

Freedom Markets:

Consumption and Commerce across Human-Trafficking Rescue in Thailand

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Introduction

Since 2009, the US nonprofit antitrafficking organization Not For Sale (NFS)¹ has hosted the Free2Play Camp in northern Thailand, located about seventy kilometers from the Thai-Myanmar border at Chiang Rai. The organization provides an opportunity for over a dozen US volunteers to teach, play, and dance with the nearly 150 children who live at the home, while promising self-supporting volunteer participants an opportunity to learn about human trafficking. NFS supplies “shelter and long-term housing to youth rescued from exploitation,” and it claims that the youth at the home are “vulnerable to human trafficking” because of poor parenting stemming from poverty, drug use, and sex work.

Several members of the 2013 cohort entered a video competition sponsored by the Brees Dream Foundation, a charity created by National Foot-

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ball League (NFL) quarterback Drew Brees of the New Orleans Saints. Their video featured young college-aged Americans playing with the Thai youth at the shelter. In January 2014, the foundation named the video as the winner, which earned the NFS Thailand project a \$5,000 donation. The NFS website enthusiastically reported that it was a “different kind of football victory—to benefit children in Thailand—to report just in time for Super Bowl Sunday.” This headline references the significance of Super Bowl Sunday as an allegedly important US sex-trafficking destination of recent years. Fueled by moral concerns around modern-day sexual slavery, trafficking abolitionists contend that large-scale sporting events like the Super Bowl, World Cup, and Olympics are a breeding ground for sex trafficking because they bring money and tourists into competition cities. Anti-sex-trafficking advocates have called for increased surveillance and a crackdown on sex work during such events as a means of decreasing sex work (McCain Institute 2014). The juxtaposition of domestic concerns about trafficking at the Super Bowl with the funding of the NFS Thailand campaign by a celebrated NFL quarterback represents the unique convergence of US moral preoccupations around sexual commerce with transnational humanitarian investments in human trafficking’s abolition.

This article is particularly interested in why and how Thailand functions as a pivotal destination for these US human-trafficking rescue projects, and it situates transnational antitrafficking endeavors within Thai political and economic history. Building off my previous work with Elizabeth Bernstein (Bernstein and Shih 2014), I highlight how the transnational human-trafficking movement in Thailand is oriented around new forms of market-based humanitarianism. Herein, I juxtapose two distinct tourist encounters: one a human-trafficking reality tour hosted by a US nonprofit organization and the other a separate study-abroad gathering of US university students hosted at the office of a Thai sex worker rights organization. Bernstein and I previously explored the merging of humanitarian sentiment and commerce through this reality tour—what we described as an “erotics of authenticity” (ibid.). Pairing this prior fieldwork and analysis with additional ethnographic observations of a US university study-abroad program, I show that these disparate cases illustrate the hierarchical dimensions in which sex-trafficking interventions operate in Thai antitrafficking work.

The case of Thailand illustrates how global markets in tourism and commerce compel the global concern against sex trafficking in Thailand, while also serving as vital facilitators of antitrafficking humanitarian engagements in the country. In particular, this article positions Thailand's vibrant transnational civil society alongside a booming global tourism industry, both of which are legacies of military imperialism, Western-led development schemes, and contentious and violent struggles for state power situated between state sovereignty and market governance. The following sections outline features of the Thai political economy, paying particular attention to economic policies that Pasuk Phongpaichit and Christopher John Baker have characterized as "neoliberal populism" for the way in which the Thaksin regime has "closed the gap between business and politics" (2004: 230). The attention to practices of market-based governance under both Thaksin regimes aims to offer context to the Thai government's response to trafficking in persons, the transnational antitrafficking movement, and US rescue industry interests in Thailand.

Global Humanitarianisms

An established genealogy of critical humanitarianism studies explains the role of social action under the conditions of global capitalism (Ticktin 2014). Didier Fassin (2012) articulates "humanitarian reason" as a field that exists between mutually constituted poles of morality and politics. Nation-states, according to this theory, strategically deploy moral agendas in order to achieve militaristic, medical, and corporeal hegemonic regimes. Thus, the practice and politics of humanitarianism are firmly entrenched in a "dichotomizing paradigm defined by relationships of difference" (Aijazi 2014: 46; Kapoor 2008: 42). Accordingly, empathy and solidarity, two emotional claims of contemporary global humanitarian action, must be understood as deeply embedded in relations of power. Frequently, however, such relations are intentionally obscured under the putative guise of universal humanitarian benevolence.

Attuned to the sources of power and difference, some commentators have paid attention to the race, class, and gender inequalities between humanitarians, rescuers, saviors, and their alleged subjects. Teju Cole's

“The White-Savior Industrial Complex” (2012) highlights the interlocking forms of race and national power that underscore contemporary humanitarian action—and its related sentiments—from the global North onto the global South. Geographer Mary Mostafanezhad (2013) has discussed celebrity humanitarianism as a site of first world “gendered” generosity, whereby the celebrity of figures like Angelina Jolie and Madonna serves to bolster and celebrate their adoption of third world children—uncontested subjects of maternal humanitarian action. The social capital accumulated by global North humanitarians expands to the case of global “voluntourism” (Vrasti 2013) in Latin America and Africa; postmilitary “reconstruction” in the Middle East, Southeast Asia, and Afghanistan (Nguyen 2012); and civilian-led sex-trafficking raid and rescue in East and Southeast Asia (Soderlund 2005; Bernstein and Shih 2014) and in the United States (Shih 2016). An expanse of disciplines ranging from political philosophy to queer theory have expanded the notion of “humanitarian imperialisms” to speak of the political and moral contradictions inherent in the asymmetry between the emotional impacts experienced by donors and doers of humanitarian action over the material impact on intended beneficiary communities (Chomsky 2008; Nguyen 2011).

In addition to tremendous social capital, contemporary humanitarianism is also locked into large sources of financial capital, leading other scholars to examine humanitarian endeavor as enterprise. Tracing the adoption of neoliberal market-based ideologies to humanitarianism, many scholars have identified an increasing application of market solutions to social issues, often under the label of “social entrepreneurship” (Heiliger 2013; Bernstein 2016; Peredo and McLean 2006). Many global movements also have turned to the market to leverage consumer buying power to effect social change, for instance, in the case of fair-trade coffee (Jaffee 2007), ethnic handicrafts (Wherry 2008), Product Red goods to combat HIV/AIDS (Heiliger 2008), and “slave-free” commodities that provide financial support to the global antitrafficking movement (Shih 2013).

Reflecting on the resource constraints of humanitarian work, others have identified a “competitive humanitarianism” landscape, for instance, in post-disaster Sri Lanka following the 2004 tsunami (Stirrat 2006). Such competition recognizes the institutional and bureaucratic dimensions of global

social action and critiques the “NGO-ization” of global development as a process in which NGO success is based on “dependence and/or complicity with state, market, and multilateral/international institutions” (Choudry and Kapoor 2013: 1). Alternatively labeled a “non-profit industrial complex (NPIC)” (Smith 2007: 4), the economics of humanitarianism are fundamentally rooted in a symbiotic relationship between the state and civil society and the market. Speaking specifically of the antiviolence movement in the United States, Andrea Smith (2007) argues that the NPIC caused institutions to stray from antiviolence goals in favor of receiving or keeping funding and shifting organizational goals to accommodate requests for proposals (RFPs) from “above.” Such competition for funding and organizational survival “constrain[s] collaborative movement building” and discourages critical introspection into justice efforts because of the need to maintain funding (Finley and Esposito 2012: 13).

The aforementioned theoretical discussions of the market dimensions of humanitarianism and the nonprofit industrial complex are well suited to considering global antitrafficking efforts, which have been characterized as a “rescue industry” (Agustín 2007), “anti-trafficking industrial complex” (Leigh 2015), and a site of “redemptive capitalism” (Bernstein 2016) and “philanthrocapitalism” (Chuang 2015). The market metaphor is particularly appropriate given that human trafficking has often been likened to a market in human beings (see, e.g., Molland 2012). Thus, the irony of championing market-based solutions to resolve labor exploitation that emerges from global capitalist market impulses in the first place cannot be ignored (Bernstein 2012). Read together, these disparate insights reveal that humanitarianism is increasingly commodified by actors who design social projects in ways that make them appealing to their constituent bases—consumers and activists who compose the cohort of concerned citizens from the global North. This article extends these frameworks by demonstrating how Thailand functions as a site of free-market humanitarianism for human-trafficking rescue. Attempts at market-governance-based solutions to human trafficking often eclipse instances of long-standing community organizing and local activism, as well as long-term strategies for migrant rights or migrant integration.

Thai Political Economy

Since the end of the Indochina wars, Bangkok has marketed itself as a cosmopolitan environment hospitable to capital in all forms: foreign investment, humanitarian aid, development, and mass tourism. An influx of foreign capital, both from private corporations and in the form of development assistance, occurred following the Asian financial crisis in 1997. In the past decade, the rapid escalation of gross domestic product (GDP) and foreign direct investments has helped Thailand ascend as one of the strongest economies in Southeast Asia, transforming it from an aid recipient to a donor country in the Asia Pacific region (Manning 2006). Sharing a physical border with several nations that report a much lower GDP—in particular, Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar—Thailand is also the recipient of significant flows of migrant worker and refugee populations from the region (Phongpaichit and Baker 2002).

Thailand was a focal destination for military rest and relaxation (R & R) during the Indochina wars in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The market for intimacy in these “pleasure belts” generated a new moniker among the many US military servicemen who frequented the areas; rather than “R & R,” they proposed the alternate moniker “I & I,” referring to “intoxication and intercourse,” in order to more specifically describe their activities there. After the formal exit of US military troops from Southeast Asia in the early 1970s, the commercial sex industry remained central to the Thai tourist industry’s expansion. The Thai export-driven economy—planned and funded by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank loans following the 1997 financial crisis—privileges exports, tourism, and corporate expansion, primarily in Bangkok, and has created large wealth disparities between Bangkok and the other seventy-five provinces of Thailand. Currently, the majority of the nation’s wealth is consolidated in the nation’s capital, with 44.3 percent of GDP accounting for Bangkok alone (Thai National Economic and Social Development Board 2013; Wilson 2004; Skrobanek, Boonpakdee, and Jantateero 1997).

State interests in Thailand have prioritized economic development as a key path to providing social welfare. As anthropologist Ara Wilson (2005) has demonstrated, the market has penetrated most aspects of Thai life, and

the merging of markets and intimacy is evident everywhere from mass retail to medical tourism, and from private homes to public go-go bars. For many of the same reasons that it is hospitable to tourism, Thailand has succeeded in attracting foreign direct investment and is the regional hub of numerous global governance and humanitarian aid organizations, including the United Nations, International Labor Organization, Asia Foundation, International Organization for Migration, Red Cross, and Save the Children.

Thai economist Pasuk Phongpaichit and writer Christopher Baker have claimed that Thailand's economic policies of the past two decades exemplify "neoliberal populism" (2007), in which market-driven policies that aim to favor the rural masses are the foundations of Thailand's economic development and its democracy. The political struggles of the past decade have oscillated between populist strategies to win over the rural majority and Bangkok-centered development schemes that appeal to the urban elite, what *Time* magazine has referred to as a deep-seated division between the "country's northern rice bowl and the entrenched urban elites" (Stout 2014).

It is in this context of market-driven development and persistent rural-urban inequality that the stage for transnational market-based antitrafficking efforts that bind the state, private sector, nonprofit organizations, and migrant workers has been set.

Transnational Antitrafficking Movement and US Interests in Thailand

Global interest in human trafficking in Thailand is expansive, and the country has been the subject of more chapters in monographs on trafficking than any other country in the world, including Kevin Bales's *Disposable People* ([1999] 2004), David Batstone's *Not for Sale* (2007), Rachel Lloyd's *Girls Like Us* (2012), and Siddharth Kara's *Sex Trafficking* (2009). Each of these accounts overwhelmingly focuses on the prevalence of sex trafficking (rather than non-sexual-labor trafficking) in Thailand. Bales's celebrated *Disposable People*, published in 1999, calls readers to action through his depiction of rampant sexual slavery in Thailand, a form of "modern-day slavery" that he obliquely links to the nation's values: "Thailand is a country sick with an addiction to slavery. From village to city and back, the profits of slavery flow. Once authorities and businesspeople become accustomed to this outpouring

of money, once any moral objection has been drowned in it, a justification of slavery is easy to mount, and Thai culture and religion stand ready to do so" ([1999] 2004: 78).

Bales's comments, and those of other authors who have echoed similarly essentialist sentiments about the Thai character of slavery, reference economic inequality, rural-to-urban migration, government corruption, and corporate labor exploitation—features that are hardly specific to Thailand. Thus, this article seeks to explain the US antitrafficking movement's persistent and exceptional focus on Thailand, a global obsession that I suggest has been facilitated by the comforts of a hospitable mass tourist destination, the legacy of the US military's enjoyment of sexual services, the visibility of commercial sex as a proxy for sex trafficking, and the government's acquiescence to transnational treaties and hospitality toward foreign capital.

Thailand is home to over thirty-five different nongovernmental and global governance projects, as listed on End Slavery Now's public directory of antitrafficking organizations (2017), and dozens more grassroots organizations that claim to work on the issue. The functions of these organizations range from advocacy, awareness, and fundraising to direct service. One US evangelical Christian organization in northern Thailand claims to rescue male sex workers from sexual slavery, using the catchy motto, "Boys cannot be baht";² MTV's project, End Exploitation and Trafficking, is housed in central Bangkok and produces antitrafficking awareness concerts throughout the region; and the global secretariats of the Global Alliance against Traffic in Women and End Child Prostitution and Trafficking both direct regional efforts from Bangkok, as do the regional management offices for United Nations Action for Cooperation against Trafficking.

Antitrafficking operations in Thailand have become so appealing—and arguably profitable—that an Australian organization founded under the name The Grey Man was exposed in 2012 for fraudulent fundraising on behalf of antitrafficking commitments. Founded by a former military special operations officer, and funded by donations from Australian citizens, The Grey Man facilitated former Australian soldiers' and police officers' rescue missions of victims of sex trafficking in Thailand. The organization claimed to work with the Royal Thai Police; however, a journalist's probing

discovered that none of the organization's claims of rescuing Akha children were true. The Thai Department of Special Investigations later discovered that the organization had in fact posted "false rescues" on the Internet as a means of generating financial support for the organization, and their operations in Thailand have been suspended to date (Drummond 2012).

These disparate projects illustrate how the international community's urgent concern with human trafficking in Thailand has united global governance institutions like the United Nations and the International Labor Organization and state and nonstate actors in Thailand, the United States, and throughout Western Europe and Australia. In 2013, the Global Slavery Index ranked Thailand as the twenty-sixth worst offender of slavery—earning it a spot in the top 10 percent globally—reporting that in a country of nearly 67 million residents, an estimated 472,811 were victims of modern-day slavery (Walk Free Foundation 2014). A new ranking mechanism funded by an Australian NGO and in partnership with the International Labor Organization, the Walk Free report reveals the explicit alliances between global governance institutions and certain Western state and nonstate actors.

This global ranking system shares a great deal in common with the US *Trafficking in Persons Report* (TIP report; US Department of State 2003–14), which, since 2000, has been criticized for promoting the United States as the "global sheriff" of antitrafficking work (Chuang 2006) in which "global governance" has come to represent the interests of Western economic powers.³ In the early years of the TIP report, 2003–9, Thailand was consistently ranked a "tier 2" country, a middle-tier status assigned to the majority of countries on the list. Beginning in 2010, Thailand received a sudden downgrade to tier 2 "watch list" status, a special category for countries that do not comply with antitrafficking efforts as outlined by the US State Department. After being on the watch list for two years, the nation faced an automatic downgrade to tier 3, which would trigger economic sanctions. The 2013 TIP report stressed that despite an increase in trafficking investigations (83 in 2011 and 305 in 2012), Thailand did not prosecute enough human-trafficking cases, with just 27 prosecutions in 2012, compared with 67 the year prior (US Department of State 2003–14).

Anticipating the threat of a tier 3 downgrade in the 2014 TIP report ranking, the Office of Commercial Affairs at the Thai Embassy in Washington, DC, hired DC-based law firm Holland and Knight (H&K) to assist with a public relations campaign regarding Thailand's antitrafficking efforts and rankings. The eight-month program cost a total of \$408,000, and though little public information has been made available about the partnership, the Thai government seemed to rely on the firm's legal expertise and political clout in Washington, DC, to advocate for the country's antitrafficking activities. H&K issued press releases, made public comments, and lobbied on Capitol Hill at different congressional hearings on behalf of Thailand's government.⁴

Despite these efforts, in June 2014, the TIP report demoted Thailand to the lowest ranking, tier 3, citing Thailand's lack of attention to cases of labor trafficking in the deep-sea fishing industries and to the rights of Rohingya refugees⁵ from Myanmar (US Department of State 2003–14). As a tier 3 nation, Thailand risked economic sanctions, loss of development aid, and potential ostracism by other countries that do not want to do business with noncompliant governments.⁶

Thailand's government antitrafficking response is housed within the Ministry of Human Development and Social Welfare and coordinated among numerous other government entities. Relative to other countries in the Asia Pacific region, the Thai governmental response is robust, well prioritized, and autonomous in that it does not need the financial support of the many international agencies present in Thailand. For instance, its nine national human-trafficking shelters are fully run and funded by the Thai Ministry of Social Development and Human Security. Early in their inception, these shelters were upheld as modeling best practices in the region because so few governments in the region funded shelters devoted exclusively to assisting trafficked persons. Recently, however, Thai government shelters have become a scandalized site of numerous documented rights violations, creating new tensions between the Thai government and global governance institutions working in Thailand (Empower Foundation 2012).

Methods

This article is based on data gathered from forty months of global ethnographic participant observation research on the antitrafficking movement in China, Thailand, and the United States. Between 2008 and 2014, I served in varying capacities as researcher, volunteer, visitor, and activist in a range of secular, faith-based, government, and United Nations antitrafficking programs in three countries. In Thailand, I was generously offered office space at the Bangkok office of the Global Alliance against Traffic in Women. I conducted participant observation as a volunteer at both an evangelical US human-trafficking rescue program in Bangkok and the Empower Foundation, a Thai sex worker rights organization, in their office and sex-worker-owned bar in Chiang Mai. During the nonconsecutive four months that I spent at the Empower Foundation, the staff was patient as I occupied numerous roles: a researcher, an English teacher, sometimes a Chinese-language teacher, an outreach worker, an insufficient graphic designer,⁷ and a customer at the Can-Do Bar during the hours of operation between Wednesday and Saturday nights.

In August 2012, Elizabeth Bernstein and I participated in a week-long human-trafficking reality tour to Bangkok, Chiang Mai, and Chiang Rai (see Bernstein and Shih 2014). Elizabeth and I traveled as researchers, she at the time finishing a book on how what she conceptualized as “redemptive capitalism” spread throughout global anti-trafficking engagements and I finishing dissertation research, for which she was one of my astute advisers. This global purview of antitrafficking activism meant that we did not accept “human trafficking” as the obvious object of our own tourist gaze; rather, we studied how the tour company, NGOs we visited, and other tourists understood the realities of human trafficking in Thailand as their consumptive object.

Sex Tourism and Anti-Sex-Trafficking Tourism

Thailand’s thriving sex tourism sector has evoked a response from many commercial tour outlets seeking to educate global citizens about the issue of human trafficking through the experience of prepackaged mass tourism.⁸

In the name of providing a firsthand look into “modern-day slavery,” such tours focus primarily on painting a picture of rampant sexual commerce and the heroic campaigns that aim to curtail them. Such tours are offered by diverse outlets, ranging from churches to adventure expedition companies to educational institutions, and may involve paid volunteer opportunities.

The seven-day human-trafficking reality tour that Bernstein and I attended was cohosted by two nonprofit organizations, one that sponsors reality tours to destinations throughout the world, and the other that focuses on advocacy and awareness of human trafficking. The trip cost US\$1,300, excluding airfare. The fee included

- accommodation in three-star and above hotels;
- in-country transportation;
- expert tour leaders and guides;
- two meals per day;
- donations to organizations;
- education on effective strategies for undermining slave rings, and first-hand experience with how victims rebuild their lives;
- meetings with activists in the fight against human trafficking; and
- visits with different NGOs working directly with victims of human trafficking. (Global Justice Projects 2012)⁹

Nearly all participants on this reality tour expressed an interest in sex trafficking as their core motivation for attending the tour. However, when we received our itineraries on the second day of the seven-day trip,¹⁰ we saw that we would visit only one sex-trafficking organization. This organization, City Light in Chiang Mai, was founded by a young American woman who claimed to rescue young men—whom the organization’s activists universally refer to as “boys”¹¹ though they are older than eighteen—from sex work in Chiang Mai. The itinerary also included visits to a home for orphans, runaway youth, and youth previously living in homes with drug addiction (cosponsored by the US NGO that organized the trip); a Thai migrant worker organization that provided services for Burmese and Cambodian male victims of extreme labor exploitation in the deep-sea fishing industry; and an Australian-government-funded project that provided human-trafficking identification training to Thai law enforcement officials.

The existence of such a reality tour in Thailand is founded on Thailand's free-market fertility for multiple forms of tourism: sex tourism, mass tourism, medical tourism, ecotourism, ethnic-minority/hill-tribe tourism, and volunteer tourism, in addition to reality tourism.¹² Illustrative of the opportunities made available by the Thai market and vibrant civil society, the director of the Global Justice Project's reality tours contacted me to ask for advice on how one would go about setting up a reality tour in China, as his preliminary efforts seemed to be met with skepticism by local NGO partners and travel agents in China's comparatively authoritarian political environment with its limited opportunities for small US enterprises. In our ensuing discussion, I asked the director whether the company needed to secure the support of the Thai government. The director responded that they did not formally need to register because the Thai tourist sector is so large in Thailand (field notes, August 2012, Bangkok). The fact that there are nearly ten other educational or recreational tours that concern human trafficking demonstrates the possibilities of Thailand as a site of international humanitarian action and commerce.

Our primary guide, a Cambodian-American expat living in Phnom Penh with a decade-long career as a consultant for the United States Agency for International Development, UN organizations, a large US antitrafficking NGO, and several other development projects, said he hoped to deliver a balanced portrait of the issue of human trafficking. The resulting itinerary included visits to organizations that dealt with a range of important development issues, though links between such issues and human trafficking were never clearly articulated. The tour highlighted the country's vulnerability to trafficking, shown primarily through the lens of poverty, ethnic minority disenfranchisement, and an abundance of NGOs. When visiting the sponsoring organization's flagship project in northern Thailand, we were told of tragic stories of stateless mothers from Myanmar who were addicted to drugs. While mothers were detoxing,¹³ a large group home for youth provided housing for children, "saving them from begging on the streets." The organization's director shared that, during their residence at the respective care programs, both children and adults were taught the craft of jewelry making, so that they could earn supplemental income and generate income to support the organization.

On a different visit to the Echo Foundation in northern Thailand, we were taken to an Akha village, the destination of numerous popular “hill tribe trekking eco-tours,” and had the opportunity to speak with the village chief. Eager participants in the group asked the village head about the presence of human trafficking, through an independent interpreter provided by the organization, and the village head repeated numerous times that trafficking was not an issue precisely because the village’s location near a prominent national park created job opportunities close to home.

In the absence of formal visits to sex worker rights organizations, the sample itinerary promised a “visit to nightclubs and bars to observe activities.” Our guide provided our tour group with two opportunities to participate in evening walk-throughs of “red-light districts” in Bangkok and Chiang Mai. The guide explained that these areas were quite busy and dangerous, so there would be no formal tour or commentary; rather, it was important that we make our own observations. Several people voiced concern over the safety and the ethics of walking in the red-light district. They expressed discomfort with being near the sale of sex, thus perhaps supporting it in some way. In response, the guide simply remarked, “In order to understand human trafficking here, you really need to just see the red-light districts” (field notes, August 2012, Bangkok). Consistently speaking in such abstract and elusive ways about commercial sex did serve to maintain its allure, yet this never provided reality tourists with the contemporary or historical contexts of sex work and sex tourism in Thailand. It is this perpetual seduction surrounding the exploitative nature of commercial sex in Thailand—so allegedly ubiquitous and monolithic in character that it obliterates sex workers’ diverse experiences—that makes the red-light district such an ideal destination for reality tourists.

The prevalence and visibility of sex work—which many faith-based and abolitionist groups argue is the primary symptom of human trafficking—illustrates the relationship between human security and economic development in Thailand. While the sale of sexual services is currently illegal in Thailand, the Thai government does little to curb the sex tourism industry, aside from raids on sexual entertainment establishments for the purposes of nominally enforcing the law and meeting police quotas. In fact, the government has historically supported sex tourism, owing to its military and eco-

conomic positioning in the area. The US military presence during the Vietnam War, including the stationing of US troops in Thailand and the flow of other foreign troops for R & R, bred one of the earliest infrastructures for tourist exchange and commercial sex tourism in the world (Cohen 1996; Wilson 2004; Enloe 1989).¹⁴

In addition to the two primary guides, the tour agency employed one local Thai guide, who was accredited by the national tourist agency. As the only Thai-speaking guide on the entire trip, he shouldered the burden of translating for all twenty tourists on the trip. For his work, our Thai guide was paid 1,000 baht (US\$33) per day, a sum less than the 3,000 baht (US\$100) in donations that the tour agency gave to the selected NGOs we visited. Interviews with the tour guide and local tour outlets revealed that this salary was the average market rate for local Thai tour agents, and tour participants discouraged Elizabeth and me from questioning the sponsoring organization about the tour guide's salary, pleading that such an accusatory remark would stain the tenor of a trip sponsored by a "nonprofit organization just trying to do good."

Our local tour guide shared that when he leads tours for commercial tourist companies, he also earned a considerable amount of tips from tourists. It is worth noting, however, that reality tourists did not feel obligated to tip, since they believed that the nonprofit agency organizing the tour would engage in fair-wage practices and did not want to mar their relationship with their local guide with cash—many considered him "like family" by the end of the trip. This powerful emotional connection to the assumed beneficence of reality tourism framed a powerful disconnect with the material reality of the project as a commercial undertaking.

The Last Reality Tour of Siam

While the human-trafficking reality tour sponsored by Global Justice Projects did not arrange visits to any sex worker rights organizations, some other US tourist groups have made an effort to contact sex worker rights organizations during their travels in human-trafficking education. While conducting ethnographic participant observation as a volunteer at the Empower Foundation in Chiang Mai for several months between 2012 and 2014, I wit-

nessed anywhere from ten to twenty group visits per month; these included journalists, researchers, and students—mainly from Western Europe and North America, but also some from Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. For nearly all these visitors, questions about human trafficking drove their inquiry. Another, distinct set of visitors included sex workers and their allies from around the world who facilitated different workshops ranging from belly dancing to massage skills. Their visits typically oriented around sex-worker-organizing strategies, and they often discussed the harm that the antitrafficking movement had brought to their working lives in different places around the world.

In spring 2013, I observed a group of twenty undergraduate students from a university in South Dakota arrive at the Can-Do Bar, a sex-worker-owned and -operated bar run by the Empower Foundation in Chiang Mai. The group was led by two middle-aged, white American men, one a professor from their home university in South Dakota and one the director of foreign-exchange programs at Chiang Mai University, a long-time expatriate who organizes such visits for numerous student groups. The group of twenty juniors and seniors were on the tail end of their two-week journey to understand human trafficking in Thailand, an extended spring break as part of their semester-long course on human trafficking. In the days leading up to their visit to Empower, the group visited a variety of antitrafficking organizations, including the NFS project and other US abolitionist organizations fighting sex trafficking. The visit to Empower was their last NGO visit before they wrapped up their spring break with an extended weekend in Krabi Island, one of Thailand's famous beach resort destinations in the south.

The Empower Foundation fields daily requests from visitors—journalists, researchers, students seeking internships, and classes—who mostly express an interest in learning about “human trafficking.” During this visit, four Empower employees joined the group to share their experiences with sex work and sex work activism, and they encouraged the students to ask whatever questions they had. As an example of one of their advocacy tools, and as a product of their research on the antitrafficking movement, they screened a short film, *Last Rescue in Siam*,¹⁵ a satirical recounting of common injustices

experienced during a police raid of a beer bar (field notes, July 2014, Chiang Mai).

The film opens with a common day at work in a bar. A woman and her male client, who happens to be a police officer, are sitting and sharing drinks. The second scene cuts to the “war room” in which a “hero NGO,” policeman, and social worker are “planning a daring rescue.” During the rescue, the interagency task force that has convened drives through town, bypassing more serious crimes, such as a theft, a motorcycle accident, and a violent dispute on the street. The interagency actors arrive on the scene, and what ensues is a mismanaged comedy of errors as they try to arrest a sex worker as part of their plan to rescue her. Many of the sex workers onsite flee, but the rescue team captures one person and brings her in for questioning.

Once the “victim” arrives at the war room, the detained worker is asked her age and discloses that she is nineteen years old, speaking to social workers through a well-meaning translator. The rescue team decides that she is actually sixteen years old so that she may be deemed a victim of trafficking because Thai law states that sex workers under the age of eighteen cannot choose to participate in sex work. Once determined to be underage and a victim of trafficking, she is sent to the government trafficking victims shelter, where she is put to work with a sewing machine, a common strategy of rehabilitation for government, secular, and faith-based antitrafficking organizations alike. In the final scene, the able and empowered worker sews herself a ladder to escape from her captors and the “rescue” that has been forced upon her.

This satirical Chaplinesque film—black and white and silent with subtitles in Thai and English—is based upon years of Empower’s direct work by and with sex workers whose lives and working conditions are continually negatively impacted by the global antitrafficking movement and Thai laws and law enforcement. Despite efforts aimed at protection, many sex worker rights organizations globally have demonstrated that antitrafficking surveillance, through police raids and increased prosecution of clients, has led to a decrease in overall safety and other working conditions. In 2012, Empower published the groundbreaking report *Hit and Run*, which

documented the collateral harm experienced by sex workers at the hands of the antitrafficking movement in Thailand. This report highlighted instances in which residents of Thai government human-trafficking shelters experience numerous rights violations in the name of their protection as victims of trafficking.

Empower was founded in 1985 and had been operating long before the global antitrafficking movement so robustly descended upon the Thai political and legal infrastructure. It provides a range of community support services to sex workers throughout the country. In 2012 Empower began coordinating the meetings of Sex Workers of ASEAN—annual gatherings of sex workers from the ten Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) member countries—which cleverly appropriates ASEAN’s model of political economic cooperation as a platform for regional solidarity among sex workers.

Despite the organization’s unparalleled firsthand experience in providing outreach, direct service, and advocacy to and by sex workers for the greater part of thirty years, it frequently finds itself as the “last stop” on study tours of human trafficking. Groups usually arrive armed with a skeptical curiosity as they attempt to reconcile the grave tales of sexual slavery that other organizations have reported to them with the contrasting accounts that Empower workers share.

Empower sex worker activists communicate to student visitors that there are different types of sex work in Thailand, noting that precarity within the trade is, like other types of low-wage work, based on the structured labor relations of each. For instance, Thai sex workers can work in a variety of entertainment establishments: beer bars where they serve cocktails to customers in order to make connections in which customers pay to leave the bar with the waitress; go-go bars, where dancers perform until they are called off the stage to accompany customers; and fishbowl situations, in which dozens of women sit behind a glass enclosure and clients select women by numbers affixed to their bodies or dress. In each of these cases of indoor sex work, the flat “bar fee,” typically 200–500 baht (US\$6–18), is paid to the bar owners, while most subsequent transactions regarding payment for other intimate acts are arranged between the worker and client independently.

Throughout their weekly outreach to sex work establishments across the country, Empower focuses primarily on educating sex workers about their rights, addressing what they see as the most prevalent issues: nonpayment of wages, maltreatment by entertainment shop owners, random police raids, and forced detention of sex workers in the name of “combatting human trafficking.” Their work is also concerned with providing tools for sex workers to be better at their jobs, either through English-, Thai-, and Japanese-language training or through distribution of free condoms. Empower has identified the most vulnerable populations as sex workers who are undocumented, primarily from Laos, Cambodia, and Myanmar, or stateless hill-tribe persons in Thailand; lacking citizenship, they are more often abused by employers and clients because they have no grounds on which to seek assistance from Thai police. Outdoor street prostitutes, who are primarily non-Thai or transgender sex workers, also work under more structurally dangerous conditions because they are more vulnerable to client and police violence.

This discussion of reality tours has juxtaposed the overwhelmingly simplistic prepackaged tales that are sold to American reality tourists with the complex realities of service provision to victims of trafficking in Thailand. Building off arguments in Bernstein and Shih (2014), this article has discussed how the reality tour phenomenon turns to US consumers to raise funds and awareness about human trafficking, selling a version of human trafficking that generates social capital for tour participants, tour operators, and the expert NGOs who craft the tales of trafficking on the trip. Unlike in the human-trafficking reality tour sponsored by US organizations, Empower’s dissenting narrative, which advocates “rights not rescue,” critiques the collateral harm that global anti-human-trafficking efforts have inflicted on sex workers, complicating a landscape of abolitionism in which the act of simply attending a reality tour is understood as a meaningful form of antitrafficking activism. The prioritization of certain actors, voices, and accounts, and the silencing of others, is an important reminder that transnational social movements are power-laden networks of institutions in which dissenting narratives have little value. Instead, value is created by commercial entities that have sought Thailand out because it is a destination for mass tourism, with prepackaged narratives of commercial exploits of sex trafficking.

Conclusion

The combined market forces of sexual commerce and mass tourism have made Thailand a ripe site for the expansion of the human-trafficking rescue industry (Agustín 2007). Illustrating the tensions between state interests in global capital and the transnational human-trafficking movement, this article has examined how circulations of sex, global commerce, and tourism align with new transnational consumer, activist, and humanitarian interests in combatting human trafficking in Thailand. Alternatively stated, the market for human-trafficking rescue is embedded in the same free market forces that allegedly drive human trafficking and that facilitate mass tourism in Thailand.

These instances of global market-based humanitarianism in Thailand, like the human-trafficking reality tour and new instances of US university studies abroad, illustrate how the transnational antitrafficking movement is embedded in race, gender, national forms of power, and capital. Amidst the plentiful commerce in antitrafficking work, the actual sites and symptoms of human trafficking and exploitation are rarely legible to transnational voyeurs, rescuers, and humanitarians. For instance, the recent spate of rural farmer suicides as protest, first somberly described to me by a staff member at Empower, whose family members have fallen victim to former Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra's notorious rice-pledging schemes (Kedmeý 2013), is one of the most significant domestic issues related to the issue of human trafficking and exploitation in Thailand. Thailand's rural poor have been systematically left behind by economic development policies that favor the development of Bangkok's urban core. Such urban-peripheral inequalities drive low-wage migration in a range of service positions, and Thailand's wealth relative to neighboring countries drives undocumented labor migration from countries throughout Southeast Asia. These forms of mobility illuminate the motives for migration and the systematic struggles that may create the preconditions for human trafficking; however, its preferred abstractions and refractions through red lights, commercial sex, and undocumented migration represent the conventional and popular ways in which human trafficking in Thailand is understood and consumed.

Notes

- 1 NFS is a US antitrafficking nongovernmental organization (NGO) that conducts direct service and awareness-raising projects to combat “modern-day slavery” throughout the world. Founded in 2005, it is the largest formally secular antitrafficking NGO, and it has integrated faith-based communities into antitrafficking activism—primarily young evangelical Christian women.
- 2 The baht is Thailand’s national currency.
- 3 This is merely an extension of the same phenomenon outlined by Janie Chuang (2006), which problematizes the US *Trafficking in Persons Report’s* relationships with binding economic sanctions from multilateral lending institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Additionally, for critiques of the Global Slavery Index, see Anne Gallagher’s (2014) op-ed in the *Guardian*.
- 4 Globally, Thailand is not the only country to use US firms to promote their attention to social issues. Following the 2014 kidnapping of more than 250 teenage girls by Boko Haram from middle and high schools in northern Nigeria, the Nigerian government hired a US public relations firm for a reported \$1.2 million dollars to bring global attention and funding to the issue and to promote its social media campaign #BringBackOurGirls (Kristof 2014).
- 5 The Rohingya are an Islamic ethnic group who live predominantly in Myanmar. The United Nations has named them one of the most persecuted ethnic groups in the world. An estimated one hundred thousand Rohingya live in refugee camps on the Thai-Myanmar border (United Nations High Commission on Refugees 2014).
- 6 As of 2014, Thailand, China, and Malaysia are only the countries in the Asia Pacific region to have received such low rankings.
- 7 At the time, Empower was reprinting its English-language textbook, based on an original that lacked a digital copy.
- 8 The copresence of sex tourism and anti-sex-trafficking tourism in the Thai context is discussed in Bernstein and Shih 2014.
- 9 Pseudonyms are used to refer to the reality tour provider and all organizations encountered during the tour and are consistent with those used in the article that also describes this tour (Bernstein and Shih 2014). At the request of the Empower Foundation, a pseudonym is not used when discussing their work.
- 10 Although the website promised three-star hotels, the group was placed in back-packer hostels that cost US\$5 per person/per night. When I confronted the guide about the inaccurate description on the organization’s website, he explained once again, “Don’t forget that this is Thailand, still a poor third world country, and these accommodations are the equivalent of three-star hotels in Thailand.” Other tourists seemed pleased with this explanation, eagerly nodding in agreement and seemingly applauding their ability to “rough it” and to under-

stand and experience local realities. Kimberly Hoang (2015: 148) describes this phenomenon as a fascination with “third world poverty,” through her ethnographic accounts of Western men’s “benevolent remittances” to Vietnamese sex workers, whom sex tourists assume to be “virtuous” third world subjects.

- 11 This language parallels the reference to former sex workers as “girls” in Shih 2013.
- 12 For examples of the aforementioned instances of tourism, see Parreñas 2011, Bloul 2012, Vradi 2012, Steinbrink 2012, and Linke 2012.
- 13 Fathers were not beneficiaries of such “antitrafficking” services. In fact, several of the organization’s comments about fathers suggested that Burmese men were part of the problem, subjecting their wives and children to the cruel fate of poverty and the temptations of drugs and crime. The organization’s many references to creating “home” and “family” for mothers and children encouraged the escape from the deficient families they were born into.
- 14 Another country where US militarism led to an increase in commercial sex tourism is South Korea. Sealing Cheng (2011) and Hae Yeon Choo (2016) have demonstrated the presence of sexual humanitarianism in former and current US military bases throughout South Korea, revealing the force of geopolitical power within contemporary migrant worker lives and the humanitarian campaigns that hope to discipline them.
- 15 Cultural forms of activism in Thailand have a rich history dating back to the democracy struggles in the 1970s, and this film is just one of a number of artistic interventions that sex worker rights organizations have conducted into antitrafficking work. In 2013, Empower Foundation launched an art show at the Bangkok Art and Culture Centre featuring artwork by sex workers from Malaysia, Philippines, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Myanmar, Timor-Leste, and Singapore.

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