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The Immortal Spirit of Harriet Tubman: Scholarly Reconceptualization of Human Trafficking and Slavery

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The Immortal Spirit of Harriet Tubman: Scholarly Reconceptualization of Human Trafficking and Slavery

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"Crossing Boundaries, Making Connections"
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[This paper is unfinished. Some of the sections need further development. Some of the themes addressed early in the paper need to be picked-up again towards the end of the paper. I welcome comments and suggestions to help me finish it. That's what this conference is about making connections and building collaborations.]

Life, learning, and teaching are journeys. We build on experiences and continue to learn. We acquire new knowledge, understandings and reconceptualize what we know. As activists we use our experience and research to revise our strategies and goals. As academics we develop new scholarship and revise the courses we teach.

This paper is a description of my personal, activist, and academic journeys of learning and teaching about slavery and human trafficking. I will discuss some of the books or events that influenced my thinking and how they compelled me to revise my university courses. Although these journeys began decades ago, they are still ongoing. I am still learning, still advocating for rights and freedom, and revising my courses to include more information and new understandings of human trafficking and slavery.

Awakening

When I was 12 years old, the immortal spirit of Harriet Tubman slipped from between the covers of a book and changed my life. While reading *Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad*, Ann Petry's biography of Tubman's heroic life, I was so overcome I had to put the book down between pages.

Up to that point in my life, I don't recall reading anything more exciting than books from the Dick and Jane genre.[2] The historical figures in biographies for young readers seemed lifeless and inaccessible. While reading about Tubman, her escape from slavery, and her work to guide others out of slavery into freedom, I repeatedly said to myself: "She was a real person. She really did these amazing and heroic things." Up to that point in my life, all the heroes I had been introduced to at school were men. I was impressed that she was a woman and did more brave things than anyone I've ever read about.

Tubman and her activism for freedom inspired the direction of my life in many ways. The first thing her story did was send me flying back to the library in search of other books about real

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[2] For anyone born later than the 1960s, Dick and Jane books were readers used to teach students to read from the 1930s to the 1970s. They were based on white child characters, Dick and Jane, who led restricted lives with simple interactions with Puff, the cat, and Spot, the dog, baby sister, Sally, and Mother and Father.

heroes, their struggles and triumphs. She set me on a lifelong course of reading—as soon one book is closed, another is opened.

It's hard to pinpoint all the factors that shape our lives and work. I can't say it was reading about Tubman's life alone, but at some point, the idea of opposing violence and exploitation and working for freedom and dignity caught hold of me. I gave up the study of genetics[3] to pursue the study of sexual exploitation. Ever since then, I have worked to end violence against women and, in particular, the sexual exploitation, of women and girls.

Analysis

In the early 1980s, I starting volunteering at a local battered women's shelter and rape crisis center. My analysis[4] of battering and sexual violence was formed by the ideas of the anti-battered women's movement and anti-rape movement during the 1980s. I was strongly influenced by the radical feminist[5] analysis of violence against women and the call for social and political change for equality and an end to misogyny. Radical feminists engaged deeply entrenched, emotionally difficult subjects, like battering, rape, incest, pornography and prostitution, and refused to look away from or excuse the harm done to women and girls. In the words of Andrea Dworkin: "I'm a feminist, not the fun kind."[6] A radical feminism analysis extended beyond violence and exploitation as individual experiences and problems and viewed them as social and political problems. This analysis was summarized by the slogan coined in the early 1970s: "The personal is political."

The second wave of the women's movement had its beginning in the 1960s. Although I believe I've always had the heart of a feminist, at least since reading about Harriet Tubman, I didn't get my feminist start until the 1980s. In 1987, I attended the conference *The Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism*[7] at New York University, where I learned more about violence against women, and heard Evelina Giobbe from a feminist civil rights organization called WHISPER (Women Hurt in Systems of Prostitution Engaged in Revolt) give her analysis of prostitution and pimping.[8] At this time, the term "trafficking" was not being used, but Giobbe's presentation was a description and analysis of what today we call pimps or traffickers.

From these activists and movement leaders, I learned how different types of sexual abuse and violence are connected. Andrea Dworkin described how child sexual abuse is linked to sexual exploitation of teens and adults. She said that incest was "boot camp" for later prostitution.[9]

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[3] I have a PhD in genetics

[4] By "analysis" I mean the social and political cause and effects.

[5] Being a radical feminist does not mean being an extremist. The word "radical" in radical feminism means "going to the root." It means engaging in analysis that goes to the root of the problem and engaging in deep social and political change.

[6] Andrea Dworkin, "Dworkin on Dworkin," *Off Our Backs*, reprinted in *Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed*, Ed. Renate Klein and Diane Bell.

[7] *The Sexual Liberals and the Attack of Feminism*, New York University School of Law, April 6, 1987.

[8] Evelina Giobbe, "Confronting the Liberal Lies about Prostitution," in *The Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism* (Eds. Dorchen Leidholdt and Janice G. Raymond), Pergamon Press, pp 47-81.

[9] "Incest is boot camp. Incest is where you send the girl to learn how to do [prostitution]. …. She's trained. And the training is specific and it is important: not to have any real boundaries to her own body; to know that she's valued only for sex; to learn about men what the offender, the sex offender, is teaching her." (Andrea Dworkin, "Prostitution and Male Supremacy" (1993), Michigan Journal of Gender and Law 1(1):1-12. Reprinted in Life and Death (1997), p 130-51.)

The same people who organized the Sexual Liberals conference also organized the first international conference on trafficking of women and girls, entitled simply *Trafficking in Women*, in New York City in 1988.[10] Another influential conference that I attended was *Prostitution: From Academia to Activism* in 1992 at the University of Michigan Law School.[11]

At this time, before a legal definition of trafficking was established, most feminists used the term "trafficking" broadly to mean the sexual exploitation of women and girls, especially in prostitution and the production of pornography.

The term "slavery," in particular, "sexual slavery" was also used by feminists. Kathleen Barry, co-founder of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, defined "female sexual slavery" as follows:

> *"Female sexual slavery is present in all situations where women and girls cannot change the immediate conditions of their existence; where, regardless of how they got into those conditions they cannot get out; and where they are subject to sexual violence and exploitation."*[12]

Shortly after the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) was formed, I started working with them. I would continue to work with them for a decade.

From these early learning experiences, my understanding of sex trafficking became rooted in an analysis of sexual violence against women and girls. I still consider sex trafficking to be a form of sexual violence as much as it is slavery.

Judith Herman advanced our understanding of violence, exploitation, and contemporary slavery by writing about trauma (and recovery). In 1993, Judith Herman published her important analysis *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*.[13] By focusing on trauma, she moved beyond what happened only to women and girls to the broader topic of trauma caused by acts of violence. She does not write about "trafficking" and only a little about slavery, but she writes about "captivity."[14]

She linked what happened to political prisoners with the experiences of victims of domestic violence: "Political captivity is generally recognized, whereas the domestic captivity of women and children is often unseen."[15] She also mentions what we now call sex trafficking.

> "[R]epeated trauma occurs … when the victim is a prisoner, unable to flee, and under the control of the perpetrator. Such conditions obviously exist in prisons, concentration camps, and *slave labor* camps. These conditions may also exist in religious cults, *in brothels and other institutions of organized sexual exploitation*, and in families." [Emphasis added]

Herman goes further and puts the scope of trauma experiences in a social and political context. She explains that society as a whole does not want to hear about atrocities that violate their sense of order. Because of this resistance, for victims to be heard, they need a movement to break

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[10] *Trafficking in Women*, Martin Luther King High School, New York City, October, 1988.
[11] Prostitution: From Academia to Activism, University of Michigan Law School, October 30-Nov 1, 1992.
[12] Kathleen Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery*, New York University Press, 1979.
[13] Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence---From Domestic Abuse to Political Terrorism*, Basic Books, 1992.
[14] Chapter 4 of Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* is entitled "Captivity."
[15] Herman, p. 74.

through the social denial.[16] Just as a feminist movement was needed to hear the voices of battered women and rape victims, Herman introduces us to the idea that a movement will be needed to hear the stories of other types of victims of trauma and captivity. For the last few decades, radical feminists have been willing to listen to victims of pornography and prostitution and what became known as sex trafficking. Today's victims of forced labor also needed a movement to be heard.

Modern Day Forced Labor

In the summer of 1997, a case of forced labor shocked the conscience of America and the anti-trafficking movement.[17] Dozens of deaf mute Mexican men, women, and children were discovered in "virtual slavery"[18] in Queens, New York. Deaf people were recruited in Mexico and transported to New York where they were forced to peddle trinkets on the street and turn over all proceeds to a family-operated trafficking ring.

They dynamics of this case, such as how the victims were recruited, brutalized and forced to work for the profit of the traffickers, were to become familiar to those working against human trafficking.

This case forever changed how people thought of "trafficking." Slavery as a legal institution in the U.S. may have ended, but the captivity, forced labor and exploitation of people had continued. Slavery was still being practiced right in front of public view on the streets of New York. After this case what was called "trafficking of women and girls" was broadened to "trafficking in persons" or human trafficking. Although until the end of the Clinton administration, President Bill Clinton and First Lady Hillary Clinton continued to talk about "trafficking of women." As the drafting of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act got underway, a shift was made to "trafficking in persons."

Human Trafficking

The term "trafficking" had no legal meaning until the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) was passed in 2000 by the U.S. Congress and the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children was added to the Convection against Transnational Organized Crime was adopted by the United Nations. For almost two decades a debate raged within the feminist community about the nature of prostitution and how "trafficking" should be defined.

Based on the legal premise that modern day trafficking is a form of slavery, the definition of "sex trafficking" as a punishable crime requires elements of force or coercion (or the victim being under the age of 18). There is now a legal distinction between "free" and "forced" prostitution for adults. The debate about the harm of prostitution and the laws prohibiting prostitution still continue. But in the area of human trafficking, prostitution has largely been dropped from

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[16] Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence---From Domestic Abuse to Political Terrorism*, Basic Books, 1992. p 1.

[17] Deborah Sontag, "Captive in Queens: The Overview; Dozens of Deaf Immigrants Discovered in Forced Labor," *The New York Times*, July 20, 1997, Pg. A1.

[18] The description "virtual slavery" was used by New York City mayor Rudy Guiliani in one of the first new stories about the case. Blaine Harden, "N.Y. Police Find 52 Deaf Mexicans in 'Virtual Slavery,'" *The Washington Post*, July 20, 1997, Pg. A04.

discussion. It has been delegated to other arenas. This has led to calmer discussions, but the nature of prostitution as a contributing cause of sex trafficking is still being debated among different groups advocating for legalization, criminalization, and decriminalization of prostitution.

From Hero Worship to Scholarship

For decades, there were only young reader books about Harriet Tubman, such as the one I read when I was 12 years old. Not much detail was known about her life: she was illiterate, so left no written record. Sources on her life were sketchy and diffuse. There were no modern scholarly biographies.

About a decade ago, new biographies based on new historical research were published. [19]

> *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom* by Catherine Clinton (2004)
>
> *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero* by Kate Clifford Larson (Ballantine, 2004)
>
> *Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Life Stories* by Jean M. Humez (University of Wisconsin Press, 2004)

And a more recent biography:

> *Harriet Tubman and the Fight for Freedom: A Brief History with Documents* by Lois E. Horton (St. Martins, 2013)

And based on the new evidence about Harriet Tubman's live another new booked called a "re-imagining" of her life has been written, entitled *Harriet Tubman: Imagining a Life* by Beverly Lowry (Anchor, 2008).

Now, those of us who only had myths and hero worship could re-engage and learn about Tubman's life based on new scholarship.

When I teach the senior capstone course for women's studies, I use *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero* to teach students how new research can transform what is known about women's lives. I hope to inspire an interest in historic research, particularly about women and slavery.

Teaching about Sexual Exploitation and Human Trafficking

In 1988, I started teaching women's studies courses at Penn State University. Based on my interests, work, and my political analysis that violence and exploitation lay at the root of women's historic and contemporary second class status, my courses always included relatively large sections on violence against women and sexual exploitation.

My early courses included feminist analyses of pornography and prostitution, as well as rape, incest and battering. Given my background of feminist activism, I focused on these subjects from

[19] Gary Dorsey, "A Legend Unshackled: Changing times, biographers' determination bring the true Harriet Tubman out of myth and into the light," *Baltimore Sun*, January 25, 2004.

the perspective of how they hurt women and girls. I used victim testimonies and stories in teaching about these topics.

In my experience, many students know little about history. I'm always shocked to find that many of the topics I introduce, students have never heard about before. Although, we think that most students have a basic knowledge of antebellum slavery in the U.S., I'm finding that many students have almost no knowledge about it, other than that it existed. So I always try to give some historic perspective to any of the subjects that I teach.

Below is a list of the books on the history of trauma, slavery, trafficking and abolitionist movements in my Gender and Women's Studies (GWS) courses.

> GWS 325 International Women's Issues: *Comfort Woman: A Filipina's Story of Prostitution and Slavery under the Japanese Military* by Maria Rosa Henson (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1999)
>
> GWS 365 Sexual Violence: *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* by Judith Herman (Harper Collins, 1992)
>
> GWS 370 Sex Trafficking: *Josephine Butler* by Jane Jordon (Bloomsbury Academic, 2007)
>
> GWS 400 Feminist Scholarship (the senior capstone course) *Bound for the Promised Land—Harriet Tubman: Portrait of an American Hero* by Kate Clifford Larson (Ballantine Books, 2004)
>
> GWS 401 Human Trafficking: *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* by Douglass Blackman (Random House, 2008)
>
> GWS 401 Campaigns and Services for Victims of Trafficking: *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* by Adam Hochschild (Houghton Mifflin, 1988) and *Bury the Chains: Prophets and Rebels in the Fight to Free an Empire's Slaves* by Adam Hochschild, (Mariner Books, 2006)

I believe that each of these books is only a starting point to introducing students to the history of slavery, trafficking, and trauma. Each of these books is a starting place for me as well as I continue to learn, make connections and transform what I teach.

Scholarly Reconceptualization of Human Trafficking and Slavery

Recommendations for how to move forward with the scholarly reconceptualization of human trafficking and slavery are in keeping with the theme of this conference of crossing boundaries and making connections.

For over two decades, I've constantly reworked my syllabi and designed new courses to include information and new scholarship on forms of violence and exploitation. Over the past decade, I've added types of historic slavery to my courses. More recently, I'm working to get students to make connections between the dynamics of historic slavery and contemporary human trafficking.

To do this, I've had to "cross boundaries." I'm not a scholar of historic slavery; my research and advocacy have focused on contemporary sex trafficking. I think some of my efforts have been

disjointed. I've added history, but didn't reconceptualize the topics of slavery and human trafficking.

In the early 1990s, I worked on "curriculum transformation," a movement aimed to add women and their experiences and contributions to a previously male centric curriculum. The first efforts were referred to as "add women and stir," meaning that women were added to the curriculum, but their addition didn't transform the teaching of the subject matter. The next step required rethinking the whole subject based on what adding women had contributed to the knowledge base. I think this is where I am with the reconceptualization and teaching about slavery and human trafficking.

In the past year, I've tried to present a more seamless history of slavery and human trafficking by using the book *Slavery By Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* to bridge the gap between historic slavery and contemporary trafficking. Blackmon's history about peonage, what today we'd call debt bondage, was a form of involuntary servitude carried out using convict leasing in the southern U.S. states. After reading Blackmon's history, you understand how the culture and practice of slavery did not end with the Emancipation Proclamation, the Civil War, or the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, as we repeatedly hear.

Like many processes of change, once initiated, new insights come quickly. One of the things we need to do is to broaden the study of historic slavery to include more than antebellum slavery in the U.S. south.

One topic that I'm aware of, but haven't yet succeeded in incorporating in my courses is black slavery in the North, in particular in Rhode Island, a commercial center of the slave trade. To me this is especially important because I teach at the University of Rhode Island.

I recently learned about the sale of Indian prisoners of war into slavery during King Philips War in the 1670s in New England, right in my backyard of Narragansett, Rhode Island.[20] I was jarred to learn about this and was again forced to rethink what I thought I knew about the history of slavery in the U.S.

Another practice of slavery that I knew about superficially, but I am now committed to learn more about is the enslavement of Indians by other India tribes. [21] How should that fit into our teaching about slavery and or human trafficking?

There is an area of scholarship about "captivity" and captivity narratives. There is an overlap between captivity and slavery and human trafficking. What can we learn from examining that topic and analysis?

I'm aware of historic slavery and abolitionist movements around the world. I've included spotty coverage about these topics in my courses. How much more should I include? How much do historic slavery in other parts of the world and throughout history contribute to your understanding of contemporary human trafficking?

Of course, the history of slavery and the contemporary practice of human trafficking is huge and vast. One of the challenges we face is how to identify themes and link these practices across

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[20] Nathaniel Phlbrick, *Mayflower: A Story of Courage, Community and War* (Penguin Books, 2007)
[21] Christina Snyder. *Slavery in Indian County: The Changing Face of Captivity in Early America*, Harvard University Press, 2010.

place and time. What are the similarities and differences among these practices of slavery and exploitation?

And as one who is crossing boundaries, I sense that many of the questions I have addressed already have answers. There are books and papers I have yet to find. I need other scholars to point me to the sources.

I believe Harriet Tubman's spirit lives among modern day abolitionists as we combat multiple forms of human trafficking, continue to do historic and contemporary research, and reconceptualize our scholarship and teaching.

I welcome activists and scholars to work with me on these projects.