

## **Narrating "white slavery!" in The Wire: A generic genealogy**

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

According to conservative estimates compiled by Kevin Bales in his groundbreaking work *Disposable People*, there are an estimated 27 million people forced to toil as slaves in the world today.<sup>1</sup> More than ten thousand men, women, and children are trafficked into the United States alone each year, many of whom 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>2</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>3</sup>

In 2003, the acclaimed HBO television series *The Wire* 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 second 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 their unexpected murder as well. When one shipment of women is discovered in a claustrophobic compartment hidden in the back of a shipping container, they have suffocated, and 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, 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 Two of *The Wire*, we receive mini-lessons on the inner-workings of modern day slavery. Detectives, 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 US. In one episode, a night club 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. (II, 6)

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 and narrative constructions of *The Wire* to 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 21<sup>st</sup> century – mythologies regarding the safety our state can provide us, the post-racial society many thought we had built in the US, the stability of the US as a superpower, our unshakeable 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 Two, I want to argue, allows us to locate *The Wire* within a long tradition of representing slavery that can further inform our reading of the program's interrogation of early 21<sup>st</sup> century American life, cultures, and literary tradition. 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 within the context of two modes of representing slavery in particular – the African American slave narrative

tradition and the “white slavery” narratives of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century – *The Wire* becomes an inheritor of and contributor to our ever-changing picture of slavery in the US and the cultural norms and anxieties that allow it to exist.

This paper will trace some of the cultural contexts that inform the depiction of slavery in the last few centuries of American writing as way of historicizing and critiquing the way *The Wire* takes up slavery as its subject in the 21<sup>st</sup> 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, and sex that intersect in our discourse regarding 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 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries 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 anti-slavery movements as testimonial evidence of the inhumanity of the institution of slavery. In one of those narratives written in 1860, 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 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.”<sup>6</sup> These unbearable, unspeakable, and nearly unbelievable realities forced Jacobs to flee, but, aware of the limitations and dangers a black woman would meet if she traveled 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 all the time, but mentally maintaining her strength and determination to avoid the sexual and physical deprivations of slavery. When 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.

Jacobs’ published narrative was particularly compelling because it revealed to its readers the unspoken gendered politics of Southern slave holding families. The perversion of sexual mores among the master class that was born of living with an enslaved class was made explicit, and the domestic tensions between slave holding husbands and wives revealed what was an open secret among households in the South. As Hortense Spillers describes it, “The mistress in the case of Brent’s [Jacob’s] narrative becomes a metaphor for *his* [the master’s] madness that arises in the ecstasy of unchecked power.”<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Jacobs’ 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.<sup>8</sup> Jacobs’ 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 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in America that help us understand the political and cultural contexts within 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 anti-slavery movement. Nevertheless, a significant impetus for publication and distribution of most slave narratives grew out of 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 US, 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. She 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.<sup>9</sup>

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' 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.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the harrowing silence that slavery seemed to inflict upon Jacobs' ability to narrate her own life, Post believed Jacobs was burdened with a "duty" to publish her narrative because she believed that the wide-ranging, positive effect it would have for millions of African Americans would far outweigh the psychological anguish it caused her. 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."<sup>11</sup> Two mutually reinforcing desires prompted the production and wide distribution of first-person stories of enslavement, then – 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 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> 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 in the slave narrative, 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 by the first time we encounter them.<sup>12</sup> 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 Amy Post and Lydia Maria Child, they recognize that though the slave's 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 in order 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 One on busting drug dealing bad guys, is transformed in Season Two 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 at identifying and humanizing 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” (II, 3). Beadie discloses that she doesn’t feel good about allowing the women to go into nameless graves (II, 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...” (II, 6). The detectives’ collective (but necessarily partial) narration of the scene of death shared by the thirteen 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 Two, Officer Beadie reveals the only legible story the women have left the detectives regarding their lives and struggles after being made captive – the claw marks, “broken fingernails, blood on the walls” that they left as proof of their short time in the

death trap (II, 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 identity and to the stories of torture they might have told had they survived. The dead women also leave behind their bed rolls and luggage, and at least one woman left family photographs and a letter – expressive but nearly illegible indications of who she was before she was transformed into a slave 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 who has unknowingly lost a daughter and a mother to dreams of a better life (II, 3).

The voices of the slaves themselves may be curtailed, but the anti-hero of the entire series, Detective Jimmy McNulty (though no Lydia Maria Child) is personally committed not only to solving the crime of the women's death, but also to putting names and stories to the dead faces of the enslaved girls. 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 they are 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” (II, 3). It is primarily through McNulty's consistent representation 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, of putting a human face on the crime of modern slavery, of creating a slave narrative in this new context.

### *The Silence of Modern Slavery*

A profitable comparison to the 19<sup>th</sup> century slave narrative tradition would likely have to stop there, however, for the genre of the slave narrative was tuned precisely to the slave's own voice. The slave narrative depicted 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. 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.<sup>13</sup> The slave narrative indicated to the public that the first-person voice and lived experience of enslaved

people was 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 condemnation of the slave narrator would be to imperil the causes of democratic liberty and justice.

Enslaved women in *The Wire*, however, find no such agency or significance within 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>14</sup> and we can say those figures represent the powerful legacy of the slave narrative in that way, the show does not extend that multi-dimensionality to all of its characters, and it is this very particular group of enslaved women who fall 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 the way enslaved women are treated within 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 hard-working, honest Kima and the resilient and determined Beadie.<sup>15</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 multi-faceted and complex subjects akin to, say, the drug dealers, politicians, policemen, or newspaper reporters represented in the rest of the series.

If the murdered women are unavailable for testimony in the case, there are still other internationally trafficked prostitutes who emerge in the process of the investigations in Season

Two, who represent an alternative outcome that the dead women in the can might have encountered had they survived. In Episode 5, the camera turns to some of those women, Russian-speaking sex slaves 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 – they have their voices obscured within 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”<sup>16</sup> – is erased by the authors of the script when they refuse the primarily English-speaking audience the ability to understand her (II, 5). 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 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 US, 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 investigation.<sup>17</sup> Though the detective’s work is necessarily dedicated at times to the naming of the victims and the investigation of the bodies violated by the crime, this focalization reduces the space within 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 our judicial system has in comprehending the lived experience of victims of crime in general.<sup>18</sup> In this way, the genre of detective fiction both silences the lived experiences of the victims and also 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>19</sup> However, the working class that the season begins with – those working women who paid 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. They are repeatedly referred to by the detectives in the most abstract and practical of terms, called “14 homicides” (II, 7) or “that can full of dead girls” (II, 3), and even “pussy in a can” (II, 2). Essentially, within 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 within 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 entirely 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 hyper-visibility 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 were, 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 appear 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 being prostituted there are being held against their will, shuttled back and forth by armed guards, and threatened with violence if they dare escape. In order 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" (II, 9). Not only does McNulty figure himself as the passive victim of a crime he was "unable to resist," but he also designates the prostitutes 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 death McNulty is investigating. Enslaved sex workers are thoughtlessly transformed from victims to criminals in one sexual act.

Indeed, the disgust that McNulty and his colleagues express for the traffickers they are there to arrest does not appear to extend to a disdain for the clients who utilize the sexual services and who 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, “It takes a whore to catch a whore” (II, 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” (II, 9), and pats him on the back, completely uninterested in the dire implications this playboy attitude has for the women he exploited in the process. Of course, his colleagues are clearly dismissive and even tired of McNulty’s reckless behavior. On the other hand, they never once 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 making humor out of McNulty’s participation in the sex trade, 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 to hide from his past. And Kima selfishly neglects her pregnant lover and newborn child. There is no clear good and bad in *The Wire*, and yet there is a discernable morality 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 motivations: 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, they struggle to understand the hierarchies they have to ascend in order to participate in the union, and in the end, when Sobotka realizes that his entire life and family have been destroyed, he goes back in a dramatic scene to the only thing he can truly know – the work (II, 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. Though Beadie off-handedly comments that "what they need is a union" (II, 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 Harriet Jacobs' 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 after the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century marked a momentous shift in our cultural awareness and legislative protections of sex trafficking victims. In November 2000, The UN demanded international legislative change by passing the "Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children," which defined 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>20</sup>

Two major US governmental attacks on the modern slave trade – the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA)<sup>21</sup> and the annual Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report<sup>22</sup> – were both born in 2000 as well. The TVPA defined human trafficking, outlined penalties for convicted traffickers, and provided provisions and funding for protecting and providing aid to trafficked

individuals. In 2003, the Bush administration, most concerned about protecting “family values,” put pressure on legislative bodies to regulate the sex trade in the US 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>23</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. Non-profit organizations, quietly organized in the late 1990s, became international powerhouses for change at both the grass roots and legislative levels. Thus, Season Two of *The Wire*, aired June to 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 US.<sup>24</sup>

These major legislative shifts, enacted to address the issue of human trafficking, brought to light a struggle within US cultural discourse regarding women’s bodies, sexuality, and rights. Despite the fact that more attention was paid during this period to the problem of sex trafficking, popular conservative notions of propriety continued to dominate the discourse regarding women’s sexuality and the sale thereof. Thus, the erasure of the voices of the enslaved women in the show might equally stem from generic limitations of the detective genre and the continued repression and circumscription of women’s sexuality within the spheres of culture and government in the US. The erasure of the voices of the women in the show is emblematic, in fact, of the way sex workers’ and sex slaves’ voices have been erased from the discourse of anti-trafficking work in general. In an effort to legislate sexuality and “abolish” prostitution, non-

profits and legislators have often subordinated sex workers' rights to their narratives to the political causes that purport to protect them.<sup>25</sup>

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 twentieth 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 *Human Trafficking*, for instance, women from Ukraine, Czech Republic, and Russia all fall prey to an evil conspiracy of a Russian sex trafficking syndicate. In *Taken*, 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* seeks justice for the Eastern European and Russian women who were victims of both sex traffickers and a corrupt UN. Many quality low-budget documentaries are made about sex trafficking in Asia, where the problem is statistically more prevalent, but these don't make it into the living rooms of the average American consumer.

"The media's obsession with Eastern European sex slaves" has made it something of a trope, and as such has become so normalized in our shallow understanding of human trafficking that we take their existence for granted, allowing this "victim porn" to rob "trafficked migrants" of "humanity and dignity," according to Louisa Waugh.<sup>26</sup> 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 allows it to disappear from the narrative relatively quickly. Their

existence is taken for granted; they almost seem as if they are slaves by nature instead of circumstance. Their only role to play in the narrative is as 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 work as sex workers, further complicating our notion of what it takes to constitute forced sex. The definition of sex trafficking is finally articulated clearly in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, despite much debate, indicating that it involves a “commercial sex act [that] is induced by means of fraud, force, or coercion.”<sup>27</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 experience 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 death of the women in the cargo container, it seems as though once a woman has submitted to being a prostitute, 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 in the season are illegal immigrants, and thus they are not availed the possibility of claiming innocence. Seemingly, the women’s choices relegate them to being guilty by nature, making it seem 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 escapade with the sex slaves highlights this disconnect.

Even when public awareness did turn toward the issue of sex trafficking the early 2000s and legislatures began to address the growing crisis in the US, the focus of the prosecutions was on the traffickers. Johns (purchasers of sexual servicers), like McNulty, are not prime targets of the indictments, and they regularly go unpunished altogether, even when there are under-aged girls involved. In part, this has to do with the notion that sex work is a choice, as discussed earlier, but McNulty's escapades reveal lingering, outdated notions of normative sexuality that indicate 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 the money for sexual services. When a woman sells her 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 in which our 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 non-issue, 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 our contradictory and yet utterly pervasive notions of gendered sexual norms in our society and replicates them without critique. Through a generic analysis of the way in which slavery has been depicted over the course of two hundred years in the US, we make visible the stark contrast between liberation-seeking abolitionist slave narratives and the representation of slavery we have available to us today in the popular culture of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. That depiction strikingly and painfully reveals how 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 20<sup>th</sup> Century*

The only time we see the Eastern European women working, 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 19<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> century, when there emerged a fairly popular trend in novelistic and non-fictional 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 Keire, 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.”<sup>28</sup> Around the turn of the twentieth century, this language gets re-worked by progressive movements to protest individual economic alienation by big business and their supporters in elected government. Though some women were in fact being trafficked as sex slaves, the progressive movement used the evocation of anti-slavery sentiments which grew out of Northern anxieties about the Southern plantation system in order 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 1907, journalist James Kibbe Turner published a sensationalist article in *McClure's Magazine* entitled “Daughters of the Poor,” in which he outlined the mechanism by which women were being brought from other countries in order 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 within the brothels. Instead, what seems to be of deepest concern to Turner 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.<sup>29</sup> He callously refers to the women as mere “supplies” or as “exports,”<sup>30</sup> ostensibly in order 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 what is commonly referred to as the White Slave Traffic Act of 1910, which designated 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>31</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 famously first evoked 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 1910’s, saw the growth of films, novels, plays, magazine articles, captivity narratives, and treatises that attacked not only 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>32</sup> In some few ways, these stories of 20<sup>th</sup> century white slavery share characteristics of the narratives written by former slaves in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The concern with the widespread injustice of forced labor is clearly present, and an attempt at raising awareness and promoting radical social change is crucial to the motivation for writing the books.

However, there are many more characteristics which distinguish the 20<sup>th</sup> century white slave narratives from their 19<sup>th</sup> century predecessors. The most striking and significant of these differences is that the stories are seldom, if ever, told in 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 case, 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 in their demise. However, their voices are almost entirely erased; their responses to the situations are largely lost in an effort to make them seem entirely helpless within the situation. What comes to pass when a nefarious man steals a woman out of a dance hall or ice cream shop or poor house is registered only (but significantly) by the deteriorated look on the once cherubic young face.

For the most part, these women are interchangeable, the specificity of their experience as individuals or as slaves is completely avoided by the narratives. In fact, in *Panders and their*

*White Slaves*, Clifford G. Roe, assistant state's attorney in Illinois and leader of the fight against white slavery, writes about a young woman who barely escaped slavery, claiming that, "It does not matter what this girl's name was."<sup>33</sup> Unlike the slave narratives of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in which the slave's liberation is often expressed in the declaration of his or her own name, these early 20<sup>th</sup> 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 can be found in a novel by Eustace Hale Ball entitled *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 experience 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.<sup>34</sup> If the novel strays away from any clear description of the life of slavery, what it does concentrate upon is 1) the changing mores of young single independent women, 2) the machinations of the syndicate of traffickers which, in this case, directly involves the very people who run anti-vice organizations, and 3) the menace of unrestrained immigration and its impact on morality.

Indeed, in both the fictional and non-fictional representations of the white slave trade, immigration is figured as the most influential factor in the proliferation of trafficking in American cities. There are some few groups of immigrants who are outside of the criminal networks, ethnic groups that seem to have become Americanized such that they can act as the heroes who liberate the slave 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. On the other hand, 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.”<sup>35</sup> 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.”<sup>36</sup> Clearly, the problem these writers pinpoint as the plague of American cities is much more complicated than simply the trafficking of young women.

The foreign menace was a common theme in these novels and tracts. *Fighting the Traffic in Young Girls* alleges that Italians masked as innocent, model-immigrant Irish men are responsible for running brothels.<sup>37</sup> Italians are accused of frequenting and often owning the dance halls and ice cream parlors in which youthful and fun-loving young women find their demise.<sup>38</sup> George Kibbe Turner 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.<sup>39</sup> And according to Ernest A. Bell, 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.”<sup>40</sup>

The fear that women were being trafficked clearly ran deeper than a concern that sexual mores were changing – writers in the 1910s were revealing deeply-entrenched discrimination against immigrant populations and depicted their battles against the government organizations that encouraged those populations to immigrate and prosper. The fact that the women's demise takes place off stage is not entirely attributable, then, to the impropriety of writing about sexuality. Instead, women's experience of the sex trade is 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 anti-vice 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, what gains the attention of the narrative are 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 20<sup>th</sup> century themes so central to white slave narratives are only changed in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century insofar as criminal enterprises have diverted their attention to new products and re-organized 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 multi-faceted emotional and personal lives complicated by the urgency of the demise of their status in society and a decline in the

availability of work. However, in addition to the monochromatic depictions of enslaved women, certain specifically 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>41</sup> The ethnic interactions of the second season unite seemingly innocent, hard-working Americanized people of Polish descent with the cold, hard, wheeling and dealing of recent immigrants who speak with accents (and even 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 (II, 6). The whole conspiratorial crew dines on expensive meals in scenes reminiscent of *The Godfather* and makes jokes about being able to change their ethnic identities any time their illegal activities are discovered (II, 9 & 11). Though the Ukrainian thug balks at dock worker Nick’s lack of knowledge of other people and their cultures (II, 1), the writers do little themselves to avoid stereotyping the men who run the smuggling operations.

Though the show is otherwise premised on providing 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 there are some groups of people (who come from a very similar set of countries to those feared in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century white slave narratives) who are feeding off of 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, de-territorialized 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 that breaks down national and ethnic borders;<sup>42</sup> instead it reifies the tense inter-ethnic divisions that seemingly lie at the heart of class relations in the US. 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 20<sup>th</sup> century white slave narrative, *The Wire* reveals the post-9/11 anti-immigration sentiments so common in the US during the years the television program was being produced. Again, American anti-trafficking legislation is revelatory of the prevalence of the anti-immigration anxiety in US culture that *The Wire* highlights. The 2000 Trafficking Victims Protection Act, ostensibly set up 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 anti-trafficking 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 punishment.

Since the TVPA did not provide funding or support for protective or rehabilitative services administered to US citizen victims of trafficking,<sup>43</sup> the only people who were aided by the law were those who came from other countries into the US for the purposes of forced labor<sup>44</sup> (which is ironic since, as comment made by Beadie makes clear, in fact, more women were likely to immigrate to the US 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 US after being trafficked was only provided with services or allowed to apply for a “T-visa” if they were certified by the Attorney General as a person whose “continued presence” in the US would “effectuate prosecution of traffickers in persons.”<sup>45</sup> The fact that the TVPA only focused on people trafficked across US borders makes it clear how much the law and our culture subordinates 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 anti-trafficking prosecutions and investigations as well, leaving the protections of survivors (seemingly so central to the meaning of the bill) to the efforts of non-profit organizations who were 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.<sup>46</sup> As Wendy Chapkis 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.”<sup>47</sup>

These political tactics (promoted most rigorously by Republican 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 US. While the prosecution of traffickers is no doubt an important step in ending modern slavery, this miasmic 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 breaks down as “organized crime is equated to terrorism; is equated to trafficking.”<sup>48</sup> The xenophobic anxieties that grew out of the terrorist attacks on the US 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 way human rights discourse is mobilized in the US to support claims and aims that are completely antithetical to the intentions of most human rights advocates around the world. On the one hand, the series captures the tension between fighting crime and fighting a perceived immigration menace in the last episodes of the season, when the trafficking case is repeatedly subordinated to the issue of port control and immigration policing by the FBI, who are under a post 9/11 mandate to single-mindedly pursue counter-terrorism 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*, (likely inadvertently) following conservative sentiments, 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 being mobilized in the *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. What *The Wire* artfully reveals, and this I would argue is intentional, is how the working class is subsumed into this debate unknowingly, through the activation of anti-immigration anxieties about the decrease in working opportunities that accompanies our nation's post-industrial economy. Instead of focusing on systemic problems within the US justice system, as the program did in Season One, season two 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 the way in which their enslavement is merely being employed as a means to analyze issues which 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 in which this slavery is particularly racialized within *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!” (II, 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 turn of 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 20<sup>th</sup> century in which white slavery was called “the blackest slavery that has ever stained the human race”<sup>49</sup> and “Chicago’s black traffic in white girls.”<sup>50</sup>

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’s a slippage between the literal and metaphorical usage of the word “slavery” in that the writers (or at least the FBI agent) seems to indicate that people are literally being bought and sold, but they’re also trying to mobilize a certain abstracted sentiment regarding the American slave past as progressive organizers did in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. At the same time, the unnecessary modifier “white” differentiates Sobotka’s crime from the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 US.

The word slavery and the actual presence of slaves, then, seem to appear as a trope within 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 hard-working 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* are able to 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 storyline, the metaphor of slavery maintains its power to shock and to exact a striking condemnation of the larger societal issues that makes such a crime possible.

The labor of modern day sex slaves within 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 which, 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 upon our anxieties about sexual normativity and immigration that persist in silencing women’s experiences.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Bales, *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999) 8.

<sup>2</sup> I derive this definition from Kevin Bales' work.

<sup>3</sup> "Traffic" (Television Miniseries), Dir. Eric Bross and Stephen Hopkins, USA Network (January 26, 2004); "Human Trafficking," (Television Miniseries) dir. Christian Duguay, Lifetime Networks (2005); "Trade," (film) dir. Marco Kreuzpaintner, Lions Gate Films (2007); "Taken" (film), Dir. Pierre Morel, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox (2008); "Whistleblower" (film), Dir. Larysa Kondracki, Samuel Goldwyn Films (2011).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Frederic Jameson, "Realism and Utopia in *The Wire*," *Criticism* 52: 3&4 (Summer/Fall 2010), 359-372; Amanda Ann Klein, "'The Dickensian Aspect': Melodrama, Viewer Engagement, and the Socially Conscious Text," in *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television*, Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall, ed. (New York: Continuum, 2010), 177-89; Chris Love, "Greek Gods in Baltimore: Greek Tragedy and *The Wire*," *Criticism* 52: 3&4 (Summer & Fall 2010), 487-507.

<sup>5</sup> See Alasdair McMillan, "Heroism, Institutions, and the Police Procedural," in *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television*, Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall, ed. (New York: Continuum, 2010), 50-63. For a compelling analysis of the racial dimensions of Simon's revision of the police drama, see Jane Gibb and Roger Sabin, "Who Loves Ya, David Simon?: Notes Toward Placing The Wire's Depiction of African-Americans in the Context of American TV Crime Drama," *Darkmatter* 4 (May 2009) Online, <http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2009/05/29/who-loves-ya-david-simon/>.

<sup>6</sup> Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written By Herself* (Boston: self-published, 1861) 5.

<sup>7</sup> Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17:2 (Summer 1987), 77.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Best, *The Fugitive's Properties: Law and the Poetics of Possession* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 174.

<sup>9</sup> Lydia Maria Child, "Introduction by the Editor," in Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written By Herself* (Boston: self-published, 1861) 8.

<sup>10</sup> Amy Post, "Appendix," in Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written By Herself*. (Boston: self-published, 1861) 304-305.

<sup>11</sup> Qtd. in Jean Fagan Yellin, *Harriet Jacobs: A Life* (New York: Basic Civitas Book, 2004), 122.

<sup>12</sup> "The Wire" (Television Series), Creator and Producer David Simon, Season Two, Home Box Office (June 1 2003). All future references to *The Wire* will be indicated by season number and episode number as follows: (II, 1).

<sup>13</sup> Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "Introduction: The Language of Slavery" in *The Slave's Narrative*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), xiii.

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<sup>14</sup> For an analysis of revisions of representations of African American life, see Courtney D. Marshall, "Barksdale Women: Crime, Empire, and the Production of Gender," in *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television*, Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall, ed (New York: Continuum, 2010), 23-36; James S. Williams, "The Lost Boys of Baltimore: Beauty and Desire in the Hood," *Film Quarterly* 62:2 (Winter 2008), 58-63.

<sup>15</sup> Sophie Jones 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 do little if anything to alleviate the sense that "gender is either excluded from, or a mere footnote to, this sophisticated, expansive worldview." Sophie Jones, "Women and 'The Wire,'" *Popmatters*, (August 25 2008), online, <http://www.popmatters.com/pm/feature/women-and-the-wire>.

<sup>16</sup> Thanks to R. Thum for this translation.

<sup>17</sup> Neil C Sargent, "Mys-Reading the Past in Detective Fiction and Law," *Law and Literature* 22:2 (Summer 2010), 289.

<sup>18</sup> This chronic problem was addressed by the Victims Rights Act of 2004, but it continues to be a factor in victims' experiences of prosecutions. Mary L. Boland and Russell Butler, "Crime Victims' Rights: From Illusion to Reality," *Criminal Justice* 24: 1, (Spring 2009) 1-3.

<sup>19</sup> See for instance, "HBO Renews The Wire, Acclaimed Drama Series From David Simon, For Its Fifth Season." Online. [http://www.hbo.com/thewire/news/hborenews\\_thewire091306.shtml](http://www.hbo.com/thewire/news/hborenews_thewire091306.shtml); Tim Goodman, "HBO scores a gain with a stellar second season of 'The Wire,'" *San Francisco Chronicle*, (May 30, 2003) Online, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2003/05/30/DD157653.DTL>; Diane Anderson-Minshall, "Sonja Sohn Taps into The Wire," *Curve Magazine* 13:4, Online, <http://www.curvemag.com/Detailed/399.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, November 2000, General Assembly Resolution 55/25.

<sup>21</sup> Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA), January 24, 2000, H.R.3244, Section 2, Division A.

<sup>22</sup> Instituted as part of the TVPA, H.R. 3244, Division A, Section 104, Annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.

<sup>23</sup> Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2003, January 7, 2003, H.R. 2620. For regulation of funding for services for victims, see Section 7(g). For critiques of this legislation see Anthony M. DeStefano, *The War on Human Trafficking: U.S. Policy Assessed* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2007) 102-117; Jo Doezema, *Sex Slaves and Discourse Masters: The Construction of Trafficking* (London: Zed Books, 2010) 130; Jennifer Lynn Musto, "The NGO-ification of the Anti-Trafficking Movement in the United States," in Tian Tian Zheng, ed., *Sex Trafficking, Human Rights, and Social Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2010) 26-27.

<sup>24</sup> 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 the history of US slave trade history.

<sup>25</sup> Doezema 137-138.

<sup>26</sup> For a discussion of this trope, see Louisa Waugh, *Selling Olga: Stories of Human Trafficking and Resistance* (London: Phoenix, 2006), xiii-xv.

<sup>27</sup> TVPA, Section 103(8)(A).

<sup>28</sup> Mara Keire, "The Vice Trust: A Reinterpretation of the White Slavery Scare in the United States, 1907-1917," *Journal of Social History* 35:1 (Autumn 2001) 7.

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<sup>29</sup> George Kibbe Turner, "The Daughters of the Poor: A Plain Story of the Development of New York City as a Leading Centre of the White Slave Trade of the World, under Tammany Hall," *McClure's Magazine* 34 (November 1909) 45.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid* 47.

<sup>31</sup> White-Slave Traffic Act ("The Mann Act"), June 25 1910 (Stat. 825; codified as amended at 18 U.S.C. § 2421–2424).

<sup>32</sup> See Ernest A Bell, *Fighting the Traffic in Young Girls or War on the White Slave Trade* (1909); Thomas Nelson Page, *John Marvel, Assistant* (1909); Clifford G. Roe *Panders and Their White Slaves* (1910); Reginald W. Kauffman, *The House of Bondage* (1910); Clifford G. Roe, *The Great War on White Slavery or Fighting for the Protection of our Girls* (1911); H.W. Lytle and John Dillon, *From Dance Hall to White Slavery* (1912); Jean Turner Zimmerman, *Chicago's Black Traffic in White Girls* (1912); Estelle Baker, *The Rose Door* (1913); Elizabeth Robins, *My Little Sister* (1913); Eustace Ball, *Traffic in Souls* (1914).

<sup>33</sup> Roe 11.

<sup>34</sup> Ball 263.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid* 138.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid* 159.

<sup>37</sup> Ernest A Bell, *Fighting the Traffic in Young Girls or War on the White Slave Trade* (Chicago: G.S. Ball, 1910) 186.

<sup>38</sup> See *From Dance Hall to White Slavery*, 112, or *Panders and their White Slaves* 32, 110.

<sup>39</sup> Turner 45–61.

<sup>40</sup> Bell 246.

<sup>41</sup> For an analysis of the ways Jewish people are caricatured in *The Wire*, see Keith Kahn-Harris, "The Politics of Brisket: Jews and *The Wire*," *Darkmatter* 4 (May 2009). Online. <http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2009/05/29/the-politics-of-brisket-jews-and-the-wire/>.

<sup>42</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006).

<sup>43</sup> Kevin Bales and Rod Soodalter, *The Slave Next Door: Human Trafficking and Slavery in America Today* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009) 102–105.

<sup>44</sup> TVPA Sec 107(B)(1).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, Sec 107 (b)(E)(II)(bb).

<sup>46</sup> Musto, 26. See also April Rieger, "Missing the Mark: Why the Trafficking Victims Protection Act Fails to Protect Sex Trafficking Victims in the United States," *Harvard Journal of Law and Gender* 30:1 (2007) 231–256.

<sup>47</sup> Wendy Chapkis, "Trafficking, Migration, and the Law: Protecting Innocents, Punishing Immigrants," *Gender and Society* 17: 6 (Dec. 2003), 932.

<sup>48</sup> Doezenia 130.

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<sup>49</sup> Bell 3

<sup>50</sup> Jean Turner Zimmerman, *Chicago's Black Traffic in White Girls* (Chicago: self-published, 1912).