

# Narrating “White Slavery!” in *The Wire*: A Generic Genealogy

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According to conservative estimates compiled by the Walk Free Foundation in 2013, an estimated 30 million people are forced to toil as slaves in the world today. More than ten thousand men, women, and children are trafficked into the United States alone each year. Many of them are sold as sex slaves, while others are exploited as domestic, factory, and agricultural laborers. Though contemporary slavery typically does not announce itself in the antebellum form of chattel slavery familiar to Americans, the people who are called slaves today are indeed slaves as we historically understand the term—they are forced to work through threat of violence, with no pay beyond subsistence, and with little or no ability to escape.<sup>1</sup> While government policy white papers, social science texts, and documentaries about this global crime rarely enjoy wide public attention, several more popular depictions of modern-day slavery have emerged recently in an attempt to interrupt the gaping silence regarding this serious issue.<sup>2</sup>

In 2003 the acclaimed Home Box Office (HBO) television series *The Wire* (2002–8) courageously addressed the issue of modern-day slavery and its effects on US politics, economics, and social values. Each season of *The Wire* introduces several new characters, a new crime to be investigated, and a new network of injustice that disturbs the fleeting tranquility of the city of Baltimore. In the sec-

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1. I derive this definition from Kevin Bales’s work.

2. See, for instance, *Human Trafficking* 2005; *Taken* 2008; *Trade* 2007; *Traffic* 2004; *The Whistleblower* 2011.

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ond season the narrative opens with the revelation that eastern European women are being trafficked in cargo container ships into the port of Baltimore to be forced to work as sex slaves. The union workers who run the docks unwittingly participate in the sale of this particularly lucrative cargo and in some women's unexpected murder as well. When one shipment of women is discovered in a claustrophobic compartment hidden in the back of a shipping container, the women have suffocated. Their deaths provide the mystery that necessitates the intervention of the main characters of *The Wire*, homicide detectives who worked together in the first season to break open a major drug case that shook Baltimore at every social level.

In the second season of *The Wire* the detectives encounter a crime about which they, like their viewing audience, know very little—modern-day slavery. Because this crime goes largely unnoticed in American culture despite its prevalence, in many episodes of season 2 we receive minilessons on the inner workings of modern-day slavery. Detectives, Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) agents, and members of the criminal underground launch into monologues that characterize a very specific form of trafficking in which women are moved from eastern European countries to be sold to eager purchasers in the States, resulting in their brutal exploitation as commercial sex workers in cities all over the United States. In one episode a nightclub dancer describes for the curious detectives the means by which European women are being held captive. She articulates what the detectives all suspect:

They ain't here legally. They don't know shit. They ain't got no family. The men they got handling them are always with them. Right there to take them from whatever hotel they're using to the club and back. Right there when they need to get food or go to the Rite-Aid. Right outside the fucking motel door when they're up there in the motel room with the johns. . . . I seen one of them get lit up with one of them stun guns just for going down the block to get some dinner. I mean, they barely let them girls go to the bathroom by themselves. And if they see one getting too close to the johns, that's when they move the whole crew to another town. Keep it so they don't get no help. (*The Wire* 2003, season 2, episode 6)<sup>3</sup>

It becomes clear that the women who were murdered in the shipping container were headed for precisely this life of sex slavery, and the audience is made aware of a small corner of the global injustice of human trafficking.

Critics, both popular and scholarly, have convincingly compared the writing

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3. All future references to *The Wire* will be indicated by season number and episode number, for example: 2.6.

and narrative constructions of *The Wire* to Charles Dickens and to Greek tragedy, and much of the show is a testament to the writers’ attention to the place of serial television in the tradition of American and “Western” literature.<sup>4</sup> The writing of the series is clearly informed by literary inclinations, drawing on themes characteristic of dramatic tragedy and social realism while intertextually referring to other television shows and subtly critiquing the clichéd strategies and forms of the tired police drama.<sup>5</sup> The writers use these varied literary modes to produce something that transcends the typical cop-and-robber television series. *The Wire* is a cop show that boldly seeks to explore the tensions in the grand narratives that we brought with us into the twenty-first century—mythologies regarding the safety our state can provide us, the postracial society many thought we had built in the United States, the stability of the United States as a superpower, our unshakable economy, the undeniability of social mobility, our unlimited individual potential, our pursuit of the true and the good.

Focusing specific attention on the representation of modern slavery in season 2, I want to argue, allows us to locate *The Wire* in a long tradition of representing slavery that can further inform our reading of the program’s interrogation of early twenty-first-century American life, cultures, and literary traditions. Throughout history, a culture’s representation of the experience and voice of the slave can be read as a lens through which we can examine the larger tensions that plague the nation regarding race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and migration. Read in the context of two modes of representing slavery in particular—the African American slave narrative tradition and the “white slavery” narratives of the early twentieth century—*The Wire* becomes an inheritor of and contributor to our ever-changing picture of slavery in the United States and the cultural norms and anxieties that allow it to exist.

This article will trace some of the cultural contexts that inform the depiction of slavery in the last few centuries of American writing to historicize and critique the way *The Wire* takes up slavery as its subject in the twenty-first century. By tracing this generic genealogy, we can look to *The Wire*’s depiction of human trafficking as a window into American cultural responses to slavery. This reading reveals the deep-rooted and persistent cultural anxieties regarding race, ethnicity,

4. See, for instance, Jameson 2010; Klein 2010; Love 2010.

5. See McMillan 2010. For a compelling analysis of the racial dimensions of David Simon’s revision of the police drama, see Gibb and Sabin 2009.

and sex that intersect in our discourse on forced sex work, a troubling discourse that is alternately highlighted by the program and inadvertently replicated.

### Slavery's Narrators

The genre of the African American slave narrative flourished in the late eighteenth century and the nineteenth century because it provided an autobiographical account of slave life on southern plantations written by escaped slaves themselves (sometimes in conjunction with an amanuensis), which could be used by the antislavery movement as testimonial evidence of the inhumanity of the institution of slavery. In 1861 a young woman named Harriet Jacobs (also known as Linda Brent) published a pseudonymous narrative about her life as a slave and her protracted journey to freedom. Jacobs lamented both her male slaveholder's attempts to corrupt her to his sexual wills and her mistress's predictable jealousy, which led them both to psychologically torture Jacobs. Despite the inconceivable behavior of her master and mistress, Jacobs (1861, 5) reminds the readers: "Be assured, this is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may be incredible, but they are, nevertheless, strictly true. I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by slavery; on the contrary, my descriptions fall far short of the facts." These unbearable, unspeakable, and nearly unbelievable realities forced Jacobs to flee, but aware of the limitations and dangers facing a black woman traveling alone in the South, she only escaped as far as the small crawl space in the attic of her grandmother's house. She remained there for seven years, physically deteriorating but maintaining her mental strength and determination to avoid the sexual and physical deprivations of slavery. Although she finally escaped slavery and the South forever, she never felt entirely free because the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 meant that she could be captured and returned to her supposed "owner" in the South at any time.<sup>6</sup>

Jacobs's published narrative is particularly compelling because it reveals to its readers the unspoken gendered politics of southern slaveholding families. The perversion of sexual mores among the master class that was born of living with an enslaved class is explicit, and the domestic tensions between slaveholding husbands and wives reveal what was an open secret among households in the South. As Hortense Spillers (1987, 77) describes it, "The mistress in the case of Brent's

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6. Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, 9 Stat. 462 (1850).

[Jacob’s] narrative becomes a metaphor for *his* [the master’s] madness that arises in the ecstasy of unchecked power.” Furthermore, Jacobs’s narrative reveals the culture of surveillance that permeated US government control over black bodies after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850, a power that “compelled all citizens to see the slave just as the master saw the slave,” according to Stephen Best (2004, 174). Jacobs’s narrative is only a single example—though a fairly typical one—of the hundreds of life stories recorded by men and women of African descent who were held in bondage in the eighteen and nineteenth centuries in America that help us understand the political and cultural contexts in which slavery flourished.

These autobiographies of slavery typically revealed the intimate memories of formerly enslaved people of African descent, which allowed them to voice their own personal commitments to the antislavery movement. Nevertheless, a significant impetus for the publication and distribution of most slave narratives grew out of the white abolitionist conviction that stories of enslavement would engage the sentiments of those who held firmly to the notion that human bondage was a necessary pillar of the US economy. Long before there was hope of emancipation in the United States, Lydia Maria Child and many other abolitionists saw the publication of the slave narrative as the clarion call that would awaken the spirits of white citizens. Child (1861, 8) wrote:

I do it with the hope of arousing conscientious and reflecting women at the North to a sense of their duty in the exertion of moral influence on the question of Slavery, on all possible occasions. I do it with the hope that every man who reads this narrative will swear solemnly before God that, so far as he has power to prevent it, no fugitive from Slavery shall ever be sent back to suffer in that loathsome den of corruption and cruelty.

Knowledge of the lived experiences of slaves was so critical in effecting change that abolitionists encouraged their fugitive friends to write their stories down to be disseminated far and wide. Amy Post persistently requested that Jacobs lend her narrative to the cause. She wrote of hearing Jacobs’s story: “Even in talking with me, she wept so much, and seemed to suffer such mental agony, that I felt her story was too sacred to be drawn from her by inquisitive questions, and I left her free to tell as much, or as little, as she chose. Still, I urged upon her the duty of publishing her experience, for the sake of the good it might do; and, at last, she undertook the task” (Post 1861, 304–5). Despite the harrowing silence that slavery seemed to inflict on Jacobs’s ability to narrate her own life, Post believed Jacobs was burdened with a “duty” to publish her narrative. She believed that the

wide-ranging, positive effect it would have for millions of African Americans would far outweigh the psychological anguish it caused Jacobs. Jacobs, when she decided to write her narrative, concluded, “The truth can never be told so well through the second and third person as from yourself” (quoted in Yellin 2004, 122). Two mutually reinforcing desires prompted the production and wide distribution of first-person stories of enslavement—the slave narrators’ sense of duty to publicize the wrongs of slavery and the abolitionists’ and public’s desire to know the human face and hear the authentic voice of the slave. The first-person narrative, as Jacobs asserts, was a vehicle by which that “authentic” voice could be mobilized to effect real change in the US political and economic landscape.

As was true for the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century abolitionists and their commitment to the slave narrative, *The Wire* also tries to put a face on the issue of modern-day slavery, and it is similarly a visage that is complicated and mediated by the investments and culture of its own time. Unlike those in the slave narratives, the voices of the enslaved women in *The Wire* are never heard at all—the fourteen women that Lieutenant Daniels and his team are investigating are dead when we first encounter them (2.1). Nonetheless, when the detective characters in *The Wire* recognize the inhumane plight of the enslaved women, they are mobilized and motivated to eradicate slavery in their city. Like Post and Child, they recognize that although the slaves’ ability to speak for themselves may be limited (and in this case completely silenced), the names, faces, and experiences of these oppressed and silenced people must be made public to emancipate so many others.

Thus “the work” of the police (a term used with reverence throughout the program to describe the detective’s job), so focused in season 1 on busting drug-dealing bad guys, is transformed in season 2 by a motivating sympathy for the loss of life in the shipping containers (a transatlantic voyage perhaps evocative of the Middle Passage, even if unintended). The work of the detectives, then, turns to uncovering the narrative of what happened to these enslaved women, and for a few episodes their investigation essentially turns toward a search for a modern-day slave narrative.

The narratives McNulty, Beadie, Kima, and Bunk produce about the women are attempts to identify and humanize the victims both for the audience and for their own consciences. McNulty insists he is “gonna find where [one woman’s] people are at” and “give this one a name” (2.3). Beadie discloses that she does not feel good about allowing the women to go into nameless graves (2.3). And Kima

takes her partner, Cheryl, down to the docks to explain why she is so committed to “the work,” lamenting that what she has pieced together of the narrative reveals that the enslaved women on the container ship had only “a few flashlights, some junk food, some water, a portable toilet they had to share . . . and not enough air” (2.6). The detectives’ collective (but necessarily partial) narration of the scene of death shared by the fourteen women is their way of recognizing the human costs of the modern slave trade and of empathizing with the lives of women who do not enjoy the privileges they do.

Halfway through season 2, Officer Beadie reveals the only legible story the women have left the detectives regarding their lives and struggles after being made captives—the claw marks, “broken fingernails, blood on the walls” that they left as proof of their short time in the death trap (2.6). Without a sympathetic audience to hear their screams, their bodies nonetheless communicated the violence of their final moments of consciousness. The detectives read the marks as clues to their identities and to the stories of torture they might have told had they survived. The dead women also leave behind their bedrolls and luggage, and at least one woman left a family photograph and a letter—expressive but nearly illegible indications of who she was before she was enslaved and murdered by her traffickers. The family photograph, which depicts three generations of healthy, happy women posing before a modern European cityscape not unlike Baltimore, points to the humanity of the young woman and to her innocent family, which has unknowingly lost a daughter and a mother to dreams of a better life (2.3).

The voices of the enslaved themselves may be curtailed, but the antihero of the entire series, Detective Jimmy McNulty, though no Child, is personally committed not only to solving the crime of the deaths but also to putting names and stories to the dead faces of the enslaved women. McNulty repeatedly represents the women and their ill-fated story to anyone he can enlist to help him. He shows photos to crime lab technicians; he solicits a translation of the letter from local community members; he condemns a system that does not even attempt to ascertain the names of the people it is defending. What McNulty soon discovers, however, is that the photograph and the letter can no more tell us who the woman is than her dead corpse can. McNulty is motivated to join the investigation by his own disgust with the fact that these unnamed but nonetheless respect-worthy women will be “medical cadavers, then [sent to] a crematorium, then that mass grave out of Crownsville” (2.3). It is primarily through McNulty’s consistent rep-

resentation of the women that they exist at all in the imagination of the narrative, as they are otherwise essentially excised from memory and the government record as unidentifiable Jane Does.

McNulty's obsession with uncovering the identity of one of the women reveals his own sympathy for (and the narrative's own sympathetic approach to) the loss of her life as well as his commitment to putting a face on this crime as a means of helping himself and others identify with the victims of modern slavery and potentially make a greater commitment to investigate and abolish it. In turn the show produces something of a composite narrative of a hidden crime and a silenced group of very real human beings whose stories might otherwise have been lost. The narrative the show tells of the human cost of modern slavery is a way, even if brief and subtle, to put a human face on the crime of modern slavery, to create a slave narrative in this new context.

### **The Silence of Modern Slavery**

A profitable comparison to the nineteenth-century slave narrative tradition would likely have to stop there, however, for the genre of the slave narrative is tuned precisely to the slave's own voice. The slave narrative depicts the life of an individual human who, by mere dint of race, was forced to live and suffer through the worst form of torture a human can experience—being entirely robbed of one's right to one's own body, labor, self-determination, and liberty. The slave narrative provided a venue through which the enslaved person could, as Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1985, xiii) put it, “write himself into the human community through the action of first-person narration” in response to a body of legal, historical, philosophical, and scientific writings that had attempted to write enslaved people out of the human community. The slave narrative indicated to the public that the first-person voice and lived experience of enslaved people were of central importance to the shaping of a democratic nation that had previously disenfranchised a significant percentage of its population. The narratives implied, at a time when it was of crucial importance, that to refuse the warnings and condemnations of the slave narrator would be to imperil the cause of democratic liberty and justice.

Enslaved women in *The Wire*, however, find no such agency or significance in the narrative as the season unfolds, and we are forced to admit that, while sympathetic to the women's experiences, *The Wire* is certainly no slave narrative.

While *The Wire* has done much to represent a wide spectrum of human nature in its black characters,<sup>7</sup> and we can say that those figures represent the powerful legacy of the slave narrative in that way, the show does not extend that multidimensionality to all of its characters, and it is this very group of enslaved women that falls prey to invisibility time and again.

This differentiation in the modes of representing slavery can tell us much about the cultural context in which slavery exists today. The erasure of the voices of the women is emblematic of how enslaved women are treated in the second season in general and, I argue, in American society as well. There are indeed positive models of resilient (and realistically conflicted) women in the show—including the hardworking, honest Kima and the determined Beadie.<sup>8</sup> However, the women who are found dead at the beginning of the second season are nearly invisible except when we get to see their bodies displayed for our consumption as voracious viewers, fixed on them more as a premise of investigation than as multifaceted and complex subjects akin to, say, the drug dealers, politicians, police officers, or newspaper reporters represented in the rest of the series.

If the murdered women are unavailable for testimony in the case, other internationally trafficked sex workers emerge during the investigations in season 2 and represent an alternative outcome that the dead women might have encountered had they survived. In episode 5 the camera turns to some of those women, Russian-speaking sex workers who are being held by the Department of Homeland Security as they await trial and almost certain deportation. When these women do speak—in the prison where McNulty tries to interview them—their voices are obscured in the narrative, because they speak almost entirely in Russian and there is no subtitling. Even the telling complaint that one woman makes in Russian to her fellow prisoners (which is translated here)—“You’re simply wasting time. No one will help”—is erased by the authors of the script when they refuse the primarily English-speaking audience the ability to understand her (2.5).<sup>9</sup> In the end, the irony is that the women are correct—no one is going to help them, and they might just as well continue saying nothing at all, because

7. For analysis of revisions of representations of African American life, see Marshall 2010; Williams 2008.

8. Sophie Jones (2008) argues that this erasure of women’s complexity is symptomatic of the entire show’s portrayal of women and that the “strength” of Kima and Beadie does little if anything to alleviate the sense that “gender is either excluded from, or a mere footnote to, this sophisticated, expansive worldview.”

9. Thanks to Rian Thum for this translation.

even the writers of the show have become complicit in effectively silencing them. We might argue that this represents the writers' awareness of the enslaved person's inability to represent herself in the judicial sphere in the United States, but there is not a single sympathetic instance in the show in which the commercially exploited sex worker is allowed to speak.

While the creators of the show were likely only unintentionally signifying on the slave narrative tradition, comparisons between the slave narrative and the show's representation of slavery within the frame of detective fiction can shed light on the cultural contexts and implications that make such a rendering of slavery possible. If the slave narrative provided a venue through which slaves enacted their power to narrate their own experiences, *The Wire's* depiction of modern slavery erases that power and lends it instead to the detectives, leaning on the genre of detective fiction as a route to explore the inner lives of the detectives instead of the victims to be investigated. The detective genre focalizes on the detective as "the privileged standpoint of an authoritative master" who often, through the course of the narrative, becomes intertwined as a protagonist in the investigation as well, affecting and being affected by the very subjects of his or her investigation (Sargent 2010, 289). Though the detective's work is necessarily dedicated at times to naming the victims and investigating the bodies violated by the crime, this focalization reduces the space in which the victims and their experiences and voices are represented. The victims become merely the narrative devices that allow the case to move forward. They are tools of testimony that aid investigators in doing the important work of hunting down and successfully prosecuting criminals. Their lives and experiences are marginalized in the attempt to indict crime. This limitation mimics the inadequate response of our judicial system to comprehending the lived experiences of victims of crime in general.<sup>10</sup> The genre of detective fiction both silences the lived experiences of the victims and allows us the opportunity to critique the way silence is judicially induced in US culture.

The season is intently focused on the "death" or the "demise" of "the American working class," a slogan repeated over and over again in magazine and news articles in an effort to reawaken American interest in the issue of class.<sup>11</sup> However, the working class that the season begins with—those working women who paid

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10. This chronic problem was addressed by the Victims' Rights Act of 2004, 18 U.S.C. § 3771 (2004), but it continues to be a factor in victims' experiences of prosecutions. See Boland and Butler 2009.

11. See, for instance, Anderson-Minshall 2008; Goodman 2003; HBO 2006.

for their American Dream with their lives—is an even more obscured class. The sex slaves that are seemingly at the center of the narrative quickly become Jane Does. The detectives repeatedly refer to them in the most abstract and practical of terms, called “14 homicides” (2.7), “that can full of dead girls” (2.3), and even “pussy in a can” (2.2). Essentially, in the framework of the narrative, the women are on par, in terms of their agency, with the heroin that is shipped to the criminal organization in the other containers; the women are represented as merely traded commodities in the network of corruption that the series investigates. Though that commodification is evident to the mafia members who traffic them, the show participates in that commodification when it erases the enslaved women’s stories and subordinates that part of the narrative so that the women become a case rather than characters in the plot. Whereas antebellum African American slaves were marked by their racial hypervisibility in the context of white-dominated society, these modern-day slaves are marked by their near illegibility.

But there is something even more insidious about the rendering of the experience of sex slaves in *The Wire*. Though McNulty may have been sympathetic to the plight of the forced sex worker at the beginning of the season, he later has paid sex with not only one but two prostitutes who are, according to the premise of the episode, illegally trafficked sex slaves as well. These women have no names or voices either, but McNulty, caught in the heat of the moment, does not seem to be as concerned here about recognizing the human face of slavery. This third group of young eastern European women appears in the narrative of the second season when the team of detectives manages to track the supply line to a brothel and determine that the women prostituted there are being held against their will, shuttled back and forth by armed guards, and threatened with violence if they dare escape. To put a stop to this clearly unacceptable criminal activity, the team sends McNulty in undercover, disguised as a procurer of the brothel’s services. However, his disguise is all too thin, we realize, because as McNulty asserts in his police report, he was “unable to resist the ministrations of the aforementioned suspects and found himself brought to the point of a sexual act” (2.9). Not only does McNulty figure himself as the passive victim of a crime he was “unable to resist” but he also designates the sex workers as the suspects in the crime, despite the fact that the prostitutes are only an escape attempt away from sharing the fate of the women whose deaths McNulty is investigating. Enslaved sex workers are thoughtlessly transformed from victims into criminals in one sexual act.

Indeed the disgust that McNulty and his colleagues express for the traffick-

ers they are there to arrest does not appear to extend to a disdain for the clients who utilize the sexual services and perpetuate this form of enslavement. Not only does McNulty participate in the commercial sexual exploitation of trafficked women but it becomes an open joke in the police department and a source of quiet pride for him. Kima jokes before he even goes undercover that “it takes a whore to catch a whore” (2.8), jovially equating Jimmy’s unprincipled transgressions with the women’s forced bondage. In so doing she ironically implies that these so-called “whores” have *chosen*, as McNulty has, a life of sexual promiscuity, but for them, that life commodifies their sexuality and forces them to relinquish the profits from its sale. Bunk laughs, claims McNulty would “get famous behind this” (2.9), and pats him on the back, uninterested in the dire implications of this playboy attitude for the women he exploited in the process. Of course his colleagues are clearly dismissive and even tired of McNulty’s reckless behavior. However, they never connect his sexual venture to the illicit buying and selling of human beings that was once the central concern of the season. There is never a moment of critical distance that indicates that we are to critique these positions. By treating McNulty’s participation in the sex trade as humorous, the narrative is complicit in McNulty’s ignorant and illegal exploitation of forced sex laborers. *The Wire* turns a blind eye to the demand that makes sex slavery in Baltimore (and the rest of the world) possible.

The experiences of the enslaved women also stand outside the established ethical universe of the show. *The Wire* is notable for its refusal of the usual good guy/bad guy dichotomy typical of police dramas. We sympathize with D’Angelo despite the fact that he is a drug dealer. We are intrigued by the business mindedness of Stringer Bell. And in the second season we come to understand how a seemingly upstanding citizen like Frank Sobotka could find himself linked with organized crime in a desperate drive to preserve his family’s way of life. We also learn that good guys are not so good after all. McNulty is a cheating, drinking, lying danger to himself and others. Lieutenant Daniels has something significant from his past to hide. And Kima selfishly neglects her pregnant lover and subsequently their newborn child. There is no clear good and bad in *The Wire*, and yet a discernable morality is inherent in the narrative.

By essentially equating the ethics of the drug dealers with that of the cops from the very first season, the show seems to argue that all human actions (whether they be criminal or intended to catch criminals) are instigated by one of three motiva-

tions: (1) family loyalties, (2) vengeance, and (3) what the police call “the work” and the drug dealers call “the game.” This third element, which involves career advancement and also a dedication to the actual day-to-day labor of the job at hand, is also what motivates many of the men on the docks of Baltimore in the second season. They are concerned on a daily basis about getting work, and they struggle to understand the hierarchies they have to ascend to participate in the union. In the end, when Sobotka realizes that his entire life and family have been destroyed, he in a dramatic scene goes back to the only thing he can truly know—the work (2.11).

However, despite the fact that “the work” and labor relations are the central issue in the second season and despite the fact that the eastern European women are clearly being brought to the States to labor (albeit sexual labor), their “work” does not play into this equation. Although Beadie offhandedly comments that “what they need is a union” (2.3), little attention is paid to the relationship between these women and their labor, even as the season obsesses over the stultifying nature and decreasing prevalence of work for all of the other characters in the show, police and union workers included. The women’s stories are inconvenient for the morality of the narrative, as their motivations are unknown and their desire to work is circumscribed by the situation in which they are forced to do it.

### Slavery’s Contexts

In much the same way that Jacobs’s depiction of slavery spoke to the perversions of antebellum gender relations, *The Wire*’s representation of slavery can tell us much about the open secrets of gender and sexual politics in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The time period in which *The Wire* takes place and was aired is a particularly important moment in the history of the modern slave trade and human trafficking. While public and governmental concern about trafficking in women has a long history, the first decade of the twenty-first century marked a momentous shift in our cultural awareness of and legislative protections for victims of sex trafficking. In November 2000 the United Nations demanded international legislative change by passing the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, which defines 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.”<sup>12</sup> Two major US governmental attacks on the modern slave trade—the Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA)<sup>13</sup> and the annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report<sup>14</sup>—were born in 2000 as well. The TVPA defines human trafficking, outlines penalties for convicted traffickers, and makes provisions and funding for protecting and supplying aid to trafficked individuals. In 2003 the George W. Bush administration, most concerned about protecting “family values,” put pressure on legislative bodies to regulate the sex trade in the United States and abroad and imposed specific regulations as to how funding would be distributed (based on ideological principles regarding the nature of prostitution) in the reauthorization of the TVPA.<sup>15</sup> These new protocols and laws indicated a renewed commitment to the eradication of coerced labor and human trafficking, even as debate continued regarding the definition of human trafficking and the appropriate means to address it. Major public awareness campaigns blossomed in the light of this revived focus on slavery. Nonprofit organizations, quietly organized in the late 1990s, became international powerhouses for change at both the grassroots and the legislative levels. Thus season 2 of *The Wire*, aired June–August 2003, falls squarely in the midst of this momentous change and depicts the cultural mores and prejudices that inform the turn of the century response to sex slavery in the United States.<sup>16</sup>

These major legislative shifts, enacted to address the issue of human trafficking, brought to light a struggle in US cultural discourse regarding women’s bodies, sexuality, and rights. Despite the fact that during this period more attention was paid to the problem of sex trafficking, popular conservative notions of propriety continued to dominate the discourse regarding women’s sexuality and

12. United Nations, General Assembly Resolution 55/25, Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, November 15, 2000, Article 3(a), [www.unodc.org/unodc/treaties/CTOC/](http://www.unodc.org/unodc/treaties/CTOC/).

13. Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA), Pub. L. No. 106-386, 114 Stat. 1464 (2000), Section 2, Division A, [www.state.gov/j/tip/laws/61124.htm](http://www.state.gov/j/tip/laws/61124.htm).

14. Instituted as part of the TVPA, Section 2, Division A, Section 104, Annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.

15. Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2003, H.R. 2620 (2003), [www.state.gov/j/tip/laws/61130.htm](http://www.state.gov/j/tip/laws/61130.htm). For regulation of funding for services for victims, see Section 7(g). For critiques of this legislation, see DeStefano 2007, 102–17; Doezema 2010, 130; Musto 2010, 26–27.

16. By 2010 trafficking had become a more recognizable part of the political landscape, and new protocols were developed and priorities shifted in the government such that we can see the 2000s as a very particular moment in US slave trade history.

the sale thereof. Thus the erasure of the voices of the enslaved women in the show might stem equally from the generic limitations of the detective genre and from the continued repression and circumscription of women’s sexuality in the spheres of culture and government in the United States. The erasure of the voices of the women in the show is emblematic in fact of the erasure of sex workers’ and sex slaves’ voices from the discourse of antitrafficking work in general. In an effort to legislate sexuality and “abolish” prostitution, nonprofits and legislators have often subordinated sex workers’ rights to their narratives to the political causes that purport to protect them (Doezema 2010, 137–38).

It is no coincidence, for instance, that the women who are enslaved in the cargo containers are eastern European women. The US public has a very narrow vision of what constitutes sex work and specifically sex slavery in the world today. The films and news exposés that were so popular in the first years of the twenty-first century depicted sex slaves almost exclusively as eastern European women who were helpless victims of nefarious traffickers and who could only be saved by the self-assured dedication of American heroes, entirely stealing any agency the women might have. In the television miniseries *Human Trafficking* (2005), for instance, women from Ukraine, the Czech Republic, and Russia all fall prey to an evil conspiracy of a Russian sex trafficking syndicate. In the film *Taken* (2008), the kidnapped girls are American, but they are the anomalous victims of a massive Albanian trafficking network. The Nebraskan United Nations peacekeeper in *The Whistleblower* (2011) seeks justice for the eastern European and Russian women who were victims of both sex traffickers and a corrupt United Nations. Many quality low-budget documentaries have been made about sex trafficking in Asia, where the problem is statistically more prevalent, but these do not make it into the living room of the average American consumer.

“The media’s obsession with Eastern European sex slaves” has become something of a trope and as such has become so normalized in our shallow understanding of human trafficking that we take the existence of the slaves for granted, allowing this “victim porn” to rob “trafficked migrants” of “humanity and dignity,” according to Louisa Waugh (2006, xiii–xv). It is because the eastern European sex slave has become a trope that *The Wire* is able to justify relegating the enslaved women to the backstory of the narrative. The trope of the eastern European sex slave provides a convenient image of sex slavery that can disappear from the narrative relatively quickly. The slaves’ existence is taken for granted;

they almost seem as if they are slaves by nature instead of circumstance. Their only role in the narrative is that of a helpless victim (and who can be more helpless than a dead woman?) who can be saved or at least defended by the white male hero. The narrative need not call too much attention to their exploitation because it is naturalized and rationalized for us through this trope.

Furthermore, we think of the women as having chosen their fates, since the women in the cargo container ship chose to immigrate to the United States and perhaps even to become sex workers, further complicating our notion of what constitutes forced sex. The definition of sex trafficking is finally articulated clearly in the early twenty-first century in the TVPA, despite much debate, indicating that it involves a “commercial sex act [that] is induced by force, fraud, or coercion.”<sup>17</sup> The idea that force, fraud, and coercion are the means by which pimps transform sex workers into an enslaved commodity finally provides women a language with which to articulate their experiences as forced sex slaves and the ability to defend themselves against exploitation and abuse.

Nonetheless, public opinion regarding forced commercial sex was slow to catch up. Even when we learn that there are fates that no person would choose, such as the deaths of the women in the cargo container, it seems as though once a woman has entered into the sex trade, her opportunities to avoid extreme forms of exploitation are eroded. Women are often treated as if once they have agreed to do this kind of work they are no longer worthy of respect or the dignity of self-representation. In *The Wire*, for instance, all of the sex slaves depicted throughout the season are illegal immigrants, and thus they are not availed of the possibility of claiming innocence. Seemingly, the women’s choices relegate them to being guilty by nature, making it less problematic to see them incarcerated, deported, sexually exploited, even dead. *The Wire* makes all too transparent the way we have relegated certain women’s lives to the realm of exploitable properties, such that we can accept even their horrific deaths as a backdrop. McNulty’s sexual escapades with the sex slaves highlights this disconnect.

Even when public awareness did turn toward the issue of sex trafficking in the early 2000s and legislatures began to address the growing crisis in the United States, the focus of the prosecutions was on the traffickers. Johns (purchasers of sexual services), like McNulty, are not prime targets of the indictments, and they regularly go unpunished altogether, even when underage girls are involved. In part

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17. TVPA, Section 103(8)(A).

this has to do with the fact that sex work is often a choice, as discussed earlier, but McNulty’s escapades reveal the lingering, outdated notion of normative sexuality that men are subject to such undeniable sexual desires that they must find an outlet no matter the cost. When the cost is cash, men are largely relieved of the stigma of the commercial sexual encounter, especially when we place it in contrast to the stigma attached to women who accept money for sexual services. When a woman sells sex, she is understood to be a “whore”; she is considered tainted, impure. When a man buys sex from that same woman, as we saw with McNulty, he may be derided, but he is also valorized and cheered. And he is certainly exonerated.

McNulty’s sexual encounter with the prostitutes reveals the way gendered sexual norms silently exonerate the men who participate in and indeed support the existence of forced sexual labor in our society. Women’s exploitation, then, disappears when it is in the context of men’s needs. When McNulty has sex with the forced prostitutes, he claims it is because he was seduced by the women. Their own victimization is a nonissue so long as his desire is aroused. They actually become the seductresses, even when their situation has been described as utterly oppressive.

*The Wire* unwittingly represents a continued crisis in the contradictory and yet utterly pervasive notions of gendered sexual norms in our society and replicates them without critique. A generic analysis of the way slavery has been depicted over the course of two hundred years in the United States makes visible the stark contrast between liberation-seeking abolitionist slave narratives and the representation of slavery in the popular culture of the early twenty-first century. That depiction strikingly and painfully reveals that our shallow representation of forced sex labor is a result of and in turn has an effect on the cultural reception of slavery in our midst.

### **Narrating “White Slavery” in the Early Twentieth Century**

The only time we see the eastern European women working in *The Wire*, they are employed in pleasing McNulty; the only time we really see their faces, they are dead, spread out on a dock for McNulty’s inspection; and the only time we hear their voices, they are speaking a language many viewers cannot understand. Indeed as it turns out, the narrative impulse during the second season is largely geared toward elements peripheral to human trafficking itself, even though it seemed to be so central to the development of the plotline. Interestingly, though

the narrative strategies employed in the second season of *The Wire* are clearly dissimilar from the strategies of the nineteenth-century slave narrative, the strategy of representing slavery in this abstracted way does have a literary antecedent. Indeed the narrative of slavery in *The Wire* bears a fascinating resemblance to the narratives of “white slavery” that were produced in the early twentieth century, when there emerged a fairly popular trend in novelistic and nonfictional accounts of the traffic of young white women into the sex trade in US cities.

“White slavery” has historically been a subject of interest for writers in times when American fears and anxieties focus on changing values dictating labor and sexuality. According to Mara L. Keire (2001), the term *white slave* arose out of 1830s discontent with the working conditions in British and American factories. The reference to African American antebellum slavery was no mistake, and the organizers who sought to improve labor standards mobilized the language of abolition to “condemn industrial inequities, evoke an artisanal ideal of labor republicanism, and yet differentiate themselves from black chattel slaves in the South” (7). Around the turn of the twentieth century, this language was reworked by the Progressive movement to protest individual economic alienation by big businesses and their supporters in elected government. Though some women were in fact being trafficked as sex slaves, the Progressive movement used the evocation of antislavery sentiments that grew out of northern anxieties about the southern plantation system to express political problems related to, but certainly not limited to, the problem of slavery.

As a case in point, we can take one of the founding documents of this movement. In 1909 the journalist George Kibbe Turner published a sensationalist article in *McClure's Magazine* titled “The Daughters of the Poor” in which he outlined the mechanism by which women were being brought from other countries to serve in the brothels of Chicago, New York, and New Orleans. Surprisingly, the article does not dwell at all on the conditions and experiences of the young women he met in the brothels. Instead, what seems to be of deepest concern to Turner (1909, 45) are the infrastructures that make trafficking possible—the Austrian, Russian, and Jewish cartels that he claimed operated the trafficking networks to supply women to the largely male immigrant populations in major American cities and the “protection of Tammany Hall political organizations” that allowed them to exist in exchange for kickbacks that the syndicates were all too willing to pay. He callously refers to the women as mere “supplies” or as “exports” (47),

ostensibly to emphasize the fact that the trade in humans was simply another big business deal for the international networks that traded in human beings.

Turner’s widely read article, in conjunction with the public’s increasing concern about the lawlessness of red-light districts and the politicians who profited from them, led to the Mann Act, or the White-Slave Traffic Act of 1910, which designates as a criminal “any person who shall knowingly transport or cause to be transported, or aid or assist in obtaining transportation for . . . any woman or girl for the purpose of prostitution or debauchery, or for any other immoral purpose, or with the intent and purpose to induce, entice, or compel such woman or girl to become a prostitute or to give herself up to debauchery, or to engage in any other immoral practice.”<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, the Mann Act was used to prosecute innocent men who happened to enact their “immoral purposes” on their consensual female companions while on the road. Men could even be prosecuted simply for the “intent” to enjoy some vaguely immoral act with a woman while traveling, even if said immoral act did not in fact take place. It was first invoked to arrest and prosecute Jack Johnson, the famous African American boxer, for his consensual interracial relationships with white women.

The White-Slave Traffic Act made a great impression on the literary and political minds of that generation. The 1910s saw the growth of films, novels, plays, magazine articles, captivity narratives, and treatises that not only attacked the scandalous licentiousness of the sex trade and its effects on young women but more centrally smeared the elaborate international underground syndicates that allegedly made the denigration of the young so widespread.<sup>19</sup> In some ways these stories of twentieth-century white slavery share characteristics of the narratives written by former slaves in the nineteenth century. The concern with the widespread injustice of forced labor is clearly present, and an attempt to raise awareness and promote radical social change is crucial to the motivation for writing the books.

However, many more characteristics distinguish the twentieth-century white slave narratives from their nineteenth-century African American predecessors. The most striking and significant difference is that the twentieth-century stories

18. White-Slave Traffic Act (Mann Act) Stat. 825; codified as amended at 18 U.S.C. §§ 2421–2424 (1910).

19. See Baker (1911) 1913; Ball 1914; Bell 1910; Kauffman 1910; Lytle and Dillon (1912) 1943; Page 1909; Robins 1913; Roe 1910, 1911; Zimmerman 1912.

are seldom, if ever, told in the first person, and for the most part the women do not testify for themselves in the texts. Though there are clearly exceptions, the stories are typically told as if the main characters of the stories include nearly *all* of the people involved in the situation *except* the young girl. Investigators attempt to understand the cases, brothel madams trap young girls with their nefarious methods of torture and extortion, young men plot intricate schemes for tricking women into drinking alcohol, parents lament the demise of their young offspring, kindly locals aid in the girls' escapes. But the young girls themselves are figured as empty vessels being acted upon. Of course the female characters in these works might be loath to express individual agency in these situations, as it might imply that they were complicit. However, their voices are almost entirely erased; their responses to the situations are largely lost in an effort to make them seem entirely helpless. What comes to pass when a nefarious man steals a woman out of a dance hall or ice cream shop or poorhouse is registered only (but significantly) by the deteriorated look on the once cherubic young face.

For the most part these women are interchangeable, and the specificity of their experiences as individuals or as slaves is completely avoided by the narratives. In fact in *Panders and Their White Slaves*, Clifford G. Roe (1910, 11), assistant state's attorney in Illinois and leader of the fight against white slavery, writing about a young woman who barely escaped slavery, claims that "it does not matter what this girl's name was." Unlike the slave narratives of the nineteenth century, in which the slave's liberation is often expressed in the declaration of his or her own name, these early twentieth-century narratives erase the identity of the woman not simply to protect her from shame but because "it does not matter." Her individual experience, her voice, her identity, her emotions have disappeared.

This is a result of the fact that the women and enslavement are not precisely the central concerns of the narratives. In fact these stories tend to be almost exclusively concerned with the syndicates that create such a trade rather than the safety of the girls themselves. One particularly clear example of this trend is Eustace Hale Ball's *Traffic in Souls: A Novel of Crime and Its Cure* (1914). In what begins like a hard-boiled detective novel, a rookie cop is drawn into a case of white slavery through the object of his affection. When that young woman's less cautious sister is lured into a trap set by some wily and practiced gangsters, our heroic police officer, young Bobbie Burke, comes to the rescue. The novel focuses on Burke's efforts to break up the gang of traffickers and save his love's sister from a life of vice. We hear nothing of the young woman's experiences while in

the grip of her assailants, and when she does speak in the final moments of the text, it is only to indicate that she has learned her lesson to stay away from such flirtation as got her in trouble in the first place (263). If the novel strays from any clear description of the life of slavery, it does concentrate on (1) the changing mores of young, single, independent women; (2) the machinations of the syndicate of traffickers that, in this case, directly involves the very people who run antivice organizations; and (3) the menace of unrestrained immigration and its impact on morality.

Indeed in both the fictional and the nonfictional representations of the white slave trade, immigration is figured as the most influential factor in the proliferation of trafficking in American cities. A few immigrant groups are outside the criminal networks, ethnic groups that seem to have become Americanized such that they can act as the heroes who liberate the enslaved women rather than entrap them. In particular the Irish stand out as heroes rather than villains—Bobbie Burke is part Irish and part English, and his fellow cops tend to be as well. However, Burke ironically complains that “much of the vice and crime comes from letting this [immigrant] rabble into the city . . . they take the jobs of honest men, who are Americans. . . . It appears to me as if we might look after Americans first for a while, instead of letting in more scum” (138). His friend agrees with him, claiming that a “tide of social unrest is sweeping across to us from the Old World which will engulf our civilization” (159). Clearly, the problem these writers pinpoint as the plague of American cities is much more complicated than the trafficking of young women.

The foreign menace is a common theme in these novels and tracts. Ernest A. Bell’s (1910, 186) *Fighting the Traffic in Young Girls* alleges that Italians masked as innocent, model immigrant Irish men are responsible for running brothels. Italians are accused of frequenting and often owning the dance halls and ice cream parlors in which youthful and fun-loving young women are corrupted (Lytle and Dillon [1912] 1943, 112; Roe 1910, 32, 110). Turner (1909) was particularly concerned about the Jewish “cadets” who lured young women into brothels at the bequest of the larger syndicates that organized the international trafficking networks. And according to Bell (1910, 246), all girls needed to beware of “amusements that pander to passion, such as many theaters, some of the amusement parks, cafes and dance halls with drinking attachments, some Chinese restaurants, some Greek and other fruit and candy stores, and some pleasure boats that run at night.”

The fear that women were being trafficked clearly ran deeper than a concern that sexual mores were changing. Writers in the 1910s revealed deeply entrenched discrimination against immigrant populations and depicted battles against the government organizations that encouraged those populations to immigrate and prosper. The fact that the women's demises take place offstage is not entirely attributable, then, to the impropriety of writing about sexuality. Instead, women's experiences of the sex trade are marginal to the anti-immigration political ends that the texts are attempting to attain.

### Modern Slavery's New Old World

Read against the novels and treatises produced during the era of antivice squads, it becomes clear that *The Wire* also subordinates the voices and experiences of the exploited women to the larger concerns of eliminating political graft and to the ever-looming issue of immigration. As the narrative quickly moves away from the issue of human trafficking, it turns attention to the inner workings of unionized labor, the shady dealings of international organized crime, and the government collusion in these arenas. *The Wire* reveals that early twentieth-century themes so central to white slave narratives are only changed in the early twenty-first century insofar as criminal enterprises have diverted their attention to new products and reorganized their power structures.

For instance, regarding the issue of immigration, the second season of *The Wire* significantly departs from what we might call its politics of understanding—the drive to complicate character motivation no matter how appalling the behavior. Like most characters depicted in the series, Polish dock workers possess multifaceted emotional and personal lives complicated by the urgency of the waning of their status in society and a decline in the availability of work. However, in addition to the monochromatic depictions of enslaved women, certain ethnicized groups, such as Greeks, Ukrainians, and Israelis, are depicted as uncomplicated money-making or bone-breaking machines, which the writers take no interest in understanding.<sup>20</sup> The ethnic interactions of the second season unite seemingly innocent, hardworking Americanized people of Polish descent with the cold, hard wheeling and dealing of recent immigrants who speak with accents (and even

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20. For an analysis of the ways Jewish people are caricatured in *The Wire*, see Kahn-Harris 2009.

purportedly incomprehensible foreign languages) and who resent being stereotyped by the supposedly honest Americans whom they dupe into participating in an international human trafficking felony. Ukrainian thugs are nicknamed “Boris,” and the mastermind of the entire smuggling operation is known only as “the Greek.” In the diner where the Greek conducts his business, Israeli henchmen work out deals while listening to Greek music in the background (2.6). The whole conspiratorial crew dines on expensive meals in scenes reminiscent of *The Godfather* and jokes about being able to change ethnic identities any time its illegal activities are discovered (2.9; 2.11). The Ukrainian thug balks at dock worker Nick’s lack of knowledge of other people and their cultures (2.1), yet the writers do little themselves to avoid stereotyping the men who run the smuggling operations.

Though the show is otherwise premised on giving the viewer a sense of the complexity of the usual “bad guys” when it comes to Baltimore’s drug dealers and the formation of their code of ethics, the writers do little to similarly complicate the characters marked as ethnic “others” who lure the Sobotka dock workers into illegitimate work. We get little more than a sense that some groups of people (who come from a very similar set of countries to those feared in the early twentieth-century white slave narratives) are feeding off the American working class without a single moment of hesitation and without an ethic by which we might excuse their behaviors, as we do Nick’s or Frank Sobotka’s. The borderless, deterritorialized criminal network is placed in opposition to the solid, committed patriotism of the Polish union workers. In this depiction of turn of the century America, the Greek’s indeterminate ethnicity does not signal the kind of cosmopolitanism espoused by Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006) that breaks down national and ethnic borders. Instead, it reifies the tense interethnic divisions that seemingly lie at the heart of class relations in the United States. The narrative does nothing to interrogate, investigate, or navigate the complexity and motivations of the borderless individuals. In fact cosmopolitanism is rendered as a threat, simply an opportunity for commercial terrorism.

Read in light of the early twentieth-century white slave narrative, *The Wire* reveals the post-9/11 anti-immigration sentiments so common in the United States during the years the television program was produced. Again, American antitrafficking legislation is revelatory of the prevalence of the anti-immigration anxiety in US culture that *The Wire* highlights. The TVPA, ostensibly intended to protect victims of sex trafficking through providing services and visas for survivors,

was an explicit, though much misunderstood, vehicle for harnessing immigration and punishing people who facilitate the international movement of immigrants. Though the legislation was constructed in concert with a varied coalition of concerned antitrafficking organizations, it was beholden to the conservative legislators who would make or break its viability when put to a vote and who understood the anti-immigration aspect of the law's mission as ever more important after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Those interests shaped the way the legislation was articulated, and as a result the focus shifted from protections to punishments.

The TVPA did not provide funding or support for protective or rehabilitative services for victims of trafficking who are US citizens (Bales and Soodalter 2009, 102–5). The law aided only those brought from other countries into the United States for the purposes of forced labor.<sup>21</sup> (Ironically, Beadie comments that in fact more women were likely to immigrate to the United States through dangerous illegal channels after September 11, because the US government imposed tighter restrictions on visas that previously would have allowed them to migrate legally.) A victim who sought asylum and protection in the United States after being trafficked was only provided with services or allowed to apply for T Nonimmigrant Status (T visa) if he or she was certified by the attorney general as a person whose “continued presence” in the United States would “effectuate prosecution of traffickers in persons.”<sup>22</sup> The fact that the TVPA focused only on people trafficked across US borders makes it clear how much the law and our culture subordinate protecting people from exploitation to policing immigration. The men and women who were supported by the legislation were merely tools in the mission to thwart illegal immigration. Government efforts following this legislation largely went toward antitrafficking prosecutions and investigations as well, leaving the protection of survivors (seemingly so central to the meaning of the bill) to the efforts of non-profit organizations that are only marginally supported by government funds and only if they were willing to agree to provisions preventing them from supporting sex work as a legitimate trade (Musto 2010, 26).<sup>23</sup> As Wendy Chapkis (2003, 932) puts it, “The T-visa, then, is designed not so much as a means to assist the victim as it is a device to assist prosecutors in closing down trafficking networks.”

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21. TVPA, Section 107(B)(1).

22. TVPA, Section 107(b)(E)(II)(bb).

23. See also Rieger 2007.

These political tactics (promoted most rigorously by the Republican representative Chris Smith of New Jersey) successfully limited the protections we give to the most vulnerable people in our society—people who are so impoverished as to find themselves in the most exploitative of labor situations—all for the sake of locating any means possible to forestall immigration into the United States. While the prosecution of traffickers is no doubt an important step in ending modern slavery, this miasmatic view of what constitutes change in our approach to the rights of laborers in our country to lead free lives of dignity reveals the continued disempowerment of those very same victims and the silencing of their experiences and their needs. Bush-era policies revealed a cultural “chain of equivalences” that Jo Doezema (2010, 130) breaks down as “organized crime is equated to terrorism; is equated to trafficking.” The xenophobic anxieties that grew out of the terrorist attacks on the United States in 2001 radically shaped public opinion toward immigration and allowed legislation meant to protect victims of trafficking to be hijacked for the ever more vocal cause of stemming illegal immigration. Modern slavery has simply been mobilized as a code word for illegal immigration.

This reveals the mobilization of US human rights discourse to support claims and aims that are antithetical to the intentions of most human rights advocates around the world. On the one hand, *The Wire* captures the tension between fighting crime and fighting a perceived immigration menace in the last episodes of the second season, when the trafficking case is repeatedly subordinated to the issue of port control and immigration policing by the FBI, which is under a post-9/11 mandate to single-mindedly pursue counterterrorism through attacking union bosses. On the other hand, in providing only one-dimensional portraits of the international criminal networks that pervade the narrative of the second season, the writers of *The Wire*, following conservative sentiments (likely inadvertently), fill the narrative gaps left by the silent victims of slavery with crusade politics—the largely uninformed post-9/11 anxieties and motivations that dominate our public discussion of immigration.

Human rights discourse and the figure of the slave are ironically mobilized in *The Wire* to mask nefarious and racialized acts of intellectual and political violence that only thinly veil the drives that serve as the real impetus for the conservative government and public efforts to end slavery today—the desire to legislate sexuality and police immigration. *The Wire* artfully reveals, and this I would argue is intentional, that the working class is subsumed into this debate unknowingly through the activation of anti-immigration anxieties about the decrease in

work opportunities that accompanies the nation's postindustrial economy. Instead of focusing on systemic problems in the US justice system, as the program did in season 1, in season 2 *The Wire* mistakenly places at least part of the responsibility for our nation's discontent and demise on unregulated immigration.

### Slavery as a Metaphor

Abstracted as it is from the lived experience of modern enslavement, the narrative of the second season of *The Wire* primarily mobilizes slavery as a metaphor rather than as a literal reality of forced labor in the twenty-first century. In the end, slavery is present in the narrative primarily as a moral compass that might gauge the degree to which any character has successfully negotiated the convoluted terrain of criminality that Baltimore presents to its citizens. While literal slaves are found in the container and in the bed with McNulty, the erasure of those women's experiences and voices indicates that their enslavement is merely employed as a means to analyze issues that the writers (like their legislative counterparts) have deemed more central to the narrative of a changing US political and economic landscape.

Complicating the use of slavery as a metaphor is the way this slavery is particularly racialized in *The Wire*. When Sobotka is finally interrogated, a white FBI agent condemns him not only with the charge that he has been involved in racketeering, wire fraud, and conspiracy to traffic drugs but, worse yet, that he has been a party to “white slavery!” (2.10), which she enunciates with genuine venom and disbelief. Here, by unnecessarily modifying “slavery” with “white,” the FBI agent implies that one of the most heinous of all crimes in history—slavery—is apparently somehow even worse (or at the very least different) when it involves *white* women. The phrase “white slavery,” spoken with all the contempt that such a seemingly ironic juxtaposition of words would induce, conjures up memories of the Mann Act and the novels of the early twentieth century, in which white slavery was called “the blackest slavery that has ever stained the human race” (Bell 1910, 3) and “Chicago's black traffic in white girls” (Zimmerman 1912).

Racialized in this way, modern-day slavery is both related to African American slavery before the Civil War and differentiated from it in the same moment. By speaking the words “white slavery,” the FBI agent necessarily activates the memory of chattel slavery in antebellum America and with it all of the contempt

the characters (including Sobotka himself) might have for such a universally abhorred practice. However, when the FBI agent lists white slavery as one of Sobotka’s felonies, she is largely talking about the metaphorical process of participating in the American imaginary of the most hideous of crimes. The accusation of being a perpetrator of “white slavery” seems to refer less to the literal slavery we see depicted in the second season than to an uncomplicated articulation of extreme condemnation. There is a slippage between the literal and the metaphorical usages of the word *slavery*. The writers (or at least the FBI agent) seem to indicate that people are literally being bought and sold, but they are also trying to mobilize a certain abstracted sentiment regarding the American slave past as progressive organizers did in the early twentieth century. At the same time, the unnecessary modifier *white* differentiates Sobotka’s crime from the nineteenth-century version with which we are more familiar. “White slavery” is somehow even more contemptible, because it is enacted on people who have not traditionally been the victims of slavery in the United States.

The word *slavery* and the actual presence of slaves, then, seem to appear as a trope in the plot because the writers want to evoke horror (in the characters and in the audience) regarding the shift in American ethics that makes slavery possible—not so much because they want to condemn the actual practice of modern-day slavery. This new ethic allows politicians and nefarious international criminal syndicates to work hand in hand to improve their own economic well-being at the price of other people’s lives, in turn forcing hardworking Americans to consort with criminals in order to maintain a simple livelihood in the city. In the end, it is through the extremity of the metaphor they chose rather than through its literal existence that the writers of *The Wire* explore the more visible crimes the show intends to indict. Even as the narrative of the women who are actually enslaved fades further and further into the background of the story line, the metaphor of slavery maintains its power to shock and to exact a striking condemnation of the larger societal issues that make such a crime possible.

The labor of modern-day sex slaves in the narrative context of the second season of *The Wire*, and more importantly in the context of US sociopolitical life, is a much misunderstood and silenced narrative that, to a large extent, is marginalized despite the American belief in our own abolitionist tendencies. Unfortunately, as much as *The Wire* does to humanize the working class, drug dealers, and abusers as well as a much-maligned American police force, it nonetheless participates in the commodification of its victims and illuminates the way our

understanding of slavery today is predicated on our anxieties about sexual normativity and immigration that persist in silencing women's experiences.

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