



a

whores'

dialogue:

ON THE HISTORY
& RACISM OF
ANTI-TRAFFICKING

the Underbelly
podcast
episode 3

THE UNDERBELLI PODCAST

EPISODE 3

*A Whores' Dialogue:
On the History and Racism of Anti-Trafficking*

by Isidore and Erma VIP

TULLIA

Dearest Madame Rosa,

I hope this finds you well. I am writing from a place of confusion today. As I was out running errands for the cat, getting some little treats, you know, the dry fishy ones, I passed by something very distressing. A panel on the bus stop was sullied by an advertisement in that wretched, overly wholesome, modern style. A voice bubble on it spoke to passersby: "I am priceless...and my body is not for sale". I stood in front of it gazing at my reflection for some time and found myself filled with confusion about it all. These past few months have already been a challenge, as I've been establishing myself in the industry and all, learning who my friends are, you know the gamut well. So this ridiculous advertisement had me totally asunder. There was another part too - it read: "there is a way out of sexual exploitation" with a string of numbers to call. What are they trying to say, if not that anyone who might choose to sell sexual services is exploiting themselves? And, moreover, exploiting themselves more than they would be selling any other kind of service?! Does not all work ask of us to put a price on our bodies, our time, our labor? Might you help me understand this take? Perhaps offer some words of wisdom, so that I might put myself back together?

My love to you, you and your ancient wisdom,
Tullia

NARRATOR

In this episode, we're going to channel some stories about the history, racism, and work of anti-trafficking.

The recent anti-trafficking bills FOSTA and SESTA have gained a lot of media and activist attention since they passed almost unanimously in April. Much of the coverage about the bills draws attention to how they unambiguously make working conditions precarious and more dangerous for sex workers, pulling online platforms suddenly away from people. How can something seemingly well-meaning for some pose such a danger to others? We are not going to discuss FOSTA and SESTA directly here since a lot of good stuff already exists critically looking at these bills' effects. A typical response that is formulated is that congress' anti-trafficking efforts have unintended consequences. Our approach will be more to map what has motivated anti-trafficking work from its origins in the late eighteen hundreds to the present. To do this we need to take a step back and ask some simple questions. What is sex trafficking? How is it defined? Why is anti-trafficking generally in opposition to sex work? How are sex work and trafficking related? Who designates that relationship?

We'd like to state outright that in no way do we at the Belli Research Institute intend to deny the existence of coercion that is possible in the sex industry, or any other kind of labor, nor do we deny the reality that exploitation can happen by johns and pimps just as with managers and bosses. Nor do we deny the myriad ways that women may face misogynist violence both in and out of their work lives. It should also go without saying that our use of the word "woman" throughout this is in no way an essentialized or biological category.

Trafficking does exist, but we question the organizations that push morality, numbers and ideology. According to statistics - whatever those are worth - most trafficking is for the purpose of extra-cheap laborers, not sex trafficking where most groups focus. We think it is pertinent to provide some context about the specific history of trafficking, since it

does have very specific origins and involves a specific language. We want to explore the premise that since first appearing, the work of anti-trafficking has more often made things worse for women, especially women of color, than it has done to help.

The word "traffic", which comes from the middle French and was first used in English in the 1500s, is originally defined as "the transportation of merchandise for the purpose of trade." We can now use the word traffic to refer to frustrating stagnation on highways or how many views our websites get - but the word "trafficking" takes on an entirely different emotional register. Already by the 1600s "with a sinister or evil connotation" had been added to the definition. Today, trafficking probably brings to mind exploited people - but especially women and girls and especially sexual exploitation - who are taken across borders against their wills and forced into horrible situations. If you search online dictionaries in 2018, the definition for "trafficking" is now generally "the trade in something illegal", like in "drug trafficking".

Though "human trafficking" refers to the traffic of people forced into any kind of labor, it is sex trafficking specifically that has taken center-stage in most anti-trafficking organizations.

The US Trafficking Victims Protection Act of the early 2000s defined sex trafficking as "a commercial sex act induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such an act has not attained 18 years of age;" OR as "the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act." Note here that no condition of force, fraud or abuse or even a third party role is stipulated in the latter definition. In many states, for example, someone can be charged with trafficking for driving someone to work who is going to do sex work.

What exactly are people talking about though when they speak of trafficking? Since the time of the self-proclaimed moral reformers of the Victorian era, the work of most anti-trafficking organizations has pulled a clever - or perhaps not so clever - rhetorical conflation of sex trafficking with prostitution. It is important to disentangle what it means when sex trafficking is considered the same as prostitution, no matter what you think about prostitution. This is important because at stake is not just a battle of morals but groups of people who have opinions and agency and lived experiences. When we look to legal definitions of sex trafficking or prostitution we are looking at heavily moralistic, strategic ideologies, not realities. What has happened by flattening these together is that it has served as a precedent for at least 150 years to inflate law enforcement and criminalize women who were foreigners, who were non-white, who were considered deviant, or who simply existed at the margins of society, no matter what work they were doing.

What follows is a series of letters that has been known literarily as a Whores Dialogue, wherein an older woman typically educates another woman on matters of the wise. Tullia has written a letter to her mentor, Madame Rosa. Madame Rosa, who has lived a fantastically long life through the epochs of the sex trade, writes back.

MADAME ROSA

Dear Tullia,

I understand your feelings entirely, for they are justified. I'm afraid I cannot give you a simple answer though. This ad that you've come across is the result of almost two centuries of workings by people who, while sometimes good intentioned, have created

a life that is ever more unlivable for us. It just makes me so mad to see the same old words spilling out again and again by people constantly missing their meaning. This idea, that selling your body - as they want to call it, I call it simply working - but that selling your body is the same as sexual exploitation is simply not new. Dressing it up in the "wretched, overly wholesome, modern style" as you called it - I love that - seems to be an attempt to create a digestible product for these, what do you call them, Millenials to consume. To understand this better I think a brief history lesson is necessary for we cannot know our present if we do not know the past.

It started in the midst of slavery and picked up momentum in its aftermath. White people were becoming ever more fearful of having their precious idea of racial purity polluted. As non-white immigration to the U.S. was increasing, white people saw their identity under attack. Simultaneously, American soldiers were overseas forging colonial empires and it was feared that foreign women, especially prostitutes, would morally and physically corrupt the men. Britain had established a precedent with the Contagious Diseases Acts in 1864, which gave police the power to arrest women suspected of prostitution and subject them to compulsory exams and forced confinement in lock hospitals if found to have any STIs, or what they called venereal diseases back then.

This was as bad as it sounds since it treated women, but especially women of color, as suspects to be detained, examined and targeted for increased surveillance and state violence. This treatment was used in the colonies and domestically. This connection is important because in these formulations of surveillance it was race that was central for targeting certain women. Since colonialism always breaks down ways of living for the natives, colonial subjects moved from their homelands to the metropolises and as they

immigrated, the borders and transit hubs were seen as dangerous places where these morally corrupt and morally corrupting women could be stopped. Race provided the visibility to identify which women should be seen as potential prostitutes, and thus threats, who needed further policing.

I'm afraid I haven't even yet addressed your question directly, but I'll have to say more on it later as I'm simply exhausted tonight.

I send you my love and strength,
Rosa

TULLIA

Dearest Madame,

Missing the meaning of words! That is exactly what I fear! So I see then that the evil was apparently in our drawers themselves - or rather how tidy we were perceived to keep them! And what about diseases, illnesses, and ailments contracted by industrial jobs in factories or in mines? The fixation on contagion seems very much about quarantine, social isolation, abandonment and surveillance - does it not?

I admit I have to stretch my mind a bit to understand these seemingly opposed perceptions of the prostitute: was she the criminal or the victim? But I have a suspicion that, from your words, this was about race more than anything else. White women were the victims, while non-white men and women were the corruptors. I'm interested to hear if this commonly used word "trafficking" originally concerned only the crossing of borders. Was the threat to whiteness you speak of always from the outside or did it also exist internally?

Or could it be that talk of "trafficking" was just a way to capture up molls in the life way back then too?

Love your little wren,
Tullia

MADAME ROSA

My dear Tullia,

You have a wonderful mind indeed! I'm glad you bring up trafficking in this context as its history is important to know. I'll begin again with a brief history lesson. The first formal anti-trafficking law happened in 1875 in direct response to Chinese immigration to the U.S. Fragile, white Congressmen were calling this immigration a "modern slave trade system" - such a claim they could only make from their recently acquired moral highground a la the 13th Amendment. As more Chinese women immigrated - many of whom were indeed whores, either by choice or the limited options they had - more anti-Chinese laws emerged, especially ones condemning prostitution and intensifying surveillance and control of it. Finally, the white man came clear with his opinions and made the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which prohibited the immigration of all working people from China - still allowing in the well-to-do of course.

The first U.S. Immigration Bureau, formed to enforce these laws, wanted to protect the country from the so-called "morally, mentally and physically deficient." And just who were these deficient? Well, the prostitute certainly topped that list and from the perspective of the Immigration Bureau any foreign woman might be a prostitute. Increased policing was justified with the reasoning that this immigration was part of a new "modern slave trade", which naturally

had to be opposed because of the recent formal abolition of slavery. But was it an actual opposition to slavery or just a moral crusade against women and prostitutes for racial and social purity?

This brings me to one of the most important myths that tied everything together: white slavery. Nothing brought people from across the political spectrum together better than the fear of white slavery. The belief in white slavery - often referred to as "white slave traffic" - was quite the manifestation of white guilt and fear. The fear was that white women specifically would be taken from their homes or from the streets and sexually exploited and were therefore victims who had to be protected and saved by the white man. The white woman became the ultimate innocent, helpless victim. This belief, this ideology, centered whiteness and feminine purity and sought to fend off an encroaching otherness. And what was it they felt they were saving whiteness from? Well I believe it was the threat of everything whiteness saw outside itself and thus feared.

In 1910 this fear was put into law with the Mann Act, also officially known as the White Slave Traffic Act, and which still exists today. It said, and says still, that transport of "any woman or girl for the purpose of prostitution or debauchery, or for any other immoral purpose" was a felony crime. At the same time it established a central database of all "known prostitutes", for the purpose of better tracking and policing them. An interesting tid bit is that this was the first action of the newly founded FBI, which was invented out of this same fear.

But this Mann Act - what an ironic name! - was born of moral panic and couldn't do anything but foster that. In its attempt to suppress white slave traffic it first had to find it - and here we see the prostitute come back into focus. If white women were prostitutes it must be because they were trafficked into it and therefore needed rescuing. This was a far cry

from the view of prostitutes as dangerous, infected foreigners polluting the pristine waters. The reason for these now opposing views of the prostitute as either innocent white victim or as dangerous woman of color was of course racism.

The League of Nations, however, wanted to get away from such explicit racism and replaced "white slavery" with "traffic in women and children." They achieved this in name only though as they carried out in the 1920s the first official investigations into international trafficking. They took their investigation methods, funding, and ideological basis directly from the American social hygiene movement. John D. Rockefeller is a name you've probably heard and was one of the many social purity reformers dedicated to combating prostitution and with close ties to such groups as the American Eugenics Society.

This "investigation" into worldwide trafficking was bound up with closures of red-light districts and new vice commissions with more repressive laws against women suspected of prostitution. This established the legacy that prostitutes were indistinguishable from trafficking victims and since both needed policing and/or rescue, policing and rescue started looking ever more similar.

So it came to be that politicians, police and citizen brigades of former friends - women whom I once considered close - were taking part in reforms that have led up to what you still see today. As the 20th century catastrophe rolled on, the perception of the whore deepened to include not just the evil-doers but also the innocent victims in need of rescue.

I hope this paints a clearer picture of it all.

From the depths of my evil -- to your beautiful,
whore heart,
Rosa

TULLIA

Dear Madame,

The picture is becoming clearer. It is sad to hear that people once your friends turned against you! What was it that happened for such a change to occur?

There are people today who claim to be my friend but seem to have motives. The proponents of the “end demand” approach, for example, claim more favorable to the prostitute. This “end demand” position, what people call the Nordic or Swedish model, aims at criminalizing the act of purchase but not the act of providing. As if the two could be separated - I still struggle to understand this! You cannot have prostitution without the purchasing of sex! Is this not just a covert way to condemn the buying of sex and therefore to condemn the transaction wholesale? The picture painted here to me is the prostitute as a victim of men’s “degraded” fantasies, giving into and accomodating patriarchy and misogyny. What do you think?

My head feels full and my heart heavy. In lighter news, some angel did spray paint over the advertisement - “sex work is real work”! I can see from my nest! It is so much prettier.

Forever a proud and painted gay woman,
Your Tullia

MADAME ROSA

Oh honorable Tullia,

Angels do appear in many forms! What you bring up concerning the “end demand” approach might make more sense with some context. It was in the 1980s that

things began to look as they do today. I spoke earlier of my former friends, well it was in this period that I lost many of them - not to tragic ends, but to stately reform. Some lovely person described this political change as "governance feminism." "Out of the streets and into the state!" they chanted. I can't say I actually heard it put quite so bluntly but I do believe this is what they had on their minds. The idea was that if women could only take on more positions in the state then the real changes could start happen. We're still waiting...

The significant change that really severed all possibility of friendship for me was the reactionary belief that all prostitution and even pornography was inherently exploitative, that it was just a reflection of internalized misogyny. Women I knew from the life started to believe that they had only been lying to themselves and became convinced that their experience was the right one and must then be the experience of everyone else. This trend often carried with it the abhorrent belief that biology was the basis for what it meant to be a so-called true woman. My goodness were they blind to self-expression and the wonderful pleasures that can come with breaking down such mundane gender norms.

Anyway, this focus, and fabrication really, on the newfound truth of what is or isn't sexually exploitative gave birth to the modern anti-trafficking movement as we know it. Rather than seeing the whores' work and respecting it and asking if they might offer support in some way, the radical feminists took it upon themselves to state outright that trafficking was exploitation and had to be stopped - for the sake of the prostitute of course.

In the 1980s and 90s you wouldn't believe the forces that came together, and are still together today, perhaps working even closer, to take on this monster that racial puritans had proffered a century earlier.

er. The specter of trafficking was ideal ground for everyone from evangelical Christians to liberal feminists to work together. And while this might sound nice and dandy, the thing that united them was advocating for harsher criminal and economic punishments for traffickers, for johns, and for prostitutes. It was a commitment to incarceration as a form of justice that relies on giving power over to the state. Another lovely person has termed this so eloquently as carceral feminism. I can't overemphasize just how detrimental this has been to the lives of people relying on the streets to get by. There are horrible men out there who will do the worst things to women, but has imprisonment ever changed that? This carceral paradigm was founded on the understanding that more and harsher punishments will end the "exploitation". All it has thus done is bolstered the police, tightened the borders, put more people in jail, and made it less safe for prostitutes.

Living up to its racist origins, anti-trafficking organizations sit comfortably viewing "third-world" cultures as overly traditional, "backwards", and blameworthy for causing trafficking. If only those other cultures weren't so behind - or so it goes. This idea helps the western woman define and reinforce her own perceived freedom and autonomy as a westerner. From this viewpoint, the project of stopping trafficking can be seen as a modernizing one, supported by social justice and humanitarianism. This veneer, of justice and humanitarianism, has given organizations a wider appeal and greater legitimacy, which has allowed them to push their definitions of trafficking and prostitution as the definitions. Group offering justice and humanitarianism relish in finding "helpless victims" in foreign countries whom they can rescue. Of course this rescue often comes in the form of employment as low wage laborers with stringent and punitive work contracts, prohibitions on who they can maintain relationships with, and, in the case of Christian operations, requirements to attend church

services. Oh, but at least they're not selling their bodies any more!

Others involved in anti-trafficking work believe that it is all happening here "in plain sight". By this they mean that sexual exploitation - what they perceive as such - is happening in our own backyards. On the surface this may appear closer to the truth, but are they really approaching things so differently? These social observers who believe the exploitation is in plain sight still focus on "others" who are doing the exploiting. If it's in your own backyard, then families, liberal and conservative alike, must fear that their children may be exploited or may be exploiting themselves, corrupted by outsiders! This calls communities to action for more vigilant police - of the citizen and professional kind - more surveillance of neighborhoods, the removal of street walkers. The family must be protected!

This is all quite a lot but I do hope that I've at least addressed some of your questions and assuaged some of your anxieties. It is important to continue to stand in your power.

It really is enough to make one want to rest for an entire century! But then again I do so enjoy our exchanges.

Yours quite literally forever,
Rosa

TULLIA

Thank you for this dearth of information sweet Madame Rosa. I am left with a lingering question - why all this trouble, why all this fixation, why all these myths? Why Madame Rosa why!?

I have a suspicion actually...perhaps the construction of sex trafficking as a major modern crisis offers people a way to feel more secure on their moral highground. They can remain assured that the problem of misogynist, racist violence is in a particular group of "evil" people. Perhaps it is also a way for them to engage with a sex-saturated culture such as ours without threatening their moral status or social position. Perhaps this is why too the lawmakers cannot get enough of the services we provide...

I've also noticed that every time a major sporting event comes around, the reformers - from evangelicals to liberal feminists, just as you say - double up on their efforts to emphasize just how significant a threat trafficking is and yet no one I've work with or spoken to has encountered anything like this. And then the game is over and the hype dies down and all that's left is more police trolling our websites and invading our places of work.

Well. I'll let you rest. Be well wise one, and, as always, thank you for feeding me,

Yours for eternity,
Tullia

NARRATOR

We'd like to offer a few words in conclusion. As anti-trafficking has become such a celebrated cause and given rise to a whole rescue industry, perhaps we should pause to think more about it. If rescue comes in the form of policing and policing is justified as rescue, then what is happening to those being swept up?

In the US, anti-trafficking campaigns have been far more successful at criminalizing marginalized popu-

lations, enforcing border control, and ensuring that other nations curtail prostitution than they have been at issuing any concrete benefits to victims and survivors. We contend that this is due not just to "unintended consequences", but is a direct result of certain strands of feminism joining forces with the state and NGOs to uphold a certain, white, carceral vision of society. When groups rely on the state and police, they will inevitably be relying on criminalization and punitive measures for change. The crackdowns that happen first are generally on the most visible sex workers, like those on the streets, who are usually people of color. This also includes crackdowns on pimps and clients, who in the street based sexual economy, are also mainly non-white. The rise of the internet as a platform for sex work has changed the game and provided a certain level of autonomy for sex workers. Bills like FOSTA and SEXTA are a rearticulation, dressed up for the internet age, of the same ideology that has existed for over a century and perceives the prostitute as harboring risk for trafficking and therefore in need of checking.

An interesting framework that others have suggested is that this war on sex trafficking is like a new war on drugs. A lot of hype, a lot of arrests, and a lot more money and technology for police. By now there have now been ample investigations into the war on drugs which have shown their invention of the problem through racist logics and which have resulted not in the suppression of drug use but the imprisonment of black men. We would hope that this whores' dialogue might similarly show how the so-called war on sex trafficking is not stopping misogynist violence or exploitation, but instead empowering the carceral system, upholding stigma, shutting down avenues for sex workers, and making the work generally more dangerous.

SOURCES

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by Elizabeth Bernstein

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by Gregory Mitchell

“Sexual surveillance and moral quarantines: a history of anti-trafficking”

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“Anti-trafficking campaigns, sex workers and the roots of damage”

by Carol Leigh

“The War on Sex Trafficking Is the New War on Drugs”

by Elizabeth Brown

Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State

by Judith Walkowitz

songs

Franz Liszt, *Love Dream*

Memphis Minnie, *I'm Selling My Pork Chops*

Fizz, *Submarine Intro Song*

Florence Price, *Piano Sonata in E Minor: I. Andante - Allegro*

Sergei Prokofiev, *Vision Fugitives, Op. 22, No. 16. Dolente*

Clara Schumann, *Sonate in G minor: I Allegro*

Fanny Mendelssohn, *Notturmo in G minor*

Sofia Gubaidulina, *Chaconne*

Lucille Bogan, *Shave Em Dry*



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