

## Global Sex Work, Victim Identities, and Cybersexualities

Spectacular representations of women as passive and naive victims lured or tricked into sex work are prominent in international human rights campaigns, including feminist anti-trafficking campaigns, and in international news media representations of the global sex trade.<sup>1</sup> Western audiences are familiar with this narrative of sex trafficking as one of the most prominent human rights violations; it is a pervasive narrative that situates human rights violations elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> In 2004, Nicholas D. Kristof wrote a series of op-ed pieces for the *New York Times* about his visits to brothels in Poipet, Cambodia, where he posed as a customer to interview two young prostitutes—whose freedom he later purchased by paying off their debt to the brothel owners. Kristof's stated intentions were to "address the brutality that is the lot of so many women in the developing world," an issue that he claims "gets little attention and that most American women's groups have done shamefully little to address."<sup>3</sup> Kristof overlooked feminist organizations that work to counter sex trafficking, and his interaction with these two young women set in motion a paternalistic rescue narrative defined through the very parameters of the global sex trade—the purchase of human beings. Kristof's actions therefore risk constructing advocacy on the same grounds as exploitation. What cultural, political, and economic forces contribute to making particular audiences readily accept such identifications and narratives? For whom, and in what contexts, are such narratives persuasive? To what degree do feminist antitrafficking campaigns promote justice as a politics-of-recognition paradigm through their construction of non-Western women and girls as sympathetic victims in need of rescue? An exploration of these questions reveals the intersection of a Western-inflected human rights internationalism with feminist, securitization, and antimigration agendas.

Feminist antitrafficking campaigns have been framed largely by moral distinctions between those who are considered to be the victims of trafficking and those who choose sex work as a form of survival. This tension in feminist activism between the rights of trafficked victims and of voluntary sex workers highlights the need for a differentiated politics of recognition and an understanding of identification practices as material and rhetorical acts. Feminist antitrafficking campaigns fall on a continuum running from neo-abolitionist campaigns—which use women's testimonies to influence antitrafficking legislation and to resist the movement to legalize prostitution—to campaigns that stress sex workers' agency and implicate discriminatory law enforcement as the major cause of their exploitation (Simmons 1999, 132).<sup>4</sup> Despite ideological differences, all the antitrafficking campaigns, including those that address trafficking as a complex problem involving context-specific issues of migration and labor, rely on women's victimization narratives to structure their rhetorical appeal. To the extent that these campaigns uncritically turn to women's narratives of victimization in making the invisible visible, they ignore the complications of transnational movements and privilege certain rights over others. The right to be protected from violence and exploitation (admittedly a crucial right) is privileged over the right not to live in poverty and the right to control one's sexuality, for instance. The focus on sexual victimization reveals the hegemony in women's human rights discourse of liberal individualism based on one kind of notion of morality and sexuality.

The spectacle of female sexual victimization is a central component of the international women's human rights movement and its focus on violence against women, especially the trafficking of women and girls for sex work. Violence against women became an important topic for transnational social movements in the early 1980s and gained prominence in human rights concerns in 1985, when it became an object of UN activity. In 1983, Charlotte Bunch and Kathleen Barry organized a global feminist workshop in Rotterdam against traffic in women, which situated sexual slavery in a broader debate about women's human rights. Violence against women was also a central part of the platform at the UN Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. But the danger of restricting such varied practices as battering, incest, rape, and female genital mutilation to a single category—violence

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against women—or collapsing trafficking and prostitution is that such representations fail to account for the different ways in which women and activists interpret and resist these practices in different regions of the world (Basu 2000, 78).<sup>5</sup> Despite the achievements of transnational feminist activists in engaging a wide range of concerns that affect the lives of women and children, including poverty and the lack of education and health care, spectacular representations of sexual violations of women and girls continue to attract international media attention in part because such stories subscribe to Western myths of deserving victims and to the shaming tactics of human rights organizations. Similarly, transnational feminist activism tends to be publicly recognized when the issue is sexual victimization (82). Ratna Kapur uses methodological terms to frame the challenge of understanding the contrary functions of victimization rhetoric in human rights campaigns: "What is missing from the VAW [violence against women] position, and the writings of scholars . . . who endorse it, is an analysis of how the mechanisms of discursive engagement produce the victim subject and the accounts of violence to which she may be subjected" (2005, 108).

In analyzing the deployment of victimization rhetoric in antitrafficking campaigns, I am not calling for the silencing or repression of narratives of violation; the stories of trafficked and enslaved persons need to be told and heard in a range of contexts. The Freedom Network, a national coalition of antitrafficking organizations and advocates in the United States, notes that to empower trafficked and enslaved persons to gain full access to justice and victim-centered services, organizations must ensure that these persons are perceived, in part, as victims. U.S. legislation on human trafficking requires individuals to prove they were victims of a severe form of human trafficking in order to receive legal benefits and social services.<sup>6</sup> But human rights activists and feminist scholars need to become more attuned to the ways in which strategic and at times uncritical mobilizations of victimization narratives, both verbal and visual, may revictimize the subjects represented and support repressive cultural and political agendas. My goal therefore is to draw attention to women's accounts of violation within the context of feminist antitrafficking video campaigns, paying particular attention to contrasting mobilizations of identity claims and to representations of sex work and the global sex trade that challenge the pathology of

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recognition—namely, the idea that the oppressed desire recognition by the oppressor—by highlighting multiple, shifting identities. Additionally, we must account for the geopolitical structures and technological developments that affect the mobility and marketability of certain identifications and recognition practices associated with female bodies and sexuality. Rhetorical analysis will not resolve the seemingly incommensurate theoretical and ideological positions taken by advocates and scholars, but it can help us to better understand the politics of recognition that structure the discourse about the global sex trade and antitrafficking campaigns and policies.

### Identifications, Recognitions, and Misrecognitions

At the very same time that identification sets into motion the complicated dynamic of recognition and misrecognition that brings a sense of identity into being, it also immediately calls that identity into question.

—Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers*

The concept of identification occupies a central position in psychoanalytic theory, feminist film theory, and rhetorical theory.<sup>7</sup> Diana Fuss argues: “Identification is a process that keeps identity at a distance, that prevents identity from ever approximating the status of an ontological given, even as it makes possible the formation of an illusion of identity as immediate, secure, and totalizable. . . . Identification inhabits, organizes, and instantiates identity” (1995, 2). Fuss’s psychoanalytic view of identification as “the detour through the other that defines a self” (*ibid.*) echoes Hegel’s dialectical formation of self-recognition, which links subjectivity to the incorporation of the other. Feminist film theory is invested in the politics of recognition in its focus on how cinema manipulates spectatorial identifications. In *Desire to Desire*, Mary Ann Doane claims: “The female spectator overidentifies with her image on the screen, binding identification to desire to the point where identification operates for women as ‘the desire to desire’—the desire to take on and to inhabit the desire of the other” (quoted in *ibid.*, 7). Kaja Silverman insists that critics account for the “ibidinal politics” of identification, the interaction of subjectivity and ideology, and the potential of cinematic identifications to counter oppressive ideologies (1996, 7). In her

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seminal work, *The Threshold of the Visible World*, she calls for viewing practices that resist incorporative identifications that result in self-affirmation and praises representations that “invest the other with the ability to return the look” (1996, 95). Despite the differences among these theorists, one area of contention that cuts across their work concerns the “ethical-political significance of identification” (Fuss 1995, 8).

Critical of the neo-Aristotelian emphasis on identification as a form of persuasion, Krista Ratcliffe argues that seminal scholars such as Kenneth Burke do not sufficiently account for how cultural differences and disidentifications might function as a place for positive rhetorical exchanges and collective-political action (2005, 58). Kenneth Burke argues that difference is foundational to identification: “In being identified with B, A is ‘substantially one’ with a person other than himself. Yet at the same time he remains unique, an individual locus of motives. . . . [T]o begin with ‘identification’ is . . . to confront the implications of division” (1950, 21–22). Ratcliffe insists that in order to generate productive cross-cultural exchanges, we need to recognize the partiality of our visions and become conscious of our mistaken identifications (2005, 73). Burke may not have accounted for productive exchanges based on differences, but he was sensitive to the coercive functions of identifications based on the creation of a common enemy or scapegoat. He was well aware of the politics of recognition and nonrecognition; he knew that the range of possible identifications was limited by context, and by the subject’s position in the identity hierarchy. Burke describes how in Nazi Germany faulty identifications (stereotypes) were a means of dehumanizing the other and incorporating the dominant public into the state (1950). The problem with Burke’s theory of rhetorical identification is not that it ignores differences, but that it operates in an economy of recognition that repeats the subject-object hierarchy. In the context of this chapter, I foreground the political role of identification in the development of antitrafficking policies and campaigns and examine how the identifications and the politics of recognition that those policies and campaigns set in motion challenge or reinforce social and political hierarchies. I argue that the problem of human trafficking might be better addressed if activists, policymakers, and scholars were to turn away from identity categories of victim and

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agent and to consider instead the mobilization of identity claims in action-defined contexts. Such a shift would open up important new ground for thinking through the coalitions and clashes among advocates.

#### Feminist Antitrafficking Campaigns

Recent feminist antitrafficking campaigns' emphasis on victimization narratives can be understood, in part, as a consequence of the primacy of violence against women as an organizing device in the international women's human rights movement. When that violence became a prominent focus of the movement in the early 1980s, it helped to counteract historical divisions between Western feminists, who emphasized discrimination against women, and feminists in the developing world, who focused on development and social justice and their effects on both men and women. The rhetorical appeal of the transnational identity of women as victims of oppression is persuasive. Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink suggest that the issue of "bodily harm resonate[s] with the ideological traditions of Western liberal countries like the U.S. and Western Europe [and] with basic ideas of human dignity common to most cultures. . . . Issues of bodily harm also lend themselves to dramatic portrayal and personal testimony that are such an important part of network tactics" (1998, 205).

In the course of creating sympathetic visibility<sup>8</sup> for women and girls coerced and trafficked into the sex trade, antitrafficking campaigns often isolate women and children as objects to be seen and then rescued. Women and girls in the sex industry not only become instruments of pathos but also evidence—proof—of the need for antitrafficking agencies and policies. Neoliberalist antitrafficking campaigns, such as that of the Coalition against Trafficking in Women (CATW), mobilize women's testimonies of victimization as a means of influencing antitrafficking legislation to resist the movement to legalize prostitution as a form of work, and of making the harm of prostitution visible. In CATW's campaign materials, experiential narratives appeal to a moral understanding of human rights premised on the coherence of "women" as a universal category. Despite recognition of women's consent to sex work, CATW claims that prostitution "reduces all women to sex" and therefore that all prostitution is exploitative (<http://www.catw-international.org>). CATW employs a broad definition of prostitution, which

includes casual sex, work in a brothel or escort agency, military prostitution, sex tourism, the selling of mail-order brides, and trafficking in women.<sup>9</sup>

In its representation of sex workers as victims, CATW's campaign video *So Deep a Violence: Prostitution, Trafficking, and the Global Sex Industry* (2000) highlights the global and local contexts and forces (such as poverty and sexism) that drive women into sex work and the material forces that constrain women's choices. But the video does not expand upon the contextual forces in its portrayal and identification of women as victims. In other words, an ethos of individual victimization takes precedence over a contextual understanding. Close-ups of sad and angry faces, along with the testimonies of women and children who were beaten and confined, frame the video's portrayal of "prostitution as a form of violence against women and . . . a human rights violation." According to the testimonies, these women have "little or no sexual autonomy." Women are seen as radically naive. The video claims, for instance, that they "don't understand that the mail-order bride marketers are promoting women of their country as subordinate domestic and sexual servants." The testimonies of women provide evidence that they were duped and trapped into prostitution. As one woman, a former sex worker, puts it: "I felt trapped, like I had no other choice." She continues: "We have no resources or money to create our own business . . . [prostitution] is a survival strategy. . . . I just wanted to live a normal life." This woman's narrative alludes to contextual constraints, including the lack of economic opportunity, but the larger abolitionist argument places little or no responsibility on those contextual constraints.

*So Deep a Violence* also highlights the role of men in the proliferation of prostitution and as victims of its ideology. An unnamed "expert" and CATW activist notes that prostitution "teaches men and boys that women are simply things, commodities to be used for sex." Another unnamed CATW activist says: "Economic analysis is not enough because it does not address the men, the so-called customers, or the male-dominated values that assume that prostitution is inevitable, a male's rights or a male's needs." Patriarchy is the contextual frame applied here. The commonplace that sex workers or consumers of commercial sex are passive victims of patriarchy assumes a static notion of gender identity attached to victimization—an injury or wound—and ignores the myriad forces and range of identity markers (race,

ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so on) that shape human agency and subjectivity.<sup>10</sup> This configuration also produces a static notion of context that does not account for how the economy structures sexual desire and the demand for commercial sex work (A. Wilson 2004).

According to Jo Doezema, an activist and researcher with the Network of Sex Work Projects and a former sex worker, images of “trafficking victims” as naive, innocent young women lured by traffickers bear little resemblance to the realities of the majority of women who migrate for work in the sex industry. Yet, as she notes, “it is easier to gain support for victims of evil traffickers than for challenging structures that violate sex workers’ human rights. . . . The picture of the ‘duped innocent’ is a pervasive and tenacious cultural myth” (1998, 42–43).<sup>11</sup> Moreover, a segment of the antitrafficking lobby depicts “victims of trafficking” as unemancipated, poor, third world women “kidnapped or lured from [their] village[s] with promises of a lucrative, respectable job overseas” (1999, 165). Choice is an option, Doezema claims, that in some antitrafficking campaigns is given only to Western prostitutes (166).<sup>12</sup> At work here is an international, hierarchal politics of status recognition. Many migrant sex workers, she notes, are aware that they will work as prostitutes; what they are lied to about are the slavery-like conditions under which they must work (2000, 24).

Stereotypes of prostitutes as social deviants or as helpless victims maintain their rhetorical appeal because they keep the audience’s focus on the other and thereby deflect attention from the national and international policies, economic and sociopolitical forces, and cultural traditions that contribute to the material conditions that drive many women to work in the sex industry. The identification of women solely as victims also serves a crime-control agenda. The persuasiveness of neo-abolitionist campaigns in the current climate, for instance, is achieved through their *kairotic*—that is, timely and opportunistic—association with U.S. national narratives of crisis, vulnerability, and security. The anxiety and panic over the violation of moral and geographic boundaries that characterize neo-abolitionist antitrafficking campaigns might be considered, as Doezema suggests, a modern version of old cultural myths about “white slavery.”

Campaigns against white slavery in Europe and the United States in the

late nineteenth century attempted to regulate female sexuality under the pretext of protecting women. Then, as now, such claims reflect uncertainties over national identity and fears of women’s increased desire for autonomy (Doezema 2000, 23–24).<sup>13</sup> Dominated by repressive moralists, these campaigns forged alliances with religious and social-purity organizations and feminist organizations that sought to abolish prostitution (28). Opportunistic alliances continue to exist today between neo-abolitionist feminists and right-wing groups. Although a range of forces paved the way for the passage of the U.S. Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000 (TVPA), including the efforts of Senator Paul Wellstone, right-wing and feminist groups coalesced around the passage to advance their own political agendas. As Anna-Louise Crago notes: “A successful joint campaign was mounted to ensure that the TVPA would not only condemn forced labor and forced prostitution but condemn sex work as a whole—forced or not” (2003).<sup>14</sup> For instance, on 15 January 2003, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) notified organizations around the world that no funds would go to antitrafficking projects that advocate “prostitution as an employment choice or advocate or support the legalization of prostitution” (quoted in *ibid.*).<sup>15</sup> The U.S. government is not alone in its antiprostitution abolitionist agenda but is joined by feminist groups and right-wing Christian groups. As Laura Lederer, the former senior advisor on Trafficking in Persons for the Office for Democracy and Global Affairs of the U.S. Department of State, puts it, faith-based groups have brought “a fresh perspective and a biblical mandate to the women’s movement. Women’s groups don’t understand that the partnership on this issue has strengthened them, because they would not be getting attention internationally otherwise” (quoted in *ibid.*). Likewise, Donna Hughes, the education and research coordinator at CATW (1994–1996), in her response to the new USAID policy, states: “The challenge now is to implement these landmark [antiprostitution] policies in order to free women and children from enslavement” (quoted in *ibid.*).

Such couplings, however, can have serious consequences. For example, Josephine Ho from Zi Teng, a sex workers’ rights group in Hong Kong, notes how domestic policies designed for their national appeal can be imposed on other nations:

First-world feminists and women's NGOs . . . have now joined with UN workers and other international organizations in characterizing Asian sex work as nothing but the trafficking in women and thus is to be outlawed and banned completely . . . the immense power of Western aid, coupled with the third-world states' desire for modernization . . . [has led to interpretations of] all forms of women's migration toward economic betterment and sex work as mere trafficking. (quoted in *ibid.*)

One possible outcome of the new USAID policy—beyond the reproduction of paternalistic rescue and rehabilitation narratives, as Crago rightly notes—is the prospect that USAID will give financial support only to organizations with antimigration agendas (Crago 2003). To collapse the terms *trafficking* and *prostitution* is also to downplay the role of migration in understanding the increase in human trafficking, as well as to eclipse the men, women, and children trafficked for other labor than sex work. In addition to the trafficking of women and young girls for sex work, men, women, and children are trafficked for sweatshop labor, domestic labor, marriage, and, in the case of children, for illegal adoptions.

Many antitrafficking campaigns that advocate the decriminalization of prostitution find the voluntary-forced distinction problematic because it assumes that voluntary prostitutes don't have rights: only forced prostitutes (trafficked women) have rights that have been violated. In their 1997 report *Trafficking in Women, Forced Labour and Slavery-Like Practices in Marriage, Domestic Labour, and Prostitution*, Marjan Wijers and Lin Lap-chew (1997) argue that the forced-free distinction and its mobilization negates sex workers' rights to self-determination and oversimplifies the complexity of women's agency as both victims and agents.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, the Global Alliance against Traffic in Women (GAATW) campaign importantly argues for the application of human rights principles in order to address trafficking as a complex problem that involves context-specific issues of migration and labor. GAATW aims to combat the restrictive trends of crime-control campaigns and neo-abolitionist agendas, which the organization argues infringe on the rights and protection of trafficked persons. GAATW's position is that trafficking as a concept is insufficient because it does not account for the link between trafficking and migration.<sup>17</sup> *Bought and Sold: An In-*

*vestigative Documentary about the International Trade in Women* is directed by Gillian Caldwell (a lawyer and filmmaker born and based in the United States, and a former executive director of Witness)<sup>18</sup> and Steven Galster (a U.S.-born animal-rights activist and director of WildAid's operations in Thailand). The video represents a more mediated view and integrated approach to the politics of recognition than *So Deep a Violence* in its focus on the experiences of migrant women, its attention to economic and social circumstances that enable and support the global sex trade, and its embrace of GAATW's definition of trafficking (Caldwell and Galster 1997). Caldwell and Galster made *Bought and Sold* while they worked with the Global Survival Network (a group whose investigative work focuses on exposing environmental and human rights abuses). The video is based on a two-year secret investigation of the trafficking of women from the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union. The video argues that the transition from communism to capitalism throughout Russia and Eastern Europe and decline of the economic status of women have both contributed to the increase in human trafficking. Sex workers go into sex work not because they are just naive but also because the transition to capitalism in the Eastern bloc has led to women's economic decline: "Poverty like this leads women throughout the world to migrate for work. But they face limited opportunities and substantial risks." *Bought and Sold* focuses specifically on the representational strategies of recruiters who position women in competition with each other: "White women from the former Eastern bloc are regarded as the hottest new commodity in the sex trade and are being marketed as alternatives to Asian and Latin American women"—they are "from a modern, yet meager society."

*Bought and Sold* also has a strong thread of victimization narratives, which amplifies its call for both the recognition and the protection of trafficked women: these women are all "lured" with promises of a better life and recruited by friends, and some women are portrayed as seduced by the profession of sex work. However, the video negotiates the agent-victim and economic-cultural binaries carefully, deploying victim narratives in ways that portray the complexities of trafficking and the issue of transnationality. In other words, the video presents the kairos of identification in relation to the geopolitical conditions and contexts that shape women's actions. These

*Bought & Sold*

conditions include growing unemployment and declining economies in their home countries, which drive many women to seek work abroad; the recruitment of women through front companies that present a legal façade as travel, modeling, and marriage agencies; and debt-bondage, or contracts between trafficking networks and women. Travel debts can range from \$1,000 to over \$10,000, and women also incur debts for food and housing, as well as financial penalties for misbehavior. Finally, *Bought and Sold* illustrates the roles of international networks of organized crime and government complicity—often related to traffickers' bribes of national security units and local law enforcement. *Bought and Sold* exposes how the systems meant to protect individuals facilitate their exploitation. The Global Survival Network emphasizes training law enforcement officials not to treat trafficked persons as criminals, but as victims of human rights abuses.

*Bought and Sold* does not fall into the trap of representing women as only duped victims, even though some of the women's stories fit that mold. For instance, the video's opening scene depicts the agency of a woman (Lowena) in dealing with a man who is trying to lure her into sex work and who is consciously choosing a life in sex work abroad. The voice-over says: "Lowena is ready to go. She is twenty-two. She is willing to work as an escort abroad. She hopes it is her ticket to a life of adventure and glamour. This film is made for people like her." Moreover, in its call to action at the end (a section titled "What Can Be Done?"), the video calls for a variety of strategies by activists, governments, and media groups. Besides insisting that trafficking be recognized as a human rights violation, *Bought and Sold* demands: "Governments must stop treating sex workers as illegal migrants." Instead, governments should provide stays of deportation as well as services for sex workers, including health care, education and training, and witness protection. In other words, the video represents advocacy as a necessary transnational collaboration among many sectors.

*Bought and Sold* has been distributed to more than five hundred NGOs in countries around the world and to U.S. embassies. The Global Survival Network identifies multiple audiences for the video, including at-risk women—namely, those from countries undergoing socioeconomic transition; NGOs; governmental and intergovernmental organizations; university students; the general public; and the media.<sup>19</sup> One of the major pedagogical goals

of the film is to foster an understanding of trafficking as a human rights abuse, in order to promote the development of policies that offer protections and compensation to victims and governmental and nongovernmental programs that address the socioeconomic causes of the problem and to counter media coverage that sensationalizes or dehumanizes women whose human rights are being abused). As my analysis of the videos of feminist antitrafficking campaigns suggests, the timeliness of certain identifications and the recognitions and misrecognitions they activate might be understood as adaptive, strategic, or motivated by and meaningful only in certain circumstances.<sup>20</sup>

#### A Differentiated Politics of Recognition?

The manifesto of the Mahila Samanwaya Committee (1998) exemplifies the strategic mobilization of identification practices. The manifesto also illustrates some of the social and political processes by which certain identities are recognized or resisted, and by which certain individuals or groups are classified as human and therefore deserving of human rights. The stated aim of the committee, comprised of sex workers from Calcutta and Howrah, is to attain "social dignity, justice and security for the sex workers and their children" (Pal et al. 1998, 202):

We are recognized for the business we profess—a trade that has continued since time immemorial. . . . Many tricks are manipulated to conceal the wicked propensities of men. These hapless women are marked as fallen. . . . When we are not even accepted as humans, can we expect to be honored as citizens of this country? . . . Whether we like it or not, we have been identified and continue to be identified by the same name . . . our profession is our life and death as also our caste and creed. We cannot aspire to differentiate. (200–201)

Here the committee highlights how sex workers are configured as the "fallen ones" (200), drawing attention to status recognitions and the difficulty for sex workers in shedding this label due to social stigma. The committee both critiques the essentialist politics of recognition imposed on its members by dominant groups and imagines the possibility of a more differentiated politics of identity. However, the material conditions of isolation—

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with sex workers in cubbyholes in the red-light district—fractures the rhetorical collectivity and potential solidarity among them: “As the sun sets everyday, we are out on the streets, standing in close proximity to each other, soliciting clients. We are close, but why are we not attempting to remove the barrier amongst ourselves?” (202). The manifesto employs a dual rhetorical address: the committee speaks directly to fellow sex workers and at the same time to readers positioned as listeners or eavesdroppers. It continues: “For long we have lived in terror, it is time we overcame this fear and fought for our rights. . . . We do not ask for much, except to be accepted as human beings” (ibid.). The rhetorical appeal to women as a unified group—rhetorical identification—has been a fundamental strategy of women’s human rights campaigns, which anchor their call to action in the experiences of individual victims. The phrase “we cannot aspire to differentiate” foregrounds the necessity of a universal appeal to a common humanity—in this case, the necessity of claiming a normative gender identification—and, at the same time, highlights identity as embodied rhetorical action, a configuration that frames identification practices and the recognitions and misrecognitions they set in motion as both symbolic and material struggles.

Joshua Price urges us to consider the situational nature of sex workers’ range of identifications and the “logics that govern identification” (2001, 20). He also points out the hypocrisy of the private-public split—another dimension of an essentialist politics of recognition—as it applies to sex workers and their rights. He argues: “The public sphere is not amenable to the context of living sex workers, hence, voicing in that sphere promotes self-betrayal” (16). And he notes: “Publicly their voice has no authority, their testimony is disbelieved, while on the street they are silenced. In private spaces, they serve as johns’ confidantes or as police informers” (8). Price calls for a different kind of listening, which urges the “cultivat[ion] of an ear for the highly contextualized subject positioning of different actors, including discursive positionings that ought to be critiqued” (30) and the recognition of alternative rhetorical spaces that counter the logics of an imagined bourgeois public sphere. The shift here is to listen to the invocations of identity as action rather than as characteristics of the rhetor (32). Cultivating this ear requires us to become more attuned to the strategic mobilization or transformation of normative identity narratives, cultural

myths, and rhetorical commonplaces by advocates on all sides of the debate. The concept of identity as action also suggests that we revisit the identity-based politics of recognition and the cosmopolitan rhetoric that have come to characterize Western feminist scholarship and human rights activism.

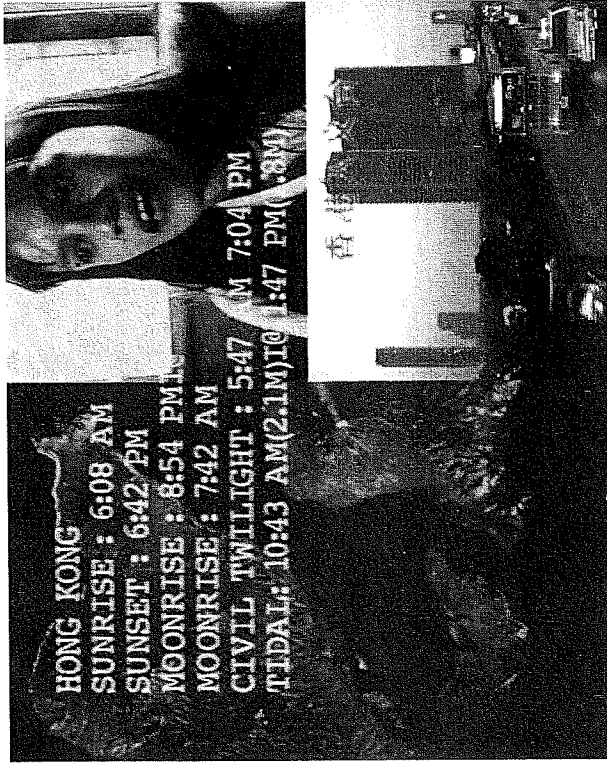
### Cybersexualities and Cosmopolitan Attachments

Ursula Biemann’s experimental videos *Remote Sensing* (2001b) and *Writing Desire* (2001c) trace the routes and displacements of female bodies in the global sex and mail-order industries and provide an opportunity to explore further how transnational movements and migrations trouble the cultural politics of recognition that inform liberal feminist antitrafficking campaigns and Western-centric cosmopolitanisms. Biemann is a white Western experimental videographer, activist, and scholar, born and based in Zurich. Her videos are distributed by Women Make Movies, in New York City—which targets an educational market, selling chiefly to universities. But her videos have also been shown at documentary festivals and in art exhibitions, and NGOs have used them in lobbying and to promote debates. *Writing Desire* was made for an art exhibition in New York City on the body image in bio- and cybertechnology, but it has been frequently shown in art exhibitions on globalization processes. Biemann says that she is interested in revealing the constructedness of different positions articulated by NGOs rather than in reducing issues to messages that can be used to bring about change on a legislative level.<sup>21</sup>

Throughout *Remote Sensing*, the screen is divided into parts that show multiple images and offer different viewing positions, including a close-up video shot of a space shuttle taking off, a distant view of a weather satellite, and what seems to be an aerial view from a fighter jet. The latter situates the viewer in the pilot’s seat, gazing through a targeting device. The divided screen, like the title *Remote Sensing*, refers to the abstraction of geography and gender by satellite technology as well as the contradictions produced by and within transnational publics generated through the production, circulation, and reception of representations of global sex work (see fig. 8).

*Remote Sensing* points out how global capital and technologies sexualize and facilitate women’s movement into the sex industry and at the same time police geographical boundaries (see fig. 9).<sup>22</sup> The film insists that stricter

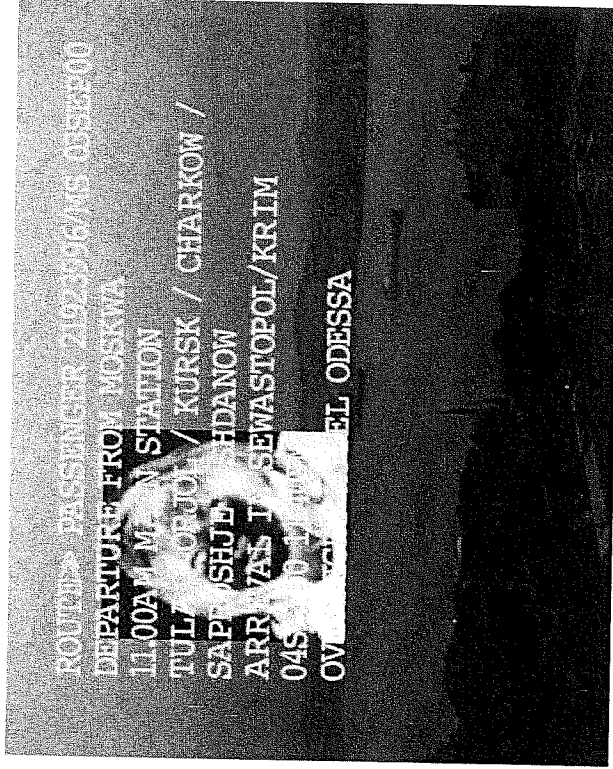




8. Commuting between a Manila slum and the Hong Kong Bunny Club. Still from *Remote Sensing*. By permission of Ursula Biemann.

migration policies and control of borders will not necessarily reduce the trafficking of women. Rather, the result might be an increase in prostitution and trafficking worldwide, because states' policies forbid women to migrate for work in other professions.

*Remote Sensing* reports: "Five hundred thousand women migrate into the European sex industry every year. Two-thirds come from postsocialist countries." As the narrator notes, migration laws reveal "the place of sex in . . . national space. These laws protect the flourishing sexual life of male citizens as privileged, and a source of power."<sup>23</sup> Focusing on the border between the former East Germany and the Czech Republic, "where two nations come together, one united, one dissolved," the camera moves down a long road—the famous highway between the two countries—sparsely populated by cars. It is winter, and snow covers everything (see fig. 10). The voice-over says: "Women standing on the roadside come from as far

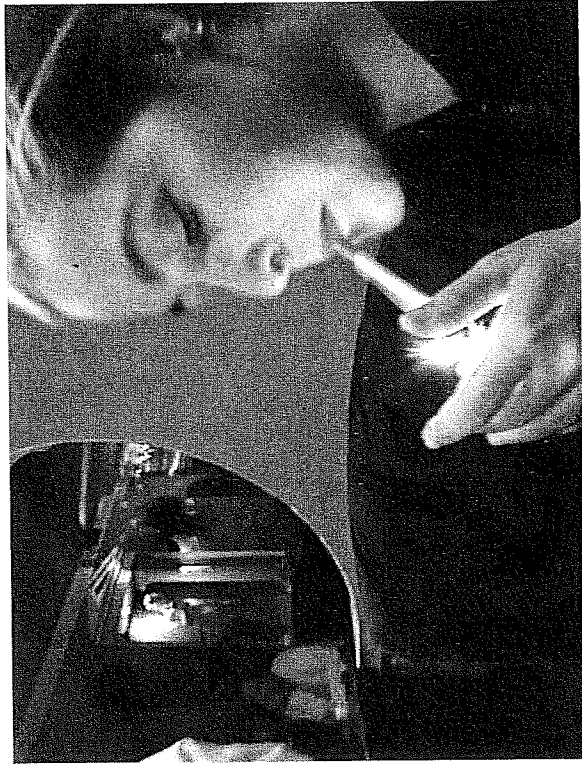


9. Travel schedule from Moscow to Tel Aviv, through the Bosphorus. Still from *Remote Sensing*. By permission of Ursula Biemann.

away as Bulgaria, Ukraine, and elsewhere. Glass house brothels, where girls dance naked under disco lights, or simply stand out in the cold, dark forest" to await their German tourist consumers. The video also challenges the victim-agent binary through its portrayal of the identity of sex workers at the border between the two countries: "Here, everything is transitory, no sentimentality, no clinging to the past. The prostitutes are from distant places, many smuggled in, captured, and illegal. They all know that where they are, and what they are, is only temporary. The consumers, the German tourists just passing through—they too are aware that their time here is only temporary. Everything resonates with impending change." Hence, this segment suggests that both feminine and masculine identity is constructed, and that male desire is also a result of social conditioning.

Neither of Biemann's videos resolves the victim-agent binary, but both do expose the oppositional logics, cultural values, and public policies that

*Identify*



10. In a brothel on the highway from the Czech Republic to Germany. Still from *Remote Sensing*. By permission of Ursula Biemann.

create and sustain such categories. Bandana Pattanaik, one of the sex workers in *Remote Sensing*, says:

Seeing them as victims creates a lot of sympathy and therefore people find it easier to accept. If I'll say that I have been forced into prostitution, people say, oh poor thing, like let's help her, she is in a really bad situation. But if somebody says I chose to become a prostitute that's very difficult to accept or to understand. Why would you choose to be a prostitute? So many times it's framed in this either-or debate. Either you are a victim or you are an agent. Either you have chosen to be a sex worker or you have been forced into prostitution. And I think there are such large gray areas in between.

Both *Remote Sensing* and *Writing Desire* struggle against the logic of positions and reveal just how large the obstacles are to systematic change and processes of resignification, even within transnational feminist advocacy. Despite Biemann's claim that she is not primarily interested in the

evidentiary function of representation, or in reinforcing the victim-agent binary, both films include narratives of women lured and tricked into sex work. For instance, *Remote Sensing* focuses on a case involving eight Filipinas who were recruited by a German man and his Filipina wife in Manila. One of the women says: "One morning the recruiter approached me personally and promised me \$350 a month if I agreed to work in a restaurant in Germany. We didn't have to pay any placement fees . . . all the fees would be gradually deducted from our salary. At the moment of departure, we noticed that on the ticket it said Nigeria instead of Germany as we believed."

Yet this "lured and tricked" narrative is complicated by several factors, including the narrative of Naomi, whose story ends in Cyprus, where prostitution is legal, and who used the money she earned through prostitution to return home. Like several of the other women presented in the video, Naomi was recruited in Manila and sold into Nigeria. She was then sold into Lome, Togo, before she fled to Cyprus. When Biemann asks Naomi if she has ever had a boyfriend, Naomi responds that she has never had sex without getting paid for it. "No boyfriend . . . someone you loved?" Biemann asks again. Naomi clarifies: "I never say to a customer . . . I love you." But she is perplexed by the question: "No boyfriend. But customer, yes. But free, no. Why?" Naomi inhabits a radically different framework than that inherent in Biemann's question. The politics of this exchange resides in the videographer's insertion of the cultural and rhetorical commonplace of the romance narrative.

The audio representation in *Remote Sensing* provides yet another framing device for the women's experiences. In the case of Filipinas in Nigeria, Biemann includes a strong mediating device, an English voice-over—which she seldom uses in her work. She has said that she typically aims to let her subjects, who include former sex workers and women employed by NGOs, speak and analyze the international situation, rather than theorizing about their experiences in a voice-over.<sup>24</sup> This voice-over might be read as an ethical breach by the Western white videographer in representing sex workers in the global south (a breach that reproduces the social dominance of the global north). But we might also view this editorial decision as evidence of the representational challenges of transnational feminist advocacy and of the lure of a feminist cosmopolitan analytic.

de Henry  
narrative  
of victimhood

As its deployment in postcolonial theory, feminist theory, and cultural anthropology suggests, the term *cosmopolitan* reveals contradictory uses and meanings (R. Wilson 1998, 352). On the one hand, the term has been used negatively to signify liberal self-invention, tourism, and global travel, and to refer to carnivalesque cosmopolitanism (Buell 1994). Cosmopolitans are associated with the movement of capital, with “knowing no boundaries” (Robbins 1998b, 249; also see C. Kaplan 2001). On the other hand, the term has been used positively to categorize a new class of transnational cosmopolitans (Hannerz 1990), and to refer to migration, diasporic movements, and refugees, as in James Clifford’s notion of the “discrepant cosmopolitan” (1992, 108). The philosophical concept of cosmopolitanism can be traced to ancient Greek and Roman thought. The Cynic philosopher Diogenes (404–323 BC) coined the term “citizen of the world.” Martha Nussbaum observes: “Diogenes refused to be defined by local origins and group memberships” (1998, 6). The Stoic philosophers over the next few centuries followed his lead in arguing that we each dwell in both local communities and the community of human aspiration (7). Broadly speaking, cosmopolitanism upholds “the view that we are citizens of the world, members of a common humanity, and that we should pay no more regard to the claims of our compatriots than to those of any other human beings regardless of where they happen to reside” (D. Miller 1995, 3).

Invocations of cosmopolitanism in human rights education and politics tend to invoke modernist philosophical conceptions of the cosmopolitan, especially Kant’s project for perpetual peace, in which he called for international commerce as a form of sociability and a way to activate, as Pheng Cheah puts it, the “humanizing processes of self-cultivation” (2006, 81). Such invocations emphasize a universal humanism that transcends particularism (19). For instance, Nussbaum calls for a cosmopolitan approach to civic education based on the view that we are all citizens of the world and members of a common humanity. For her, literature and the arts play a “vital role [in] cultivating powers of imagination that are essential to citizenship” (1998, 85). But cosmopolitanism, as I have argued elsewhere (Hesford 2010), can function as an alibi for neoliberalism and national interests in a global guise.<sup>25</sup> To address the risks of cosmopolitanism for human rights politics, feminist scholars and advocates need to engage its all-consuming vision

and acknowledge the differential conditions of mobility and the shifting dominance relations among men, women, and children in diverse locations. Moreover, we need to acknowledge that human rights law and culture work together to sustain normative frameworks of inclusion and exclusion, and that cultural predilections and entrenched conceptions of identity and difference shape an individual’s imaginative capacity to identify with others (see chapter 1).

Biemann generates a critical ambivalence through her critique of the victim-agent binary and her simultaneous inclusion of the testimonies of women victimized by the sex industry, which is indicative of her navigation of cosmopolitan and transnational feminist analytics. This ambivalence illuminates the representational challenges posed by the rhetorical conventions of a human rights internationalism based on UN discourses and treaties for transnational feminist scholars and advocates, especially the challenge of how to document victimization. For instance, *Remote Sensing* exposes the risks of documentary techniques in revealing multiple layers of surveillance: “Locked up in tiny rooms, confined in semi-darkness, guarded closely, she lives in the ghettos and the bars of the underworld, the semi-world, living a half-life. Guarded step by step, number by number, trick by trick.” The camera travels down long, dark corridors of brothels at night, dimly lit by streetlights and the lights from clubs. The corridors echo the “semi-darkness” and the “underworld” quality of the narrator’s description of sex workers’ lives. The halls are dirty and crowded, choked with prostitutes and potential customers. Because of the danger of filming in this milieu and the fact that the women didn’t want to be filmed,<sup>26</sup> the camera does not focus on any individuals. Instead it lingers on women’s eroticized body parts—breasts, lips—fragmenting the bodies it seeks to represent. Here the video plays on the cultural expectations that women will be objectified. But we might ask: Are such identifications necessary as forms of persuasion in transnational feminist advocacy? This choice, according to Biemann, is a result of difficult recording circumstances, but it also indicates the embrace and limitations of certain representational strategies and journalistic conventions. These images of captivity progressively dissolve, as later parts of the film speak to more self-motivated decisions to enter the sex trade.

*Writing Desire* suggests that critical agency resides in the strategic mobilization and juxtaposition of dominant discourses and counterdiscourses, and in this way the video draws attention to the fundamental intercontextuality of rhetorical agency. The first scene shows a beach with palm trees, and we hear upbeat music. Over this touristic image, the following lines appear in succession: "Geography is imbued with the notion of passivity." "Feminized national spaces awaiting rescue." "With the penetration of foreign capital." The opening sequence foregrounds the increasing disembodiment of sexuality, the links between sexual desire and electronic communication technologies, and the production of subjectivities through the compressed space of virtual exchanges. This sequence constructs the viewers as consumers: we hear Internet dial-up sounds, then categories and links appear on the screen, representing a search by the categories of country, age, height, weight, and education. The cursor scrolls down a list of third world countries. The link for the Philippines is then opened, and digital representations (photographs and online videos) of young women appear. Women are ranked and described according to their country of origin; in this way the video highlights locational identifications and cultural stereotypes and myths: Women from the Philippines are described as the "most friendly." Women from Brazil are listed as the "best lovers." Women from Thailand are listed as the "most beautiful," and those from Costa Rica as the "most eager to please."

*Writing Desire* focuses on commercialized gender relations on the Internet—namely, the market for mail-order brides and virgins in the former Soviet Union and the Philippines (one of the poorest countries in Southeast Asia). The video argues that women's bodies, as symbols of global products, are racialized as objects of desire waiting to be either conquered or rescued (see fig. 11). At one point in the film, the screen represents an Internet page with the following links: Distant Communication, World Sex, International Women, Travel, and Browse. Distant Communication is opened, and the following text appears. "Every year thousands of happy relationships between Western men and Eastern women begin by electronic communication."

The video implies that new media and technology create mobile subjectivities, make context irrelevant, and in so doing enable alliances that other-



11. Still from *Writing Desire*. By permission of Ursula Biemann.

wise might never occur. Yet it also portrays the fantasy that individuals can bridge distance through technology without confronting the consequences of those fantasies: "a stream of desire troubled by nothing." A woman lying across a bed says: "What's interesting about it [e-mail desire] is that you create these love stories in which you are the protagonist. . . . What is important is the act of writing. While the real bodies are absent, it's all in the writing. That's why the sexual discourse becomes important. It would be wrong to infer that it replaces the body." Instead, the body is "present in the writing." This sequence highlights the challenge of technology in configuring a locational feminism, in which identity is embodied as technology. Here the body and identity become first and foremost rhetorical, highlighting Biemann's feminist agenda of representation—which, as she puts it, is "to bring the representation of women in poverty in connection with high technology and other concepts [such as mobility] that have a progressive high status in our eyes."<sup>27</sup> Although both films attribute some level of agency to the women represented, we might ask whether the act of bringing "women

in poverty" before "our" eyes reiterates a cosmopolitanism that once again positions poor women as objects of sight for the privileged gaze.

In the case of *Remote Sensing*, "women become agents of transport and transformation for countries who struggle to make themselves a place on the global chart."<sup>28</sup> The video proposes a link between the proliferation of global sex work and sex tourism and the technology of the Internet, which "capitalizes on this vulnerable set of motivations" (Biemann 2001a, 3). *Writing Desire* fractures presumptions about the stability of identity and geographical contexts, yet it also reminds us that these new technologies foster inequitable material relations and oppressive conditions for much of the world's population.

At one point in the film, the rhetorical strategies that women in the global sex industry employ become strikingly clear. On the screen overlaying videos advertising brides from the former Soviet Union, the following text appears: "she is beautiful and feminine / she is loving and traditional / she is humble and devoted / she likes to listen to mellow music / the smile is her rhetorical gesture / she believes in a lasting marriage / and a happy home / she is a copy of the First World's past." The phrase her "smile is her rhetorical gesture" acknowledges the rhetorical dimensions of identification and agency in the context of transnationality. Biemann notes in her commentary on the film: "To present herself as humble and unambitious, [the woman] denies the desirability of the financial and social rewards of marrying a Western man. Morality remains an economic issue but if women want to be seen as moral at all, they better mask their awareness of their relationship to property, mobility, and privilege" (2001a, 3).

In this sense, *Writing Desire* exposes the foundational Western idea, as Caren Kaplan notes in another context, that "travel produces the self, makes the subject through spectatorship and comparison with otherness" (1996, 36). A critical ambivalence characterizes *Writing Desire*, just as it does *Remote Sensing*. However, the critical ambivalence in *Writing Desire* does not emerge so much from the deployment and critique of victimization narratives as from the portrayal of cosmopolitan conceptions of identity. These conceptions are acquired through travel, virtual or otherwise, as represented in the figure of Maris Bustamante. Bustamante is an artist based in Mexico City who finds an American husband through an Internet dat-

ing service. She is a middle-aged, self-identified feminist, widow, mother, university professor, and, as she puts it, "radical of my own will." After an "examination of [the] Mexican environment . . . the 'Cradle of Machismo,'" and after working through "intellectual guilt," she posts her profile on an Internet dating service. She corresponds for six months with a man named John, a lieutenant in the U.S. Marine Corps, whom she later marries and with whom she establishes a new family. Bustamante indicates that the Internet enabled her to suspend judgment and reformulate her expectations: she would not ordinarily have been attracted to a military man. Her narrative is emblematic of the historical trajectory of future promise (construed in familial, heterosexual terms), a narrative that recasts the white, middle-class feminist subject at the center and as normative. She and the lieutenant are pictured in a classic family portrait. The centerpiece of the black-and-white photograph is the father, seated front and center, surrounded by his wife and three teenage children. His wife's hands rest on his shoulder. The whole family is smiling.

Bustamante is depicted as a virtual feminist cosmopolitan, whose worldliness is acquired largely via technology. The position of her story, defined by a conventional narrative arc, affords her character a certain status in *Writing Desire*. We might read this narrative as an example of the idiomatic particularity of contemporary geopolitical feminisms, or of the temporal rhetoric of awakening and rebirth common to second-wave feminism. Either way, Bustamante's narrative highlights the venerable power of rhetorical stasis to usurp the transnational feminist project by reclaiming rhetorical commonplaces and hegemonic notions of freedom, movement, and liberation, and securing normative identifications through structures of opportunity, technology, and privilege. The rhetorical weight of Bustamante's narrative in *Writing Desire* offers a cautionary tale to feminist scholars and human rights advocates about the risks of transference (rhetorical, methodological, and cultural) and the prominence of a cultural cosmopolitanism that construes the global citizen subject as a consumer of difference.

Claudia Colimoro, an advocate for prostitutes' rights, attests to such risks in an interview with Amalia Lucia Cabezas, when she notes the lack of financial support for sex worker advocates in the third world and points out that sex workers do not seem to benefit from academic interest: "There are

sociologists, anthropologists and others interested in the different research and education projects. But the sex workers do not benefit. The academics are the ones on the board of directors, not the sexual workers. We need to have a group of academics around. But this does not permit us to advance. They are the ones who go to the congresses, the ones who take the organizations forward. It is a good business for the academics but not for the prostitutes" (1998, 199). I return to the issue of academic appropriation in the following chapter, in my discussion of children as subaltern subjects. Here I want to simply reassert the importance of understanding identity as a field of action because such a view allows us to question the victim-agent binary and to consider the strategic deployment of such contrasts in particular contexts. But if this conceptualization loses all traces of the materiality of identification practices, it risks becoming the methodological equivalent of cultural tourism. Just as we need to look beyond the academic transmission of new conceptions to consider how "social movements appropriate and transform global meanings, and materialize them in local practices" (Thayer 2000, 207–8), we need to understand how identity claims, recognition practices, and localities are produced through the visual and affective economies of the global morality market to which human rights is tethered. The performative contradictions that characterize women's experiences within the global sex trade, as several of the works discussed in this chapter suggest, compel us to read the geopolitics of recognition rhetorically, in terms of the timeliness of certain identifications and their deployment, and to account for the colonial and imperial histories of global sex work and the technologies that continue to position sexual subalterns as objects of sight and surveillance.

## Spectacular Childhoods: Sentimentality and the Politics of (In)visibility

The potentially subversive element of childhood agency is kept at bay by the sentimental and idealized vision that dominates our thinking, at least as far as human rights instruments and interventions are concerned.

—Jacqueline Bhabha, "The Child"



The development of transnational human rights networks and international human rights treaties and conventions, including the UN's 1990 Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), has made children's human rights more visible. But what is the nature of this visibility? To whom are the myriad images of children under duress addressed? What moral obligations do they solicit? How can we look at images of children whose basic human rights are not being met and then look away? What are the ethical and political stakes in circulating images of endangered children in our media-saturated global morality market? To what degree has the spectacle of the sexualized girl-child created a new neoliberal subject in the transnational human rights imaginary, extending the long-standing sentimental tradition in the feminization of childhood?

The media scholar Susan Moeller argues that within the last few decades, children have replaced women "as the public emblems of goodness and purity"; children have become "the moral referent" and "motives for action" (2002, 38). In her study of the rhetorical functions of children in international news, Moeller demonstrates how international media deploy images of endangered children to dramatize the righteousness of a cause, to symbolize a nation's identity and future (39), and to "invoke an audience's sympathy on a plane that appears apolitical or suprapolitical—'purely moral'" (48). Similarly, Karen Sánchez-Eppel illustrates how children have