frequently and look deeper beneath the surface to uncover the realities that had been suggested through political and moral scripts about human trafficking.

In a separate insight into methodology, Denise Brennan (2005) has found that interviewing trafficked persons through social service organizations often creates a situation where organizations “speak for” trafficked people in the name of victim protection. Rescue organizations frequently used the case for victim protection, and the sensitivity of ongoing criminal investigations, as the main reason why they could not fully disclose the nature of their law enforcement partnerships. These arguments, of the seriousness and confidentiality of case information, are a fundamental mechanism of vigilante rescue—they use and reuse the goals of victim protection to shield state and nonstate carceral partnerships from external oversight.

### *National Scales of Rescue*

Outside of Southern California, organizations in cities spanning from Oklahoma to New Orleans have created pathways of civilian intervention to supplement and replace law enforcement efforts. Recently, the Cincinnati-based *Imagine Foundation* conducted three months of research profiling different erotic services advertisements on the Internet. The completed report mapped all the areas in which commercial sex was being sold along interstate highways. The organization intentionally elides any form of sex work with human trafficking to achieve its aim of abolishing all sex work. It highlights the connections between prostitution and human trafficking by partnering with the Underground Freedom Museum in Cincinnati, Ohio, which has recently dedicated a wing of the Museum to a permanent exhibit “modern day slavery” titled *Invisible: Slavery Today*.<sup>24</sup> At the press release of the report, the NGO met with local law enforcement, stating, “We are going to share more specific information with law enforcement, such as exact phone numbers and places, so they can investigate it if they want to” (Imagine Foundation 2014). In addition to seeking to motivate law enforcement activity, this organization’s recent research findings advocated increased engagement by social groups, faith-based organizations, and individual citizens to take an active role in identifying sex trafficking.

Recent efforts to combat human trafficking have also sought to institutionalize surveillance through various formal “training and identification” initiatives. Around the country, such trainings have identified a host of citizen “first responders” ranging from hotel employees, border control agents, postal workers, medical personnel, and beauty salon workers. For instance, a non-profit organization named “Innocents at Risk” has begun training flight attendants on how to identify potential victims of trafficking during travel, while a separate 501(c)(3) organization named “Truckers against Trafficking,” conducts identification trainings for those in “the trucking and travel plaza industry to combat domestic sex trafficking.” These ambitious and far reaching efforts have occurred without systemic verification of the impacts of such surveillance. What this article has demonstrated is an ubiquitous civilian panic and suspicion around working class women of color bodies—and their perceived sexualization—in public space.

Compelled by similar calls to action, civilian groups everywhere from Nevada, to North Carolina, to New Jersey enter strip clubs and commercial sex establishments to distribute awareness-raising material about human trafficking. A 2014 effort undertaken by the National Council of Jewish Women Los Angeles Division initiated a campaign to mandate all businesses to put up signs about human trafficking to increase awareness for victim identification throughout the city.<sup>25</sup> Last, for-profit enterprises have now joined rescue efforts including a Memphis-based tech startup called “Rescue Forensics,” which offers paid surveillance technologies to document locations of sex work (Grant 2015).

## Conclusion

Ten years since the inception of the U.S. Campaign to Rescue and Restore Victims of Human Trafficking, and five years since *Not for Sale* began its “backyard abolitionist academy,” calls for civilian efforts to rescue victims of trafficking have expanded globally and within U.S. borders. This paper has traced the emergence of “vigilante rescue” operations within Southern California, in which antitrafficking outreach volunteers move into communities that they have no stake in or knowledge about, and measure victimhood and vulnerability through bias-driven perceptions of ethnicity, race, gender, and class difference. These empirical cases suggest another way in which contemporary antitrafficking rescue functions as an extension of neoliberal and punitive nation state agendas.

Informed by circuits of transnational activism that narrate tales of sex trafficking and its rescue throughout the world, civilian outreach and rescue efforts in Southern California are embedded in nativist, racist, classist, and gendered notions of who trafficked persons are and the inevitability that they must be saved. Project Rescue Los Angeles’ contingent of primarily male rescuers to Los Angeles’s erotic services establishments uses white male identities as potential consumers of immigrant sex work as its entry point for intervention, while Thai Red Light Rescue Project’s female rescuers to MacArthur Park and Koreatown rely on racial, ethnic, and perceived class differences as markers of vulnerability to patrol working-class immigrants in the area. Class privilege here functions as a marker of distinction of the white modern-day abolitionist, further cemented by the fact that acts of rescue are ultimately acts of volunteer work, leisure, and consumption.

Situating new trends in human trafficking vigilante rescue within the extant literatures on neoliberal governance globally, this article argues that vigilante rescue binds state and nonstate actors to enforce and extend state goals of surveillance and policing of immigrants and sex workers. Through funding, providing civilian groups with government antitrafficking brochures, and through national public awareness campaigns that demand vigilance to identify victims of trafficking, the state has marshaled large cohorts of untrained civilians in the rescue effort. Such partnerships provide critical insight into how twenty-first-century neoliberal policing emboldens American citizens with new forms of structural power to surveil and patrol marginalized communities. These efforts remain largely uncontested due to the overwhelming veneer of humanitarianism and protection that belies contemporary antitrafficking efforts, though the putative benevolence of antitrafficking rescue outreach is betrayed by the fundamentally problematic goals of carceral redress.

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## Notes

1. Human trafficking had previously been defined by the 1949 United Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation and Prostitution of Others. The 2000 Palermo Protocol established human trafficking as “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 or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation . . . of the prostitution of others or other *forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs . . .*” (Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the U.N. Convention against Transnational Organized Crims. G.A. Res. 55/25, Annex II, U.N. GAOR, 55<sup>th</sup> Sess., U.N. Doc. A/55/383 (Nov. 15, 2000) Article 2).
2. See, Human Rights Center. 2005. “Freedom Denied: Forced Labor in California.” University of California, Berkeley, CA. Available online at <http://www.oas.org/atip/country%20specific/Forced%20Labor%20in%20California.pdf>; <http://www.nbclosangeles.com/news/local/Child-Prostitutes-Rescued-Compton-Sex-Trafficking-Case-221944441.html>
3. Notably, former president Bush’s White Council on Faith-based Initiatives to combat human trafficking created after the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) allocated an unprecedented amount of funding to faith-based antitrafficking organizations. Globally, the prioritization of anti-sex trafficking stance has been perpetuated by specific mechanisms such as the “anti-prostitution pledge” that forbid organizations that support sex workers rights from receiving U.S. humanitarian assistance.
4. Sex worker rights activists and advocates globally challenge the explicit focus on turning to labor trafficking because commercial sex is still not recognized as a form of legal work, with needs ranging from wage regulations, benefits, and to occupational safety.
5. For accounts of civilian-led raid and rescue, see Nicholas Kristof (2011), and Aaron Cohen and Christine Buckley (2009).
6. For examples of other global rescue operations, see “Mission Trips to Stop Human Trafficking” (<http://www.missionfinder.org/stop-human-trafficking-resources/>), and reporting on the Grey Man, an Australian civilian antitrafficking rescue project under investigation by the Thai government for fraudulent claims of child trafficking rescue in Thailand (<http://www.nswp.org/es/news-story/the-grey-man-and-the-akhas-anti-trafficking-thailand>).
7. California’s controversial Proposition 35, drafted in the name of combating human trafficking, is a prime illustration of laws that continue to punish sex workers.
8. The names of organizations and participants have been anonymized to protect privacy.
9. In subsequent years, I completed over 30 months of ethnographic participant observation at Thai Red Light Rescue’s Bangkok office and an additional jewelry-training project in Beijing, China (Shih 2013; Shih 2014).
10. In addition to many scholars who have discussed the role of “moral panics” in U.S. antitrafficking response, see in particular the language in the 2003 induction speech made by John Miller, then director of the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons.
11. The abolitionist academy stopped operations in 2012 to focus on its international activities.
12. This case is often described as the case that motivated the founding of the Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking (CAST), California’s oldest and largest antihuman trafficking nonprofit organization.
13. <http://www.polarisproject.org/what-we-do/national-human-trafficking-hotline/the-nhtrc/overview>
14. The Coalition to Abolish Slavery and Trafficking is the largest antitrafficking organization in the Los Angeles area. Volunteering requires extensive background checks and an investment in 20 hours of training before one can attend. CAST reported that aspiring volunteers frequently did not possess the skills or technical background needed for social service assistance in the areas of psychological

- counseling and legal aid. Given the mismatch between skillsets and organizational needs, there was often a wait list of 6 months to a year to participate in volunteer training. These constraints posed a barrier to the types of volunteer opportunities that engaged citizens seek, and are one reason why concerned citizens have turned to vigilante rescue, or paid opportunities for human trafficking outreach (see Bernstein and Shih 2014).
15. The director shut the project down in 2012 citing a change in personal career priorities and lacking funding to continue operations.
  16. There has been significant public debate about how Craigslist erotic services and Village Voice backpage sections may serve as brokers of human trafficking. Numerous abolitionist groups have called for Craigslist and the Village Voice to abandon the erotic services section of their Web site. The debates over periodicals' erotic services sections has dovetailed with increased attention to commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC), a growing subsection of the movement against trafficking (see <http://www.villagevoice.com/sex-trafficking/>). In June 2014, the FBI shut down redbook.com claiming it was under investigations for facilitating child sex trafficking. The San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Outreach Project (SWOP) responded with a statement asserting that the increasing censorship of online venues for sex work makes sex workers more vulnerable to violence and unsafe working conditions.
  17. For a complete list of members, see <http://www.castla.org/coalition-members#la>
  18. The extended application procedure and mandatory two-day CAST volunteer training deterred many eager citizens seeking to become involved in that organization's antitrafficking work. The organization maintained that such bureaucratic hurdles to selecting volunteers ensured that their volunteers had the highest skills and most sincere time commitments to volunteering.
  19. See <http://pwsc.org/ab60-drivers-license-clinic/>; <http://www.chirla.org/CommunityOrganizing>; <http://thaicdc.org>
  20. Many of these organizations are listed as members of the LA Metropolitan Human Trafficking Task Force. Unlike Project Rescue LA (PRLA) and Thai Red Light Rescue (TRLR), the aforementioned organizations are secular. Religious faith is vital to both rescue operations for two main reasons. The first is that both faith-based groups understand human trafficking, as a crisis of spiritual warfare, and thus believe prayer, prostelyzation, and conversion are essential to ending human trafficking. Second, the act of civilian outreach is itself a meaningful practice of religious observance. These new practices of public religiosity as social justice are discussed at length in a separate manuscript (Shih 2015).
  21. Speaking in Chinese, I used my Chinese name.
  22. Here it is vital to note that Marissa Alexander, another Florida citizen who fired a gun in her home in self-defense of an abusive spouse, was not successful in using Florida's Stand Your Ground laws, which protected Trayvon Martin's assailant George Zimmerman. Her sentence was overturned in January 2015 after serving three years. This further demonstrates the intersecting raced and gendered asymmetries of such community policing and civilian defense (Carmon 2015).
  23. This article argues that civilian rescue is not an effective means of monitoring human trafficking. It does not suggest that cases of human trafficking in Los Angeles do not exist. As a pivotal destination for migrants all over the world, undocumented workers in particular face extreme vulnerability and precarity in a range of labor positions including domestic work, factory work, agricultural work, and far fewer instances forced sexual exploitation. For documentation of human trafficking cases in the Los Angeles area, see the California Attorney General's Office (2007).
  24. The exhibit partners with abolitionist antitrafficking organizations including Polaris Project, International Justice Mission, Free the Slaves, and Goodweave to encourage visitors to forge a "personal commitment to be 21st Century Abolitionists in the cause of freedom" (<http://freedomcenter.org/exhibits/invisible-slavery-today>).
  25. See <http://ncjwla.org/our-programs/advocacy/human-trafficking-outreach-project/>; <http://www.innocentsatrisk.org/>; <http://www.truckersagainstrafficking.org/>

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