

# The Fantasy of Spotting Human Trafficking: Training Spectacles in Racist Surveillance

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## ABSTRACT

In January 2019, in honor of National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month in the US, the Marriott International hotel group announced that it had successfully trained 600,000 hotel workers to spot the signs of human trafficking in its hotel properties around the world. This training, planned and executed in partnership with anti-trafficking organizations and law enforcement, reflects the recent proliferation of training schemes to identify victims of trafficking. This paper explores how such trainings script racist optics into the surveillance and policing of potential victims. Using proxy markers of poverty, sexuality, race, and nation, victim identification trainings expand policing--by civilians and law enforcement alike--and foreclose liberation for migrant and sex workers of color to survive under the constraints of global capitalism. The paper concludes with alternative mobilization possibilities that propose defunding anti-trafficking, and learning from lessons offered by sex worker right and racial justice organizations.

## Introduction

In early 2019, Cindy McCain was traveling through Phoenix's Sky Harbor Airport and believed she witnessed an act of human trafficking. She quickly notified law enforcement, who detained the passengers in question for over four hours before ultimately releasing them. Recalling the events on a radio show, she said, "I spotted — it looked odd — a woman of a different ethnicity than the child, this little toddler she had. Something didn't click with me. I tell people to trust your gut. I went over to the police and told them what I thought. They went over and questioned her and, by God, she was trafficking that kid."<sup>1</sup>

McCain tweeted about this incident, to widespread public acclaim, espousing a now popular belief in civilian vigilance in human trafficking victim identification. Following the famous "if you see something, say something" campaign, asking New York City residents to identify potential "terrorists" in their midst following 9/11, the push to civilian identification as part of the wider interest in human trafficking awareness has showed up everywhere from the Super Bowl, to mass media journalism and Hollywood films, to January 11<sup>th</sup>, which was anointed human trafficking awareness day by President Obama in 2012. After police investigated the so-called case of trafficking that Cindy McCain had reported, they discovered that it was not trafficking at all; rather, a mixed-race family traveling together. Retroactively clarified not as a case of trafficking but instead, an act of racial profiling, McCain and her supporters did not rebuke their suspicion. Rather, professing justification, a spokesperson for United Against Human Trafficking, one of the Houston-area's largest anti-trafficking non-profits, told the NYTimes, "we would rather people call and report human trafficking incidents and be wrong 100 times on the off chance that they are right one time."<sup>2</sup>

Since the passage of the 2000 US Trafficking Victims Protection Act, the message has been clear: human trafficking is, by varying estimates, one of the largest crimes of the contemporary era, and that it is incumbent upon American citizens to play a part in its identification because it is so perilously “hidden in plain sight.” Such claims about human trafficking ignite an equal humanitarian and security response, signaling one reason for their popularity amongst the American public. Victim identification training programs satiate a growing desire for everyday civilians to do their part to stop human trafficking.

This paper documents the prominent emergence of a trainings regime that purports to teach Americans how to identify human trafficking. Within the past decade, such trainings have grown in popularity, conducted by a unique host of actors ranging from law enforcement, church groups, non-profit anti-trafficking organizations, and corporations. Using proxy markers of poverty, sexuality, race, and nation, such trainings script racist optics into the surveillance and policing of potential victims. Their claims justify the everyday surveillance and policing over people of color, undocumented immigrants, sex workers, and other sexual minorities, who have all been swept under the war to combat trafficking. This war is fueled by deeply racialized scripts of hyper-sexualized Black criminality and hyper-fetishized Asian innocence, which amplifies the policing of Black and migrant Asian women, who are often infantilized, criminalized, and othered in the American rescue fantasy.<sup>3</sup>

## Methodology

The data that informs this paper spans ethnographic participant observation of the anti-trafficking movement and community-based research alongside two sex worker rights organizations from 2010 to

the present. Between 2010-2014, I participated in human trafficking identification and outreach activities through two different social service organizations in Southern California. These weekly outreach activities mobilized college students and young professionals, to travel to immigrant communities and massage businesses and patrol them for signs of human trafficking. While these outreach efforts were not formally sanctioned by local law enforcement, they ultimately fortified the anti-trafficking approach's underlying carceral commitments by sharing all civilian-collected data with the LAPD. In 2015, my ethnographic sites expanded as I developed community-based research projects with COYOTE RI, a sex worker rights organization in Rhode Island. Since 2018, I have participated as a core organizer with Red Canary Song, a grassroots coalition of sex workers, migrant workers, and allies organizing with Asian massage workers in Flushing Queens. Data collection with COYOTE and Red Canary Song has included participating in local anti-trafficking meetings, attending anti-trafficking trainings, building a massage worker-led oral history project, and teaching and mentoring students in Rhode Island and New York City.

## Policing Human Trafficking and Modern Day Slavery

In January 2019, timed alongside National Slavery and Human Trafficking Prevention Month, Marriott International announced that it had successfully trained 500,000 hotel workers to spot the signs of human trafficking in its hotels, upholding their company commitment to "stand up for the most vulnerable in society" by fighting what Chief Executive Officer Arne Sorenson refers to as "a horrific form of modern slavery."<sup>4</sup> In the same year, Delta airlines similarly spent \$1 million to train flight attendants on how to recognize victims of trafficking in flight, and, new non-profit organizations like, Truckers Against Trafficking, which is funded by Bridgestone

Tires and Volvo, now offer human trafficking identification trainings to truck drivers throughout North America. Civilian community members have also been enlisted in this through human trafficking identification programs around the country.

One can trace the contemporary anti-trafficking movement back to the year 2000, when two pieces of legislation inaugurated unparalleled global commitment to combat human trafficking. The United Nations Palermo Protocol and subsequent US Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) categorized human trafficking as an urgent transnational crime, and consolidated previous legal frameworks around labor, gender, migrant, and child rights. The UN Protocol's placement within the UN Convention on Transnational Crime has led state driven solutions to focus primarily on the policing and prosecution of trafficking, as opposed to the protection of victims (Chacón 2006; Musto 2016). In the ensuing two decades, the politicians, activists, churches, non-profits, and private sector actors that have pursued anti-trafficking work have also charged a particular moral crusade against trafficking, often targeting all sex work at the exclusion of non-sexual forms of labor exploitation. The conflation of all sex work as sex trafficking has been a tool used by diverse groups--unifying radical feminists and evangelical Christians (Bernstein 2007)--in ways that have fundamentally altered sex workers rights. Across all anti-trafficking interventions, prominent carceral feminist (Bernstein 2007), militarized (Bernstein 2010), and perverse (Hoang 2016) humanitarian commitments to ending trafficking summarily reinforce the policing of vulnerable populations. Equally, critics have pointed to the emergence of an anti-trafficking industrial complex (Leigh 2015), or anti-trafficking rescue industry (Agustin 2007), illustrating the profitable funding streams and philanthrocapitalist (Chuang 2012) undercurrents of the anti-trafficking agenda. Each of these scholarly critiques illustrates the

unique melding of corporate interests in maintaining the status quo order of racial capitalism via racialized low wage service sector and manufacturing work (Shih 2015), while obscuring calls for justice with those of “rescue.”

Though the legal definitions in the early 2000s built this movement around the phrase “human trafficking” (Gallagher 2010), within the past two decades, a wide-sweeping practice has redefined trafficking as “modern-day slavery,” as Marriott’s CEO Sorenson referenced in the above quote (Beutin 2017; Chuang 2015b; O’Connell-Davidson 2010; Patterson 2010). Early invocations of “modern day slavery” were colloquially referenced by American non-profits and young activists who were motivated by the metaphor’s resonance as a way to alleviate a collective guilt around the trans-Atlantic slave trade. However, its vociferous popularity has caused the new phrase to be scripted into recent legislation, for instance the 2015 European Union Modern Day Slavery Act, and subsequent UK Modern Day Slavery Act. Communications scholar Lyndsey Beutin has demonstrated how the viral success of the “Modern Day Slavery” agenda has profited off anti-Blackness, specifically conjuring the memory of Black suffering during the trans-Atlantic slave trade, without any attention to the contemporary legacies of chattel slavery (Beutin 2017, 2018). The movement succeeds in an intentional bait and switch: “It also names a new racialised victim in relation to racial chattel slavery: not the Black American who endures anti-Black racism structurally and interpersonally today, but the brown global Other, implicitly seen as a more worthy and less threatening victim, precisely because of how anti-Blackness shapes white American consciousness” (Beutin 2017: 27). While the American guilt around historic Black suffering is used to generate funding and awareness around the modern day slavery platform, Beutin writes that contemporary modern day slav-

ery efforts focus on the individual acts of rescue so as to ignore the structural causes of trafficking. Contemporary racialized legacies of slavery are replaced by the simplistic binaries of white saviors and almost exclusively “global Other” sex slaves.

### Hyper-sexualized Black Criminality and Hyper-fetishized Asian Innocence

This facile narrative of modern day slavery actively obscures the structural conditions of racialized poverty, stigmatization, and criminalization that have made Black lives particularly vulnerable to exploitation both inside and outside the sex industry. Writing about the decriminalization of sex work as a racial justice issue, jasmine Sankofa (2016) argues that “similar to the way the United States treats and criminalizes drug use, the policing of sex work exacerbates stigma, compromises access to resources, justifies violence, and is steeped in racial disparities. Women of color, especially Black cisgender and transgender women, girls, and femmes, are particularly vulnerable.” Significantly, these racialized forms of policing deal largely in the *perception* of sex work: “Actual or perceived involvement in the sex trade results in approximately 30,000 arrests annually, according to FBI crime data.” Sankofa’s research further illustrates that, in 2015, nearly 40% of adults arrested for prostitution were Black, while 60% of youth under the age of 18 arrested for prostitution were Black. This should be troubling because, as Sankofa argues, this disparity exists despite the fact that youth are categorized as victims of sex trafficking under federal law. Not only are Black sex workers more likely to face arrest, but they are highly vulnerable to police and interpersonal violence. The DC Trans Coalition has found that 23% of Black transgender people surveyed in the Washington, DC metropolitan area were physically or sexually assaulted by police because they were *perceived* to be transgender and involved

in the sex trade. Amnesty U.S.A. has reported that of the 41 sex workers murdered in the United States in 2015, 17 were Black and 12 were transgender women.<sup>5</sup>

The discursive framing of the modern day slavery narrative erases the existence of Black suffering and conditions of anti-Black oppression that constitute the structural conditions of the sex industry today by reconstituting liberation and abolition as individualized pursuits of spotting and reporting trafficked women. The call to action issued by the anti-modern day slavery movement is to identify and save individuals that are perceived to be victims of “enslavement” by nature of their sexual exploitation. As articulated by Beutin (2017), in doing so, it focuses on individual harm--and culpability/criminality--and proposes an easy solution for liberation, as opposed to recognizing the structural conditions of poverty, criminalization, and exploitation as legacies of chattel slavery and racial oppression. There is no space within modern day slavery discourse to theorize and advocate for a broader conception of linked struggles between migrant and sex workers of color, while seeking to dismantle the social, political, and economic foundations of racial oppression that lead to the economic and sexual exploitation of Black lives. Racialized policing, and other forms of state and humanitarian violence, thus go ignored in the fight to free “modern day slaves.”

The racialized figure of the Black sex worker and the complex history of the sexualization of Black women further contributes to their exclusion from the so-called “liberation” of anti-trafficking initiatives. Siobhan Brooks (2020) has illustrated how the framework of modern day slavery builds on anxieties of docile, innocent women being forced into sexual exploitation. However, cis- and trans- Black women are often excluded from this framing of victimhood, as they are typically assumed to be sex workers by choice and

thus deserving of arrest and policing for their illegal activities rather than saving from exploitation. Black sex workers are thus conceptualized as the foil to the innocent victim within the modern day slavery narrative. This construction of the innocent sex-trafficking victim versus the criminal Black prostitute, Brooks writes, has its historical roots in the framing of female Black slaves as “Jezebels enticing white slave masters to rape them” (Brooks 2020). Black sex workers are seen as the root cause of their own exploitation, the embodiment of the crime, as overly sexual figures. As such, we see in modern day slavery discourse the reproduction of theories underlying chattel slavery that deem Black women not as humans who deserve agency, rights, resources, and protection.

Whereas racialized narratives of the Black sex worker compete with the framing of victimhood and recognition in the modern day slavery narrative, the racialized figure of Asian women, as foreign and particularly docile subjects, aligns with anti-trafficking victim scripts (see, e.g., Shimizu 2007; Hwang and Parreñas 2021; Abdullah 2005; Ameeriar 2015; Uchida 1998). The narrow focus of such anti-trafficking initiatives uphold the fetishized ideal of Asian women as inanimate subjects deserving of rescue by white saviors. See, for instance, New York Times journalist Nicholas Kristof’s live “Twitter raid” of a Cambodian brothel (Agustin 2012), while ignoring the unmitigated hyper policing of Black trans women for merely existing in public space, and the increased policing of Black and brown sex workers. The fantasies of rescuing Asian sex slaves circulate from their sites of global conquest by journalists, academics, and tourists throughout Asia back to the United States (Cheng 2008). In 2015, the American anti-trafficking project Polaris Project initiated a campaign targeting what they coined as “Illicit Massage Businesses.”<sup>6</sup> Fueling a national rhetoric that Asian massage businesses are evidence of human trafficking, their campaign asks citi-

zens to do their part to report suspicious Asian massage businesses either to the national human trafficking hotline, which Polaris itself runs or to local law enforcement.

Yet, most Asian migrants who find themselves the subject of heroic rescue and campaigns that seek to identify victims of trafficking, elect not to identify as victims of trafficking, but accept plea bargains for prostitution. These charges leave arrested Asian sex workers facing fines, criminal records, and seized assets, while those who are undocumented can face deportation proceedings (Shih 2021). Red Canary Song, a grassroots coalition organizing and advocating against the policing of Asian massage work has argued that the raid of Asian massage businesses has been deadly. The organization was founded in 2017 following the death of Song Yang, a Chinese migrant worker who fell to her death from a 4<sup>th</sup> story window when the NYPD raided her workplace. Their efforts for liberation fight against a virulent combination of state-sponsored violence of migration and policing, the interpersonal moral violence of carceral feminism, and lastly, the economic threats of gentrification, which have displaced many downtown Flushing residents and businesses in hopes of cash in on property development interests.

## Racialized Policing

While anti-trafficking has offered new scripts on which to code racialized criminality and innocence of sex work, these trends map easily onto existing law enforcement trends. Racial profiling has long been a staple of American law enforcement tactics, with the deadliest consequences inflicted on Black communities in the US. Such racial profiling has traditionally been justified as a tool of policing where racial markers--alongside gender, class, sexuality, and ability--are used as proxy indicators of crime. In a study of racial

profiling via police stops, Epp, Maynard-Moody, and Haider-Markel (2014) find that Black people living in the US are twice as likely to be arrested as whites, and comprise a disproportionate share of those stopped and searched by police. Outside of formal policing, racial profiling is also evident in extra-legal surveillance via mechanisms like community and neighborhood watch groups. The deaths of Trayvon Martin, in the name of civilian-led community watch, and Renisha McBride and Jordan Davis in the name of stand your ground laws, exemplify the racialized criminalization of everyday life as they are disproportionately inflicted onto Black bodies in the name of civilian vigilance. It is this new era of “carceral citizenship,” defined as an “alternative citizenship category and distinct form of political citizenship” that confers “second-class citizenship for poor Black Americans as targets of the carceral state,” that Miller and Stuart (2017: 534) claim shapes a daily racial logic of hyper-policing.

Beyond their manifestations through law enforcement power, racial profiling has also been used as a tool of civilian policing. Civilian vigilance and racial profiling aid US anxiety around border control, and terrorism. Writing about the increased Islamophobia in post-9/11 New York, legal scholar Bill Ong Hing identified the emergence of a specific racial vigilantism that is mobilized in the service of state security. Exemplified by the New York City MTA’s “if you see something, say something” campaign imploring everyday residents to report “suspicious” persons and packages on subways and buses, these forms of civilian racial profiling justified rampant civilian reporting of those perceived to be South Asian, Arab, and Muslim community members. Hong cites private citizen vigilance as a force that amplifies state concerns through “suspicions of loyalty” (Hong 2001: 442). More recently, Inderpal Grewal (2017) has suggested that the emergence of a new set of vigilante defenders has

emerged precisely because of the decline of state power, in which everyday citizen defenders must “save the security state.” Human trafficking rescue is an interesting case to consider alongside these formulations of race and securitization.

While New Yorkers riding subways and buses were called upon to be the frontlines against perceived “terrorist” threats, another group of civilians was mobilizing on the US-Mexico border. In 2004, the Minutemen Project, a self-described “citizens’ neighborhood watch” at the US-Mexico border, was founded to facilitate the citizen policing of the 23-mile border between Arizona and Sonora, Mexico. The effort marshaled thousands of citizens into efforts to not only deter border crossings, but to attempt to police undocumented migrants living in the US. Like other civilian vigilante groups, the Minutemen answer a rallying cry for civilian attention in the era of what Katie Oliviero (2011) has described as a “negligent state.” Oliviero writes that “As surrogates for the nation, the Minutemen attempt to invest the United States’ past and present military actions with renewed virtue and success. Juxtaposed against the aged, white bodies of the Minutemen, these fantasies are haunted by their personal sense of gendered, professional, and cultural obsolescence—a vulnerability that traverses many white American resentments” (Oliviero 2011: 679). The perceived vacuum of state responsibility to manage border controls and terrorism has paved the way for an introduction of has described as ‘neo-racism’ (Kurz and Berry, citing Étienne Balibar 1991), which has offered vigilante groups unprecedented authority to police security and immigration.

These anxieties about border insecurity and racialized poverty converge on the war against human trafficking--particularly as they align with one more public crisis of sexual configurations that betray cis-heteropatriarchal norms (Kempadoo 2001; Kempadoo and Doezeema 1998; Hwang and Parreñas 2021). Thus, new claims about

human trafficking ignite an equal humanitarian and security response, signaling one reason for their popularity amongst American citizen activists. The anxieties around stopping trafficking are difficult to allay precisely because of a pervasive claim that human trafficking is, as claimed by the US Department of Justice and numerous anti-trafficking organizations, “hidden in plain sight.”<sup>7</sup> Because exploitation and bondage are structural conditions that can invisibilize vulnerable populations, the public has been called upon to increase their vigilance to aid in identification. While an earlier paper sought to understand how a distinct civilian vigilance is mobilized in the service of anti-trafficking law enforcement (Shih 2016), this paper extends the analysis to understand the technocratic infrastructure of training that has prescribed racial scripts. It argues that the war on trafficking has facilitated new forms of racial surveillance that mobilize American insecurity around borders and immigration, enabling racial policing that is inflected with a US humanitarian gaze and justified under the guise of liberal benevolence.

## Spotting Human Trafficking

The proliferation of training schemes to identify victims of trafficking have been culled from the 2003 US Department of Health and Human Service’s (HHS) human trafficking “Rescue and Restore” campaign. This early campaign features posters that alert everyday citizens to human trafficking, featuring images that inspire the viewer to “Look Beneath the Surface.” While the exigent moral panic drawing civilians into anti-trafficking references chattel slavery in the US, the specific markers and indicators of human trafficking that more commonly referenced draws attention to the victimhood of Asian and Eastern European white women, while almost exclusively excluding Black sex workers as victims. Instead, the forms of surveillance and patrol of racialized sexuality, has lent itself to the ongoing

hyper-criminalization of Black sex workers. While discourse has unevenly conferred sexual victimhood or criminality on the basis of race, the result of such civilian surveillance and training regimes has resulted in the criminalization of Asian and Black sex workers alike.

The anxieties around stopping trafficking are difficult to allay, specifically related to the pervasive claim that human trafficking is “hidden in plain sight.” Because exploitation and bondage are structural conditions that can render invisible vulnerable populations, the public has been called upon to increase their vigilance to aid in identification. The campaign was inspired by several early cases of human trafficking in the US that were identified by “good Samaritans.” Among the best known is the famed 1995 El Monte sweatshop case, in which 72 undocumented workers were held in a Southern California garment factory under conditions of extreme labor exploitation, and with threats of debt bondage. Located in a primarily residential area outside of LA County, this case was exposed because of a local resident who reported suspicious and unusual behaviors to local law enforcement.

The Campaign to Rescue and Restore Victims of Human housed within the Department of Health and Human Services has downloadable campaign material that includes a list of indicators of human trafficking. The specific indicators of trafficking, widely dispatched and taught in trainings around the country, claims to offer a “comprehensive” list of signs of human trafficking that includes:

- Evidence of being controlled
- Evidence of an inability to move or leave job
- Bruises or other signs of battering
- Fear or depression
- Non-English speaking

- Recently brought to this country from Eastern Europe, Asia, Latin America, Canada, Africa or India
- Lack of passport, immigration or identification documentation

The list offers a range of proxy indicators of human trafficking that draw attention to poverty and migration, arguably discriminatory markers of the racial and ethnic other. As an official government document, the list is surprisingly haphazard in its logistical consistency, listing regions, continents, and countries, as parallel sites of concern. Drawn as exceptionally vague, these ambiguous markers leave significant room for interpretation, causing many trainees to target sex workers, immigrants, and communities of color. Collectively, as they have been used in the training of everyone from librarians to postal workers, they enable the mundane daily surveillance is justified as a way of keeping stock of new and old threats alike.

While these HHS indicators are widely distributed through human trafficking awareness posters, to first responder communities, and via social media campaigns, any citizen is encouraged to engage with them. They have most frequently been shared with the public by anti-trafficking non-profit organizations, and corporations who work closely with law enforcement to deliver awareness trainings.

## Non-Profit Carceral Alliances: The Flushing Library

Human trafficking identification trainings for the public are typically conducted by either an anti-trafficking non-profit, and/or local law enforcement, and usually a happy alliance of the two. In emphasizing the importance of such civilian trainings, messaging usually

focuses on one of three areas. Some messaging highlights the importance of civilian participation in the fight against trafficking, highlighting civilian vigilance and neighborhood watch as a prime tool to aid rescue efforts. Others respond to local fears about trafficking, and bring residents together under a law enforcement framework. Finally, a third premise responds to the economic gentrification of new business districts, that have succeeded in using threats of trafficking in the service of evictions and moving out crime.

In March 2019, I attended a human trafficking training at New York's Flushing Main Street library as part of a group of organizers and activists with the migrant sex worker coalition Red Canary Song. The training was organized by Councilman Peter Koo in collaboration with the NYPD. The event was organized following a rash of hysteria around the emergence of so-called sex trafficking in massage shops on 40<sup>th</sup> Road, in downtown Flushing. Public concerns for Asian victims of sex trafficking, veiled equally emphatic economic development concerns in rapidly gentrifying Flushing. With the Flushing commercial business district (CBD) council as one of Councilman Koo's primary supporters, the shift to policing Asian massage businesses on 40<sup>th</sup> Road aligns with new real estate priorities in the area.

Welcoming the crowd of over one hundred residents, journalists, non-profit staff, and curious neighbors who gathered at the Flushing library, Lieutenant Christopher Sharpe of the NYPD's Human Trafficking Unit framed the importance of civilian intervention: "The most important place we get tips and leads is from you. . . We need the community to pay attention and buy in to give us what's going on in your neighborhood so we can go out and do effective police work."



NYPD Lieutenant Christopher Sharpe (Vice Enforcement Division) delivers a presentation at the Flushing Library, (QNS 2019)

The hysteria over reported “trafficking” in Asian massage businesses in Flushing was at the forefront of attendees’ imagination. The crackdown on Asian massage work as trafficking follows a national campaign spearheaded by the Polaris Project, one of the US’ largest anti-trafficking NGOs and the organization that runs the nations formal anti-trafficking hotline that receives all calls of identified victims. In a blog post entitled “Is there Massage Parlor Trafficking in My Community,” Polaris details some of the signs: “These businesses hide in plain sight, visible to those who know what to look for, and how those signs differentiate them from therapeutic massage venues.” Listing several indicators, the blog suggests that “a massage parlor may be engaging in illicit activity is a back or side

entrance that clients looking to buy sex use to keep from being seen. Other ways IMBs hide their illicit activity and make clients feel more comfortable include: covered windows (or no windows at all); locked entrance doors that require clients to be buzzed in; and excessive security cameras.”<sup>8</sup>

A recent policy report conducted by the Toronto-based Butterfly Project (2019) found that such indicators identify strategies that migrant sex workers use to maintain safety. For instance, many lock doors in order to protect themselves from theft and personal assault, vulnerabilities that sex workers argue are not endemic to the harms of sex work, but the fact that the illegality of the work prevents sex workers from reporting interpersonal crimes from clients and law enforcement alike.

During the Flushing library training, NYPD Sergeant Jeffrey Liu echoed Polaris’ protocols for victim identification. Reading through a slide on “Quick Facts about IMB’s” (Illicit Massage Businesses),” Liu reiterated Polaris’ claim that “There are more than 9,000 IMB’s throughout the United States,” and shared that the IMB industry was “number 2” in relation to sex trafficking only behind escort services. Labeling the phenomenon as Illicit Massage Business, full with the “IMB” acronym to professionalize the rhetoric, conveniently deracinates the majority of massage parlors as Asian run and Asian employed. This facilitates the racialized policing of Asian massage work under a larger ruse and claim of illicit business. Yet the markers that are shared, specifically describe Asian immigrant businesses exclusively, some of which provide sex work ranging from hand jobs to full service sex work, while many others offer only non-erotic massage. Nonetheless, the crackdown has enabled police and civilians both to report any massage business if it meets some of the generic indicators listed. Regardless of the widely varying types of massage work, when civilians see the signs of

trafficking, they are told to text “BE-FREE,” or report their findings to the national 1-800 human trafficking hotline.

The national human trafficking hotline is run by none other than the Polaris Project.<sup>9</sup> In 2008, the hotline logged just over 5,000 calls, but by 2010, the number of calls escalated to over 19,000 per year. On January 27<sup>th</sup> 2014, the total number of calls reached 100,000—though fewer than 1,000 human trafficking crimes have been pursued by local law enforcement since the hotline began.<sup>10</sup> This gap, that only 1% of hotline calls have resulted in follow-up by law enforcement, should raise questions about the perceptions of human trafficking and the reality on the ground. While Polaris monitors the hotline’s call logs and produces data on types of calls received (Polaris 2013), research has only begun to question the impact of rescue efforts in communities where they are undertaken.<sup>11</sup> This is an important part of a larger national conversation about racial and gender profiling by police, in particular that has targeted racial minorities, sex workers, and trans people (Ritchie 2014).

The escalation of calls to the national anti-trafficking hotline has accompanied a shift away from a good Samaritan model of identification in which a citizen *happens* across a case of exploitation, towards targeted outreach trips in which groups throughout the country take to the streets to actively seek and find cases of human trafficking. Faith-based organizations in particular have stepped into the space of civilian rescue, articulating new forms of social activism outside of the state, made possible through vast networks of social and material capital that facilitate the organization of such activities (Bernstein 2007; Shih 2016).

The Flushing library training was successful in mobilizing Queens residents to report Asian massage parlors under the guise of stopping human trafficking. Red Canary Song’s outreach experiences in the past two years have noted an increase in the amount of

policing of massage businesses, often using massage license laws as grounds for arresting workers. In Providence RI, a 2016 crackdown on “Asian massage parlors” was widely touted in the news media as rescuing victims of trafficking, but in COYOTE Rhode Island’s outreach and research, we learned that not a single worker was offered a T-Visa, and instead most, undocumented Korean workers, were deported (Butterfly Project 2019; Shih 2021).

In the lobby of the Flushing Library auditorium, Red Canary Song activists gathered to protest the “training.” Red Canary Song activists spoke out against the recent crackdown on massage work in Flushing, and held a counter-action outside the Flushing library training. As the training let out, activist Nina Luo challenged Councilman Peter Koo asking why the training consistently enabled the NYPD to conduct more policing, when it was such a police raid that lead to Song’s death. But these counter narratives are persistently ignored amidst the continuous forms of racially targeted data surveillance of Asian massage businesses espoused by anti-trafficking non-profits like the Polaris Project and Heryrick Research, which have amassed entire operations around the policing of Asian massage work as human trafficking (Colarossi 2021).

### **Corporate Carceral Training Regimes: Marriott Hotels**

Victim identification work is part of a mass proliferated “training” scheme that has spread to various industries including, all those with cosmetology licenses, flight attendants, and medical first responders. In 2017, the global Marriott hotel brand wheeled out a human trafficking identification training program that has, as of May 2019, trained 600,000 of the company’s 730,000 total hotel workers globally (Marriott 2020). Partnering with the Polaris Project, and ECPAT-USA, they use training materials that aim to educate

hotel workers on how to identify victims of human trafficking that enter Marriott hotels. These trainings operate with a widespread assumption that increased civilian vigilance is crucial for detecting human trafficking. They also take their directive from emerging state laws, like California's Senate Bill 970, which as of January 2020, requires any employee who may come in contact with a victim of trafficking to take a 20-minute victim identification training (California Senate Bill 970).

Repeatedly, the Polaris Project is the main source of informational materials driving this training campaign. Their website identifies hotels as a prime hotspot for trafficking: "Hotels and motels are common venues for both prostitution and sex trafficking, and it can be difficult to distinguish between the two, which is why it is important that concerns about potential trafficking be reported to the US National Human Trafficking Hotline rather than directly to law enforcement, which could lead to arrests. Labor trafficking also takes place, where contract workers such as housekeepers may be exploited. They are also common venues for traveling sales crews to house trafficked workers."

Since Marriott broadcasted its plan, others businesses in the tourism and hospitality sector have followed. Delta airlines donated \$1 million to Polaris to support the National Human Trafficking Hotline, and hotel chains like Motel 6 and Hyatt have recently adopted similar staff training programs.

The signs Marriott shared in their training to workers include:

- Presence of a third party (pimp/trafficker) appearing to be monitoring a hallway or door
- Guest is overly concerned with surveillance cameras or entrance policies

- Someone is dropped off and visits for 30 minutes – 1 hour only – or someone waits for that person on property or in the parking lot
- Abandoned or locked out young adults on property
- Sales flyers left behind that detail suspicious magazine sales tactics
- Lack of adequate language skills for foreign victims

Such indicators of human trafficking have been criticized for how they “see” human trafficking based on proxy indicators of poverty, migration, and sex work (Shih 2016).



(Sheraton Times Square hotel workers learn signs of human trafficking as part of Marriott International's mandatory awareness training. *Marriott 2020*)

Celebrating their recent milestone success in training 600,000 workers, Marriott released a formal press release that offered extensive video testimonials with hotel staff concerning their experiences with the training. In one segment, Dakota, a front desk staffer remarks on the immediate utility of the training: “We have had a couple situations in the hotel where you check in a guest and you feel a little uneasy about what you see, kind of the signs that are

there. We even had one where we had gone up to the room to kind of see what was going on and we saw some of the signs that were given in the trainings and we were able to notify law enforcement, and we were able to evict the person the next day. So, definitely able to put that training into motion”(Marriott 2020). Like Dakota, nearly each incident that staff described, detailed the hotel staff contacting law enforcement.

Keenan, a Director of Loss Prevention at a Marriott hotel, testified to how the victim identification training strengthened partnerships with local law enforcement: “We actually had a case at this hotel where we had a housekeeper actually go into a room and she saw several things that were becoming of a human trafficking situation . . . and we were able to act and actually pass that person’s information onto law enforcement partners so they could take the necessary steps. . . We are great partners with our local law enforcement” (Marriott 2020). Each of the instances that Marriott staff boasted as successful intervention into human trafficking ended with law enforcement intervention or eviction from the hotel. Yet, we never learn the fate of a single one of these identifications. The lack of transparency around what happens after such hotel interventions, or “evictions” occurs should be troubling given that human trafficking can often be mis-identified--as in the case of McCain’s mis-identification at the paper’s outset.

The trainings universally conflate sex work with sex trafficking. Like many anti-trafficking interventions, these indicators also penalize the few strategies sex workers have to conduct work more safely. Many sex workers have claimed that third party agents enable them to conduct sex work safely, yet such indicators look to any “facilitators” as evidence of relationships of coercion. The distinct fantasy of liberating a young woman from a pimp inspires each of

these rescue logics; while the focus on vigilance justifies the gaze of the civilian reporter to surveil, evict, arrest, and deport.

Lastly, despite the aspirations to recognize both sex and labor trafficking, nearly all of the indicators and training materials used in the Marriott training point to cases of sex trafficking. As argued elsewhere from a labor organizing perspective, it remains a bold case of whitewashing worker organizing that has been happening within its largely female worker base in the Global South. The Marriott hotel group's fanfare around its anti-trafficking training initiatives drowned out calls for increased labor protections against sexual assault for its women hotel workers working in Marriott hotels around the world (Shih, Kyritsis, and Rosenbaum 2021).

### Defund Anti-Trafficking and Alternative Mobilizations Towards Liberation

Victim identification training initiatives are enormously costly, both for the communities who are policed by them, and, for their funders. They cannot be improved because they foundationally believe human trafficking can be redressed with carceral solutions. The racialized criminalization of migrant and sex workers of color cannot be solved within the current structures of the anti-trafficking movement, yet the movements popularity casts an enormous shadow on alternatives mobilizations already undertaken by groups working in these very communities.

Rather than fund initiatives like human trafficking identification trainings, it is incumbent about the anti-trafficking movement to redistributing the massive amounts of money it has amassed in the name of combating trafficking. One might start with the Polaris Project, the non-profit which co-designed the Marriott victim identification training, receives royalty donations each time the Marriott

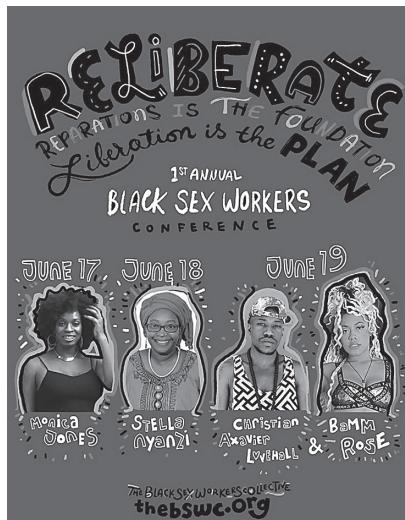
training is used by another hotel group, and was also the architect of the “Illicit Massage Business” project that has endorsed hundreds of raids of Asian massage businesses throughout North America. Polaris’ 2019 revenue of \$13.4 million, funded by a bevy of corporate partnerships with Amazon, Palantir, Uber, Airbnb, Delta, and Marriott among dozens more, illustrate the abundant resources that are concentrated and circulated within such corporate-carceral-humanitarian connections.

Groups organizing at the intersections of sex worker, migrant, and racial justice have already strategized ways of funding their work outside of the anti-trafficking industrial complex. In 2019, Red Canary Song’s annual fundraiser, “Red Canary Screams,” was co-hosted by Kink Out, which hosts events that bring people with intersecting identities together through their connections with BDSM. The synergistic collaboration was envisioned by queer BDSM educator and professional dominatrix Yin Q, who emphasizes embodied political solidarities with migrant Asian massage workers as a Chinese American sex worker. The event raised nearly \$23,000, garnered through paid flogging and boot-licking stations around the periphery of the dancefloor, a silent auction of BDSM gifts and services, merchandise sales, and sold out ticket sales. Red Canary Song was able to use the no-strings attached cash to support monthly mutual aid to massage workers in Flushing throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Workers reported that such unconditional cash assistance was unheard of and provided vital support to community members who held mixed immigration status. Through RCS mutual aid and outreach during the pandemic, we repeatedly learned that all workers, regardless of status, were excluded from various forms of pandemic assistance (Lam, Shih, Chin, Zen 2021). Sex worker groups have long demonstrated the promises of mutual aid and care as just one possible pathway towards liberation. Rather than seek funding

in the fraught anti-trafficking landscape, they have succeeded in generating funding from within Asian diasporic sex worker communities.



November 2nd, 2019 • 2-8pm  
Lot 45, 411 Troutman St, Brooklyn, NY  
@redcanarysong @kinkoutevents



Defunding anti-trafficking is not merely about massively redistributing the funding and profits accumulated by anti-trafficking interventions, but also shifting sources of expertise to center directly impacted communities. In summer 2021, the Black Sex Workers Collective (BSWC) convened their first annual conference centering global Black sex worker experiences. Organized around a theme of “Reliberation,” the conference poster highlighted: “Reparations is the Foundation; Liberation is the Plan.” BSWC curated three days of content ranging from discussions of sex work decriminalization, to keynote speeches, film screenings and digital networking sessions. In addition to the conference, the collective also promotes different forms of cultural activism and runs a bail fund, addressing the needs of incarcerated Black sex workers. Lyndsey Beutin (Forthcoming 2022) has provocatively suggested that bail funds exemplify

one powerful anti-trafficking alternative, for the ways in which they defang the carceral approaches that deprive Black women, workers, and mothers from the right to livelihood.

## Conclusion

The racialized mis-identification of trafficking can be understood as spectacle because of its uneven, and thus, fantastical, application. The excessive funding and commitment to training is premised off the belief that any enhanced surveillance will lead to a net positive reduction of trafficking. This fiction conjures incredible support, yet fails to interrogate the entire scope of which communities become unjustly ensnared in the wide net of putative rescue. In fact, the fantasy and optics of training itself belie a commitment to un-see the traditional markers of racialized poverty that have haunted civilian and law enforcement approaches to policing for decades.

What links Cindy McCain, Marriott hotel workers, and the large cadres of American citizens who are encouraged to participate in human trafficking identification is that they have been marshalled into collective effort to surveil perceived victims of trafficking. Most often, these arrests lead not to amnesty and rescue as promised, but to criminalization and deportation. These approaches have enormous consequences for Asian migrant massage workers, who once they refuse the victim label are swiftly criminalized, and if not citizens, subject to drawn out deportation procedures. For Black communities, whose history of slavery haunts them in and outside of the sex industry, their paradoxical erasure and criminalization from the new humanitarian anti-trafficking movement actually subjects them to further, “justifiable” surveillance and policing and forecloses opportunities to demand structural rights. Anti-trafficking trainings

have virulently expanded civilian and law enforcement policing, and have foreclosed liberation for migrant and sex workers of color to survive under the constraints of global capitalism.

Yet, they obfuscate these policing effects by couching such initiatives as community initiatives to liberate “modern day slaves.” The appropriation and application of the American history of chattel slavery in the United States to surveil, identify, and police Asian victims of human trafficking not only falsely equates liberation with policing, but also obscures the enduring historical legacies of slavery on the social, economic, and political conditions of Black women and Black sex workers. Rather than examining the underlying structural conditions of racialized exploitation, these training regimes establish a new racial category of the international, brown global “other” as likely victims of human trafficking that require vigilant surveillance. Under conditions of such routine violence and surveillance, poor and heavily policed communities of color will continue to seek numerous strategies for liberation.

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