



Muckraking and Stories Untold: Ethnography Meets Journalism on Trafficked Women and the U.S. Military

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Abstract: Investigative journalism using visual media has become a dominant mode of knowledge production both in popular understanding of human trafficking and in policymaking. A 2002 Fox I-team report exposed the U.S. military in Korea as being actively involved in a transnational network of trafficking women into sexual slavery. The report circulated in policymaking arenas as evidence of the need to combat trafficking and prostitution via global U.S. initiatives. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork from exactly the same U.S. military camp towns in South Korea, this article raises questions about investigative journalism and its truth power. The author also seeks to illuminate how news reports may decontextualize and make ahistorical generalizations about sex work and women's migration, especially in the larger context of the revival of a global panic about human trafficking. The fundamental question the author raises is, What stories are untold in this genre of media representations preoccupied with sex trafficking?

Key words: trafficking; prostitution; representation; truth; sexuality

In May 2002, 13 U.S. Congressmen responded to a hidden-camera broadcast on Fox News and demanded that the Pentagon conduct a "thorough, global, and extensive" (Department of Defense Office of the Inspector General, 2003, p. 1) investigation into the involvement of U.S. military personnel in the trafficking of women. Based on the Fox I-team report produced by journalist Tom Merriman and colleagues (2002),¹ members of Congress expressed concern "that American soldiers [in Korea] are knowingly procuring the services of trafficked persons and that some of these soldiers may even be ordered to protect and patrol the brothels" (Department of Defense Office of the Inspector General, p. 1). Anti-trafficking measures have been an important part of U.S. domestic and foreign policy since the passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act in 2000, with the U.S. Department

of State being primarily responsible for the monitoring of the problem abroad. The Fox News report, an important trigger that got the Pentagon involved, made its way into various policymaking institutions as evidence of U.S. military involvement in the trafficking of women—both in the form of demand for female sexual services and in the tacit approval of the illegal operations.

Coincidentally, I conducted my fieldwork in 1998–2000, with follow-up field visits in 2001, 2003, and 2005, at exactly the same two camp towns that the Fox I-team crew visited. Anchoring my critical lens in my ethnography, I will examine how the Fox I-team report is "a site of cultural production that operates according to institutional and professional rules and paradigms and within dominant political ideologies" (Soderlund, 2002, p. 441). In particular, I shall focus on the one-dimensional representation of villains, victims, and heroes in the report, as well as the conservative politics that such narratives sustain. I will argue that in spite of the good intentions of the report to expose injustices, the report does a disservice to those it intends to save because it simplifies and flattens

¹ In this article, I will subsequently refer to the 2002 report by Merriman, Easterly, Mounts, DeMarino, Hollis, and Roskey as the Fox I-team report, the Fox News report, or the Merriman report.

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understanding about trafficking. By drawing on frameworks and conventional narratives to represent the powerlessness of women, the report decontextualized and made ahistorical generalizations about sex work and women's migration, as well as curtailed the power of anti-trafficking initiatives to address problems of unsafe migration and coerced labor. Media reports like this, I would argue, though muckraking in nature and confrontational in gesture, have therefore ultimately reactionary effects in silencing voices, desires, and stories that depart from the worldview of their producers. Alleged victims therefore serve as objects, rather than subjects, in these discursive productions.

Sexing Trafficking

Investigative journalism has become a dominant mode of knowledge production both in popular understanding of human trafficking and in policymaking. Public-interest stories in journalism have traveled beyond the confines of the nation-state to global issues, and human trafficking in particular has seized much media attention in the last decade. However, the epoch-marking shift in the definition of human trafficking from that of prostitution to that of coerced labor at the turn of the twenty-first century has been eclipsed by a preoccupation with sex in many of these journalistic reports.² Even though both the 2000 United Nations Optional Protocol for the Prevention, Suppression, and Punishment of Human Trafficking and the 2000 United States Trafficking Victims Protection Act define trafficking in relation to all forms of labor (i.e., domestic work, factory work, farm work, prostitution, etc.), media coverage of human trafficking has almost exclusively focused on the subject of women and children trafficked into sexual slavery. This conflation is further aided by anti-trafficking initiatives by both nongovernmental organizations and states that equate prostitution with sex trafficking and the violation of women's human rights (e.g., Coalition Against Trafficking in Women–Asia Pacific, 1998). The rescue of women and children from brothels has therefore been a primary spectacle in representations of anti-trafficking efforts (see Soderlund, 2005).

Feminist scholars (Doezema, 2000; Soderlund, 2002, 2005; Vance, 2004) have argued that the tropes in contemporary media discourses on sex trafficking significantly echo the coverage of White slavery at the turn of the

twentieth century (Walkowitz, 1992). The invocation of slavery in conjunction with the trope of violated femininity and sexuality has allowed a broad range of constituencies to converge on sex trafficking. The sexual and moral panic that the news media helped produce over the traffic of women, these scholars have argued, facilitates a reinscription of gender roles, political maneuvers that reinstate the status quo, and the reification of a First World–Third World divide.

In other words, efforts to expose and combat sex trafficking have deployed it as a simulacrum for articulating conservative gender and sexual politics, as well as neoliberal cultural politics, that legitimize global political and economic inequalities. Gretchen Soderlund (2005) has demonstrated how U.S. anti–sex trafficking rhetoric and practices are “deeply intertwined with attempts by the Bush administration and its faith-based constituency to police non-procreative sex on a global scale” (p. 79). Focusing her analysis on contemporary U.S.-based evangelical and secular feminist anti–sex trafficking efforts, Elizabeth Bernstein (2007) has argued that their goal of arresting traffickers, rescuing women from brothels, and training women to be good workers promotes a “corporate ideal of freedom and carceral paradigms of justice, locating all social harm in the actions of evil individuals and criminals outside the institutions of corporate capitalism and the state apparatus” (pp. 149–150).

These analyses further raise critical questions about how anti–sex trafficking initiatives in effect expand state powers. In the midst of the War on Terror in this post–September 11 era, Wendy Hesford and Wendy Kozol (2005) have cautioned awareness of how representations of human rights violations could intersect with *cultures of security*:

By cultures of security we mean the textual and visual strategies that the state and the media use to promote both fear of violence from some outside force and a promise of protection by the state as long as citizens comply with the ideological, political, and legal frames of regulation and control. (p. 4)

The conservative politics that representations of violence may engender also have been well discussed by post-colonial feminist scholars with particular reference to the figure of the Third World woman. For example, Ratna Kapur (2002) has argued powerfully that a focus on violence and victimhood in feminist legal politics, particularly in understanding the human rights condition of Third World women, reproduces gender and cultural essentialism that do not produce emancipatory politics for women. A categorical difference between the First World and the Third World is perpetuated by these reports that, on one

² See Jordan (2002) and Saunders (2005) for analyses of the contested process that led to the current definition of human trafficking as laid down in the United Nations Protocol.

hand, attribute violence against women to culture and tradition and, on the other, render women invisible and mute. For example, in her study of *New York Times* reports on China's one-child policy, Arabella Lyon (2005) discussed how women are rendered invisible. She demonstrated how the U.S. press repeatedly offers "voyeuristic representations that foster . . . sentimentality and charity at best, but more often simply perceptions of abject and debased women, *not people worthy of engagement* [italics added]" (Lyon, p. 176). I will carry this important point into the following analysis and show how the Fox News report elicited the voices of women solely to confirm their victimhood rather than to engage them as interlocutors.³

These analyses warn against a ready subscription to any formulaic idealization of virginal victims, villainization of alleged traffickers, and exaltation of reformers committed to ending the trade in women. They further highlight the pleasure that viewers experience in the affirmation of dominant beliefs, attitudes, and values in representations of other women as abject and doomed by their local culture and practices, women who need help from the autonomous, powerful, and resourceful modern transnational agents of the First World (Bennett, 2005; Durham, 1998; Himmelstein, 1994; Soderlund, 2002).

Building on these insights, the following analysis of representations in the Fox I-team report is an attempt to interrogate some of the premises of global sex trafficking claims—central to which are figures of (a) the innocent, powerless, and violated Third World woman and (b) the sex-crazed, aggressive, and perverted First World man—in this case, the GI. My ethnographic discussion seeks to destabilize these prevalent sets of binary categories (woman-man, Third-First, passive-aggressive) in the genre of representations about sex trafficking, of which the Fox I-team report is only one example. In particular, my analysis questions the production of truth about these women's lives and the political interests that these truths may serve: What position do women occupy in these alleged accounts of their experience of violence? Which parts of their experiences get erased in the production of an appealing and powerful narrative? How does their victimhood become an instrument for political purposes extraneous to their well-being?

3 Similarly, Laura Agustín (2006) has observed from her study of anti-trafficking activists' interaction with women who migrate into sexual labor that the discourse of trafficking locates these women squarely in the role of victims, rendering them invisible as migrants, laborers, or desiring subjects.

The Truth Power of Muckraking TV Journalism

The *truth power* (the claim to objectivity and, therefore, to legitimacy) of the visual media has allowed investigative journalism in the form of news and documentary films—exclusively focused on the trafficking of women and children into forced prostitution—to dominate public discourse, university campuses, and policy debates about trafficking. TV journalism assumes truth power through its presentation of an apparently unmediated external reality. As Roland Barthes (1977) suggested, the visual or imagistic has a denotative status that lends itself to the naturalized state of ideological common sense, acquiring the powers of objectivity. If the audience could see with their own eyes the images and actions that journalists bravely unveil from the underworld of human trafficking—police breaking down the doors to the sordid world of traffickers who lock up women and girls, now sitting with their heads down, now looking at the camera scared and crying, their only hope to be rescued—then what they see could only be the truth. Furthermore, the verbal also carries its own persuasive power—the TV journalist as the voice of reason, rhetorically framing the visual to construct a reality.⁴

The Fox News report is notable not only because of the visual power of secret camera footage but also because of its muckraking reporting. Muckraking as a form of journalism first emerged in the Progressive Era (1890–1913) in the United States, with writers in mass-circulated magazines exposing much of the excesses and injustices of industrialism and urban life. Departing from objective and balanced reporting, muckraking presents stories with the goal of exposing injustices and bringing about reforms. Whereas the journalist in objective reporting refrains from taking a position in order to let readers and viewers make their own evaluation based on the facts presented from competing perspectives, the muckraker, in contrast, presents stories to incite pressure for reforms

4 Sarah Stein (2001), however, made the important point that the spoken word may conflict with the independent persuasive power of the visual. In the Fox News report, Merriman asked a middle-aged Korean woman who spoke in broken English whether she worked "twenty-four hours, seven days a week." Facing Merriman in front of a doorway apparently into the massage room, she nodded and said yes. Merriman asked why she would not go out. She laughed in apparent embarrassment, reached out for Merriman's hand and said, head tilted to one side, pleading in a high-pitched voice, "I'm scared." The scene ends abruptly when Merriman repeated after her, "You are scared?" (Merriman et al., 2002). Viewers do not know what she subsequently said or did, whether she laughed or cried, but they are left with the conflict between the image of the laughing, flirtatious Korean woman and the journalist's verbal reiteration that she is scared.

from institutions of power such as the state and private corporations.⁵

Tom Merriman, the journalist of the Fox News report, took it upon himself to expose the alleged complicity and participation in the sexual enslavement of women by a much-revered institution—the U.S. military—and confronted officials of the U.S. Department of State to address the problem. Muckraking poses as journalism for the people and the muckraking activist-journalist-reformer hero of the unfortunate. The report I am discussing in this article, although seeking to assume the form of objective reporting by visually presenting the supposed facts of women’s trafficking and documenting multiple parties in and out of the military speaking to confirm the women’s plight, is appealing for what it exposes and for its confrontational posture.

Trafficking Journalism and Anti-Trafficking Policies

Journalism provides politicians, lobbyists, activists, and terrorists alike with “the essential ‘oxygen of publicity’ which enables their causes to be noticed and (they hope) addressed” (McNair, 2005, p. 26). In other words, a news report does not always acquire a presence in public debate or policymaking. Its circulation and flow depends on how the media, the public, and politicians take on and use it for their own meaning-making processes. The Merriman report made its way into a circuit of policymakers and government officials who were confronted with the so-called truth of U.S. military involvement in human trafficking for the purpose of forced prostitution as documented by Merriman’s video footage. Congressman Christopher Smith (Republican, New Jersey) credited the Merriman report for bringing this problem to his attention:

My focus on the U.S. military began in 2002 when a Fox News reporter named Tom Merriman showed me a hidden camera investigation of U.S. troops in South Korea patronizing bars and other establishments where women from the Philippines and the former Soviet states, especially Russia, were trafficked and forced to prostitute themselves. (U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, n.d.).

In this account, Smith was prompted to take action by the Merriman report. On May 31, 2002, Smith sent a letter signed by 12 other U.S. Congressmen to then secretary of defense Ronald Rumsfeld. Based on the Fox News report,

the letter focused on the depiction of women in the off-post establishments as victims of human trafficking and the portrayal of U.S. military personnel in not only patronizing but also protecting these illegal activities by providing what they called courtesy patrols. Before this letter was sent, the Merriman report first made its way into the policy circuit through a testimony given by Donna Hughes (2003) at the Subcommittee of East Asian and Pacific Affairs of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

As a result of Christopher Smith’s letter, the Pentagon’s Inspector General Joseph E. Schmitz—the chief watchdog for the entire Department of Defense—released the *Assessment of DoD efforts to combat trafficking in persons, phase 1—United States Forces Korea* in July 2003 (Department of Defense Office of the Inspector General, 2003). In November 2003, then president Bush announced the National Security Directive 22, which declared a zero-tolerance policy for trafficking, including involvement in trafficking by U.S. service members. In January 2004, Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz issued an anti-trafficking policy specifically for the Department of Defense. (In Korea, this policy applied to 33,000 military personnel and 5,000 civilian and contract workers working for the United States Forces Korea.) In September 2004, at the forum titled *Enforcing U.S. Policies Against Trafficking in Persons: How Is the U.S. Military Doing?* hosted for the Helsinki Commission (U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, n.d.) and the House Armed Services Committee, Congressman Chris Smith, as cochair of the Helsinki Commission, opened the meeting by citing the Fox News report at length to show how the United States and the international community had failed in their efforts to combat trafficking. Anti-trafficking measures have been an important part of U.S. domestic and foreign policy since the passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act in 2000, with the U.S. Department of State being primarily responsible for the monitoring of the problem abroad. The Fox I-team report was therefore an important trigger that got Chris Smith to take up the linkage between the U.S. military and human trafficking; he took the lead in Congress to pressure the Pentagon into prohibiting the U.S. military and its contractors from being involved in prostitution or other forms of trafficking.

Visualizing Trafficking: Sexual Invasion, Slave Talk, and Heroic Pursuit

Tom Merriman, the journalist in the Fox I-team report, works for WJW Fox 8 I-team in his hometown of Cleveland, Ohio. He is a Harvard Law School graduate and was formerly an Ohio State deputy attorney general. In 1995, he turned to investigative journalism, for which he has a distinguished track record and has received

⁵ See Miraldi (1990) for his discussion of the tension between objective reporting and muckraking through various case studies of muckraking in both the Progressive Era and its revival in the 1960s; see Soderlund (2002) for a penetrating analysis of muckraking reports of White slavery at the turn of the twentieth century.

dozens of journalism awards (Investigative Reporters and Editors, 2002).⁶ In his capacity as deputy attorney general, he once prosecuted cases in the Cleveland area against Korean massage parlors where women worked as prostitutes. Merriman “had an interest in how these women got here” (Jacoby, 2002, ¶ 12). Finding that many of these Korean women once had been married to U.S. military personnel, Merriman talked to police investigators who suggested that this phenomenon was common; Merriman then made his way to U.S. military camp towns in South Korea, where he found Russian and Filipino women who were in what he called indentured servitude.

I am discussing Merriman’s story in relation to the frames he used in the report and am applying Durham’s (1998) definition of frames as explanatory schemes that organize social understandings of events and serve as “unifying social devices by making some meanings more salient than others” (p. 112). Throughout the 15-minute program, Tom Merriman’s voice-over crucially frames viewers’ understanding of what they see onscreen. In a tone of grave urgency, he narrates the tragedy of innocence lost, freedom shattered, and femininity violated for foreign women in the United States and on foreign land because of prostitution. He charges the U.S. military and, by extension, U.S. viewers, to take responsibility for what he calls the sexual slavery of these women—and, finally, warns of the sexual threat that is seeping into the United States through the trafficking of women. In addition to giving a singular explanation of women’s migration into sexual labor as trafficking by equating it effortlessly with prostitution (and, therefore, with sexual slavery; Agustín, 2006), Merriman also deploys a rhetoric of sexual dangers (Walkowitz, 1992) and fear of foreign contamination (Luibhéid, 2004). In braving the underworld of slavery and the institutional immensity of the government, Merriman’s role in this saga is to be the “ethical gladiator” (Stein, p. 266) who galvanizes action. Operating between the binary of truth and lies, Merriman presents himself as the muckraker who would go to any length to expose the truth and to see justice being done (or promised).

⁶ The Fox News report discussed in this article was a finalist for the Tom Renner Award in the 2002 Investigative Reporting Contest. Tom Merriman won the 2006 Alfred I. DuPont–Columbia University Award, the IRE Medal from Investigative Reporters and Editors Inc, four National Headliner Awards, and 27 regional Emmy Awards. The Society of Professional Journalists recently named Merriman the best reporter in Ohio for the fourth time. In addition, he is a 2006 Ethics Fellow at the Poynter Institute (The Peter Jennings Project for Journalists and the Constitution, n.d.).

The Fox I-team program opens with black-and-white close-ups of the faces and upper bodies of Asian women in skimpy tops and miniskirts, some smiling, some with heads down, and some waiting at a distance but looking in the direction of the camera. The following voice-over accompanied the images: “We can’t say for sure how young some of these girls may be; what we can tell you [pause] they are all indentured servants [pause]. Property bought and sold” (Merriman et al., 2002).

The black-and-white footage is interrupted by color footage of an unidentified White woman in business attire stating definitively that “this is the new slavery...and these are the new slaves.” The hidden-camera footage then resumes, and Merriman’s voice-over continues, “Perhaps more surprising, in a sense, they are all working for you...and one day they could be working a lot closer to you” (Merriman et al., 2002).

The first frame that the Merriman report uses to introduce the problem of trafficking in women is what I call the Invasion frame. Armed with hidden cameras, Merriman and his I-team investigators’ transnational systematic examination of U.S. military involvement in the international trafficking of women into sexual slavery began in Warren, Ohio. Four out of the five massage parlors that the I-team visited offered sexual services for an additional fee. Footage from a hidden camera showed an undercover I-team investigator sitting in bed shirtless, bargaining with a Korean masseuse about the price for intercourse and oral sex. Building on comments from three law enforcement officers and the I-team investigations, a map of the so-called massage parlor circuit in the United States of America fills the screen. Viewers see yellow lines in multiple directions rapidly connecting more than two dozen jumbo red dots spread between the West and East Coasts that show the organized network facilitating these illegitimate travels. The visual mapping of such proliferation of unwanted Asian women’s sexuality gives veracity and credibility to the threat of contamination. Merriman then asks rhetorically, “Where does this network all begin? And, more importantly, who helped build it? Halfway around the world, in the streets of South Korea, a system of sexual servitude built by the U.S. military” (Merriman et al., 2002).

These statements bring viewers to the second frame, Slave Talk, which Merriman deploys effectively in his report focusing on the involvement of the U.S. military. In a sudden flash, Merriman is beamed over to the streets of Seoul in South Korea, following up on the claims of Ohio police that Korean women originated from U.S. military camp towns in Korea. But lo and behold, the women who

work in the clubs are not Koreans but rather Filipinos and eastern European women whom Merriman assumes to be sex slaves—however, that does not prevent Merriman from verifying his claim. Posing as a potential client, Merriman talks to women in the clubs. At one point, after his questions yielded that Sveta did not have her passport and so could not go home even if she wanted to, Merriman the client asked her, “So you are an indentured servant?” Apparently not quite understanding what Merriman meant, Sveta mumbles something incoherent. Merriman then reframes his question, “So you are like a slave?” Sveta answers, “Yes.”

The Merriman report represents two types of GIs—the stereotypical rowdy, drunken young soldiers boasting about the easy availability of sex with women who are kept clean of diseases, and the more levelheaded ones who claim knowledge of the conditions under which the women are working (including debt bondage, being auctioned like slaves, frequent beatings from the club owners, denial of payment, and not being allowed to go home). After establishing that the women are slaves, the camera then focuses on the military police, who, instead of arresting the men or rescuing the women, are pacing the streets and clubs and even greeting people in a friendly manner. Merriman summarizes the gravity of the problem in the following pronouncement:

The I-team’s hidden camera documents for the first time how American officers, under orders, actively protect the system which traffics and enslaves women. We found U.S. military police and courtesy patrol officers [called CPs] routinely provide security inside the bars and brothels where indentured servants service American soldiers. These two officers even offered to show us the ropes. (Merriman et al., 2002)

Showing them the ropes turns out to be a CP inviting Merriman’s team to sit down in a bar, then signaling to a woman working in the club and stating, “You are all set. She will take care of you.”

The final frame that I would like to point out in the Merriman report is that of the Hero. In the Fox News report, Merriman emerges unscathed from the sleazy street scenes to arrive at the sanitized and secure environs of the institution—specifically, the U.S. Department of State. Two unnamed female staff members from the department are shown the footage Merriman took in Korea—the supposed truth of U.S. military involvement in the sexual enslavement of women—and the close-up footage of their faces reflects how seriously they regard the exposé. When they expressed grave concern and said, “You will see results,” Merriman is not satisfied and reminds them (and his viewers) of the mighty obstacle they

face—“You are up against the Pentagon here!” Then Merriman’s cause and his heroism are confirmed when one of the staff promises, “If this were known at the highest levels, there will be a rush to do something about it. So thank you, thank you for this. This will be the beginning of the end for that.”

To ensure that viewers realize the linkage between the plight of these Filipino and eastern European women in Korea with that of the Korean women in Warren, Ohio, Merriman cites an unspecified 1992 U.S. Senate report on the sham marriages between GIs and Korean women and suggests that many of these women were then sold into massage parlors. Merriman never goes so far as to state that the GIs were traffickers, but he certainly makes clear their instrumental role in bringing these women into the United States through marriage.

Viewers are then directed to see how the kinds of evils being exposed in the report, facilitated by an arm of the U.S. government that could not quite contain the sexual excesses of its military forces overseas, also pose a serious threat at home. Merriman concludes at the end of the Fox News report:

The relentless stream of new faces on the American massage parlor circuit has left small police departments like Liberty township, just outside Warren, at the brink of surrender... [interruption by Ohio law enforcement officer who lamented that no one wanted to go into massage parlor undercover anymore] overwhelmed by a system created 6,000 miles away, in a place where freedom is lost every day and every night, compromised by the people you paid to protect it. (Merriman et al., 2002)

The three frames of meaning-making merge seamlessly in this conclusion: The evils of prostitution infiltrating the heartland of the United States in well-organized circuits (Invasion) are now found to have originated with the sexual excesses of U.S. military servicemen overseas (Slave Talk); the journalist, as the beacon of truth and morality (Hero), brings the truth of the street to shatter the hypocrisy of policymakers in the comfort of their well-lit offices, galvanizing them to rectify the wrongs that he so painstakingly unveiled.

Although the Merriman report presented both the Korean women in Ohio and the Filipino and eastern European women in Korea categorically as victims, they were implicitly constructed as agents of corruption. This feminized sexual danger resonates with the figure of the Chinese prostitute that inspired the passage of the Page Act (1875) to protect White families (Luibhéid, 2004). Through her analysis of the history of U.S. immigration control policies and how women’s sexuality is regulated,

Eithne Luibhéid has concluded that “sexual regulation at the border articulates with sexual regulation within the nation” (p. xxi). Ostensibly concerned with women’s *human rights* (the term was mentioned once in the Fox program), the intersecting frames in the report combine to trigger the kind of sexualized border anxieties that have been roused to new heights in cultures of security (see Hesford & Kozol, 2005). Furthermore, the solution, as Merriman envisions, can come only from a stronger state that would both contain the sexual excesses of U.S. men overseas and keep out of the United States the sexual dangers of foreign women. In other words, the muckraking story in effect articulates the nation’s official gender and sexual norms, as well as a state-centric fortification of the borders. In the next section, I continue questioning the conservative nature of the Merriman report through my own ethnography. Specifically, I ask the question, In the telling of Merriman’s story, what stories remain untold?

When Investigative Journalism Meets Ethnography

Based on my ethnographic research, I first will discuss how the epistemological premise of ethnography differs from that of journalism and what kind of knowledge production ethnography engenders. Then I will question the Evil Military Enslaves Third World Women frame that I identified in the Merriman report. Specifically, I challenge his one-dimensional representation of both GIs and women in the clubs: the former as a homogenous body of overflowing testosterone incapable of human interaction with the women; the latter as little more than the personification of female sexual victimhood. In presenting the complexity of these individuals’ lives and interaction, I will argue that the Merriman report does a disservice to those Merriman intends to save because he simplifies and flattens understanding about trafficking by drawing on frameworks and conventional narratives that represent the powerlessness of women. In the process, he also decontextualizes and makes ahistorical generalizations about sex work and women’s migration.

I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in 1998–2000, with follow-up field visits in 2001, 2003, and 2005, at both the camp towns that the Fox News crew visited (Dongducheon near Camp Casey and Pyeongtaek near Osan Air Base). The material that my ethnography generated is significantly and qualitatively different from the Merriman report’s conclusions about sexual slavery. Ethnographic research necessitates a particular relationship between the researcher and the subject of study, a relationship developed through participant-

observation. In addition to developing long-term relationships with key informants in the field, ethnography also requires the researcher’s immersion into the local context (participant-observation) to acquire a social and cultural understanding of the meanings particular to the studied group and its practices.

In the last 2 decades, under the influence of post-modern and postcolonial theories, anthropology has moved toward a sensitivity to the politics of representation and issues of subjectivity, as well as attended to the researcher and informants as individuals with their own sets of identification along such matrixes as gender, ethnicity, and class—matrixes that shape the relational context of knowledge production. Positioning oneself is, therefore, an epistemological act. As Roger Goodman (2000) has pointed out, “the anthropologist is so directly the research tool” (p. 151) in fieldwork. My positions in the field were important in determining the kind of knowledge to which I had access. For example, not being a Korean, Filipina, or American allowed me certain objectivity in the eyes of my informants because I had little conflict of interest with them. My identity as a foreigner served as a common basis for interactions with the Filipinas and GIs, whereas my knowledge of Korean allowed me to pose as a curious student of Korean society and gained in turn the curiosity of the Korean people that I met. My ethnography produced what Donna Haraway (1988) has called *situated knowledge*, a knowledge that defies the search for a unitary truth.

In contrast, journalism operates largely on the principle of epistemic objectivity: Reporters are required to make judgments based on facts, not values. In conducting an investigation, the journalist assumes the role of the neutral observer in discovering the facts. Therefore, journalists need to maintain an emotional and social distance from those on whom they are reporting. For journalists, access to the informants is about getting to the source. Information obtained from the interaction between journalists and their sources is often taken as the truth—unless the source is a suspected criminal or politician who needs to be confronted by a muckraking investigative journalist. Although journalists’ respect for pluralism is ideally manifest in the pursuit of accuracy, diversity, balance, and fairness, it is assumed that the professional author-subject relationship is objective and unproblematic, and the social location of the journalist is rarely questioned.

The subsequent discussion in this article can therefore be understood as a dialogue between the situated knowledge of the ethnographer and the truth of journalists like Tom Merriman.

The GI

GIs are an ambiguous construction in U.S. society and in U.S. foreign policy.⁷ They may be condemned as drunkards and sex-craved young lads who would be fighting in the streets if not for the Army, or they may be hailed as patriots and freedom fighters that champion noble causes—in keeping with *Time* magazine's naming the GI as Man of the Year in 1950 and the American soldier as Person of the Year in 2003, as well as the designation in 1999 of the American fighting man as one of the heroes and icons of the twentieth century. The term *GI* commonly refers to the enlisted men rather than the officers; enlisted men are stereotyped as working class rather than college graduates and as ethnic minorities who did not make it (except in the Army) or as underachieving Whites.

The GIs in the Merriman report confirmed many of the negative stereotypes outlined previously. Captured on camera during their off-duty hours drinking, partying, and engaging in men's talk (Gough & Edwards, 1998; Kim, 1997) with Merriman, who was posing as the client looking for sex, their sexual pursuits become their defining essence. Much like Don Kulick's (2005) examination of the discursive production of clients as a new species in the Swedish state deployment of sexuality, the Merriman report reinscribes GIs' sexuality into the discourse of trafficking as demand for trafficked women.

This idea that military recruits are marginal members of U.S. society may be more a middle-class American construction than a reflection of reality. Recent statistics from the Department of Defense (2000) on the educational attainment as well as ethnic makeup of active-duty personnel of the U.S. military, supplemented by some of the personal accounts I have collected, show that although GIs may not be the cream of their generation, they are very far from being the supposed rejects of society.⁸ Many of the

7 *GI* (government issue) was stamped on cartons of supplies sent out by the U.S. government during World War II. The American soldier further made fame in the Korean War. In 1951, GI Joe was named Man of the Year in *Time* magazine (January 1, 1951) and praised for his valiant defense against communism. Although officially excised by the Army since then as an unfavorable characterization, the term *GI* has continued to be widely used in U.S. society and the media.

8 The job of an enlistee is generally comparable to a civilian job not requiring a college education. Therefore, the so-called social and economic marginality of GIs should be determined on this basis. Statistics for fiscal year 1996 (Defense Manpower Data Center Data Request Archive, 1997; information no longer available to the public; hard copy in possession of the author) showed that out of 373,473 applications, there were 179,133 accessions (48%); 89% of these enlistees were between the ages of 18 and 24. The same report also showed that enlisted men actually included a significantly higher proportion of high school graduates or equivalent compared with civilians in a similar age range.

enlistees join for the pay, the benefits, and the recruiting resources, which surpass those available in civilian jobs. Some enlist for the college funds provided by the GI Bill, and many immigrants join for the accelerated naturalization process the military offers. It is important to note that when these perks shrank in the late 1970s, the quality of new recruits fell.⁹ Joining the Army may actually be the best option out of many, rather than a last resort.

Because the two Koreas are still technically at war, a GI's assignment to Korea is considered a hardship tour, in which no government sponsorship for family members is provided.¹⁰ The tour normally lasts for 1 year. The short duration of the assignment seems to justify the absence of any program that might help with the GIs' integration into the host country: No language-skills training or education about the social and cultural makeup of Korea is offered to enlisted men assigned there. Commonly and unofficially, the little these men have heard about Korea is about the cheap sex available there (Bickford, 2003).

In the clubs, the popularity of a man, especially for low-ranking privates, usually declines as the hard cash he possesses decreases. High-ranking GIs with a handsome salary who could buy multiple drinks for an entertainer and her coworkers would be greeted most enthusiastically in the clubs. Those who refuse to buy the women drinks are often teased with the name *Cheap Charlie*. This epithet is a challenge to masculine pride that many young GIs find hard to deal with, and many Filipinas are familiar with the power of such tactics to get more out of the men.

Although virility is an important tenet in hegemonic masculinity (particularly so in the military), a GI who fulfills the stereotype and frequents the clubs for sex may actually draw disapproval from his fellow soldiers. Carl, a 20-year-old GI, talked about the so-called loser in his company:

He was a virgin when he first came. When he first arrived, he said he would not go to those bars, that he won't be paying the girls or doing that. But in less than 2 weeks, he was going down there every night by himself. Usually people go in groups to have drinks, but going alone means it's something else

9 The situation improved only with major government initiatives to enhance recruiting programs and substantially increase pay and benefits (Defense Manpower Data Center Data Request Archive, 1997; information no longer available to the public; hard copy in possession of the author).

10 In September 2000, there were only 5,798 command-sponsored dependents in Korea associated with a military strength of 36,565. In that same year, Japan had 40,188 command-sponsored dependents associated with a military strength of 40,189 (Department of Defense, 2000).

you are looking for. I used to go alone. He spends all his money on the women, all he does is to drink and get women, we all think that he is a loser, he doesn't do anything except going downrange.

Author: Does he do well in the Army?

Carl: No, he doesn't. He is a real loser.
(personal communication, February 25, 1999)

This description of the loser may resemble the Merriman report's portrayals of the bawdy GI, yet the aforementioned GI's excessive and solitary indulgence in alcohol and women met with strong disapproval from the GI's peers. Key to the designation of *loser* in Carl's description is the loss of control (over his sexuality, alcohol consumption, and money) and the defiance to the group. A man's apparently successful and continuous indulgence in aggressive sexuality to the exclusion of other ideal masculine qualities, such as discipline and comradeship, may mark him as a loser in the military. My point is not to falsify Merriman's footage, but to suggest that the masculinity that GIs displayed on Merriman's camera may not be the dominant sexual ethos of the soldiers. Subsequently, I will discuss more of their interactions with the women in the clubs.

The Entertainers—Or the Enslaved?

In the entire 15 minutes of the Fox I-team report, women who are alleged victims of trafficking, be they Russian, Filipino, or Korean, are given only the voice of abject and powerless prostituted women captured through the hidden cameras of journalist-investigators who posed as clients. In contrast, the journalists invited GIs, military police, investigators, activists, and academics to talk about the women's problems and their plight. As Bishakha Datta (2005) has discussed regarding documentary films on sex work, "Women in prostitution are asked to describe their condition, but they are never asked to describe how their condition can be changed. This privileged position is reserved for a chorus of outsiders: government officials, policemen, 'normal' citizens, and activists" (p. 264). The women are given voices only when they fill the role of powerless victims, never as partners for engagement.

Second, it is naive and yet ideologically convenient for the Merriman report to take what the GIs have to say about the women's situation as definitive truth: The stories that the clients get are often filtered through the customer-entertainer relationship, a point that I would like to elaborate on through my ethnography. I wish to emphasize that human rights violations are indeed prevalent in these clubs—including the withholding of passports, confinement, arbitrary penalties, long working

hours, and so forth—and I absolutely am not suggesting that entertainers fabricate tales of abuse and exploitative practices. Yet it is important to note that the women do engage in particular self-representations to their customers in order to trigger a sense of pity for their predicament and thus to elicit various forms of support.

The Filipinas I met with in the camp towns were between the ages of 17 and 35, most of them in their early 20s. Only a few of them had worked in a club before coming to Korea. Some had no working experience, whereas those with working experience had worked either in factories or in sales. Reasons cited for coming to Korea included wanting to make money for their family and themselves, to see the world, and to show their independence.

These women are usually in Korea on 1-year contracts. Before 1999, women in this industry had been promised jobs as waitresses, dancers, or guest relation officers, but most of the women who arrived since 2000 have had auditions for jobs as entertainers in which they had to pose in bikinis. Most of the women had a vague idea of their jobs, but they rarely knew the exact nature of their working conditions—both because of the managers' attempt to conceal the truth and the very different management in different clubs. One thing the women were aware of was the illegal nature of their migration and their jobs because of the detour they took via Hong Kong or Bangkok, as well as the lies they were taught to tell to immigration officials.

Most of the Filipinas in question entered Korea on E-6 entertainer visas. Upon their arrival, the women's passports were confiscated by the club owners and at least part of the women's salaries were not to be paid to them until they left Korea, to prevent them from running away before their contracts were fulfilled. The contracts they signed are effectively void in many cases. Half of the \$600 monthly salary went to their managers, and they might not get the 2 days off their contract promised. They were required to entertain the GI customers by getting them to buy as many 10 USD (U.S. dollars) ladies' drinks as possible—very expensive drinks compared with the tax-free beers at 2 USD each that GIs typically bought for themselves. The women got 2 USD for every one of the 10 USD drinks a customer bought for them. Club owners could arbitrarily prohibit the women from taking days off or fine them for a variety of reasons (e.g., not fulfilling the drinks quota, trying to run away, not behaving in a particular way).

Some clubs offer VIP rooms where customers who buy a woman four drinks may bring her into the room (with her consent) for about half an hour. Sexual services such as a hand job or a blow job may be provided on the

premises. A customer may pay a bar fine to take a woman out of the club. Varying with the time of the month (more expensive on payday) and the length of time desired, bar fines range from 100 USD to 300 USD. The women usually get 20% to 40% of the money. Whatever happens in the VIP room or on a bar fine outing is subject to negotiation between the woman and the customer or, in the words of many Filipinas, “It’s up to you.”

Filipina entertainers frequently asserted the voluntary nature of their work. Katie, for example, told me she believes that “it’s up to you” whether to have sex for money; she said that the women always have the choice of running away—as she herself has done. Similarly, women who go on a bar fine outing with GIs might run off at any time before sex. Janet said to me that the entertainers can choose whether to perform a blow job for a customer in a VIP room. Many women, however, do complain about the pressures club owners exert on them to increase sales. However, unlike the many activist discourses that stress these women’s powerlessness, many of them prefer to see themselves as autonomous agents exercising control over their bodies and their sexuality.

Interactions in the clubs are often personalized to create the potential of a relationship beyond the mediation of money. To this end, both GIs and entertainers mobilize altruistic ideals of friendship and romantic love. A concatenation of lies, truths, and partial truths permeates relationships between entertainers and their regulars. Apart from lying about their age, marital status, number of children, boyfriends, and virginity in order to maintain their appeal to customers, Filipina entertainers also portray themselves as helpless victims to elicit sympathy and support from clients. The powerless and the pure thereby command the pity of the powerful, who subsequently feel obliged to extend their support and protection. Regular customers usually learn of the women’s woes, ranging from family breakdowns to the abuse they suffered at the hands of managers and club owners: parents are sick, relatives are dead, and brothers and sisters need to go to school; owners are not paying their salary (monthly salaries are withheld until the usually 1-year contract ends to prevent women from running away and to compel them to earn more money from drinks, which is paid out to them weekly). These lists of problems are common pretexts the entertainers use to demand sympathy and financial support from their regular customers.

These kinds of interactions between Filipino women and American GIs—interactions that my ethnographic data show are common in the clubs—challenge the Fox I-team report on at least two levels. First, the women are not powerless victims; their telling of their victim stories is, in fact, an exercise of their agency. Second, GIs as potential

patrons of the entertainers are often privy to a version of victimhood intended to personalize the patron-client relationship in the clubs. To take GIs’ testimonies of the women’s lives at face value, as did both the Fox I-team report and the subsequent Department of Defense report (Department of Defense Office of the Inspector General, 2003), is to get a version tailored for potential customers who may offer support—not for investigators who may want to understand the causes that contribute to the vulnerability of these women as migrants and workers in Korea with the goal of changing the exploitative conditions in the long run.

Conclusion

Visibility and invisibility are crucially bound; invisibility polices visibility and in this specific sense functions as the ascendant term in the binary. Gaining visibility for the politically under-represented without scrutinizing the power of who is required to display what to whom is an impoverished political agenda. (Phelan, 1993, p. 26)

Following Phelan, I argue that what the Fox I-team’s politically high-profile muckraking report exposes is significantly less than what the report renders invisible. First, the spectacle of victimization in the report narrowly contains Third World women in roles of one-dimensional victims who are powerless and scared, awaiting the rescue of the White knight who will arrive in the form of the journalist-hero. The representational obliteration of these women’s agency eliminates the possibility of including their own assessment of what they need and their analysis for solving the problems of their human rights violations. Instead, the women’s power is transferred to the middle-class American journalist who can travel across national borders in a flash and has direct access to U.S. government officials, who know best. Second, the report’s attribution to prostitution as the reason for the abuses and immobility these migrant women live with fails to make the important connection with the general vulnerabilities of migrant workers, especially those who travel and work illegally, as well as how the prostitute stigma disempowers women, both legally and socially. Third, by exposing a supposed scandal that needs to be cleaned up, the report both suggests a worldview that is mechanistic and legitimizes the current order as normal (Stein, 2001). Finally, in a time when human trafficking has been elevated to an issue of national security (as witnessed in the Trafficking in Persons National Security Presidential Directive of 2003), the report contributes to calls for a “fortification of state-centric approach to security and a deepening of

control over the social body that may override many human rights concerns previously recognized, particularly those emanating from issues of security that have become transnational" (Truong, Wieringa, & Chhachhi, 2007, p. xi).

The "spectacle of women's victimization" (Hesford & Kozol, 2005, p. 21) in the Merriman report in effect lends political support to cultures of security. By suggesting that the abuses are one part of the machinery that has gone awry and thus needs a fix (from the Pentagon), it fails to illuminate the social structures by which women who are disenfranchised in terms of their global, class, and ethnic locations. By lumping together under the rubrics of trafficking and sexual slavery the experiences of immigrant Korean women who entered the United States by marriage with GIs largely before the 1990s, itinerant Korean women who worked the massage parlor circuit in the 1990s, and migrant Filipino and eastern European women who work as entertainers in Korea, reporters like Merriman exonerate policymakers and activists from addressing state obligations toward migrant women in different settings. This conflation renders invisible the structures that have generated gendered disadvantages in migrant women's home countries that make migration a desirable option, as well as the restrictive immigration policies and lack of protection for immigrant women that make domestic violence possible and engagement in the informal economy necessary. Furthermore, it erases the marginalization of migrant workers' rights that makes abuses commonplace, as well as the economic and political disparity between states and individuals. As a growing body of critiques of anti-trafficking legislations in different national contexts have shown (Agustín, 2007; Chacón, 2006; Chapkis, 2003; Kempadoo, Sanghera, & Pattanaik, 2005), the tendency toward strengthening law enforcement and border control, as well as fortifying anti-immigrant policies and antiprostitution agendas, serves to enhance the powers of the state and to divert attention from problems of unsafe migration and the larger-scale exploitation of unfree labor.

Media reports such as that of the Fox News I-team are conducive to the maintenance of the status quo, inadvertently ensuring a continuous supply both of so-called victims and, of course, of supposed heroes such as Tom Merriman himself. In spite of the apparently confrontational rhetoric that this Fox I-team report posed to the U.S. government and its people, the report had the reactionary effect not only of legitimizing the current global political and economic order that propels the migration of women into vulnerable situations in the first place but also of fueling the revival of a global trafficking panic at the turn

of the twenty-first century that bolsters the aggrandizement of state powers.

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