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Beyond Precarity: Ideologies of Labor in Anti-Trafficking Crime Fiction

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Writing in 1960, the patron saint of neoliberal economics, Friedrich Hayek warned that “the whole basis of our free society is gravely threatened by the powers arrogated by the unions.”¹ Describing unions as coercive because they “make the market system ineffective” and exert a “constant upward pressure on the level of money wages,” Hayek argues that projects purporting to advance the interests of the working classes actually divide, control, and damage them (237). This assertion reinforces Hayek’s earlier and broader claim that “the Road to Freedom was in fact the High Road to Servitude.”² Condemning collective economic action as servitude or serfdom, Hayek identified genuine freedom with individuals who align their projects with market concerns with minimal mediation by the state or other bodies. This idealized portrait of free labor as radical economic individualism lies at the heart of neoliberal ideology.

Inspired by Hayek, programmatic neoliberals have assaulted social security — from unemployment insurance and food and housing supplements to on-the-job protections, union rights, and even full-time employment. “Deregulation, privatization, and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision” become policy priorities.³ Critics of neoliberal projects often describe these efforts as the acceleration of precarity. They point out that neoliberal precarity concentrates capital’s control over labor power while simultaneously allowing capitalists to disavow responsibility for the laborer. To clarify this effect, Guy Standing names the collective subject of neoliberal labor practices the precariat.⁴

Accounts of precarious labor have often pointed to the rise of short-term contracts as well as the loss of benefits, job security, pension, and the stability of a career. Temporary office workers, Uber drivers, and Airbnb hosts emblemize this increasingly prevalent form of precarity. Once these concerns became well established, though, some labor analysts began to point out the geographical and industrial limitations to “gig work” as a figure for precarity. In his introduction to *Industrial Labor on the Margins of Capitalism*, for instance, Jonathan Parry asserts that the shift from contractual to casual labor is less significant than it might seem, because “the ‘standard employment contract’ was only ever of major significance in the most affluent Western countries and possibly Japan.”⁵ From a global perspective, Parry and his contributors argue, labor precarity has been a much more long-standing and varied form than US-centered discussions have suggested.

Parry’s broader perspective suggests a need to tell the story of precarity in a more rigorous manner. We can begin by noting that precarity does not only characterize the excessive and

scandalous freedom of gig work, but also forms of labor that appear to be gig work's opposite, such as forced labor. We can then learn to see slavery in the form of human trafficking as being at least as characteristic of neoliberal regimes as the provisional forms of employment more commonly associated with precarity. In Hayek's terms, we can recognize the literal servitude of trafficked persons as a by-product of neoliberal freedom.

Several forces have converged to intensify modern slavery. Geopolitical changes, such as the implosion of the Soviet bloc and the rise of China, are "push" factors, while deregulated labor markets and digital communications in advanced capitalist economies have increased the "pull" and eased the transmission of trafficked bodies, as well as images of those bodies. A grey-market remittance economy also heightens the appeal of trafficking by simplifying the international transfer of payment.

State shrinkage is, in short, only part of the trafficking puzzle. Bureaucratic surveillance, data collection, and policing also arguably call into being the neoliberal object they observe. Anti-trafficking organizations range from official state bodies to non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Human Rights Watch, the International Labor Organization, and the Polaris Project. These groups collect data to the extent this is possible for an illicit activity and publish documents such as the US State Department's annual Trafficking in Persons report, a document evaluating every nation on its adoption of anti-trafficking legislation and efforts on behalf of victims. Similar bureaucratic measures enable surveillance by border agents and immigration officials, and all these efforts share a common master narrative.⁶ Anti-trafficking documents articulate an ideological program that advances a broader neoliberal agenda.

The social criticism offered by anti-trafficking narratives assumes the virtue of market freedom and US hegemony. Some might describe anti-trafficking discourse as "left neoliberalism"—that is, as a project that mistakes itself for opposition to an economic system whose logic it shares.⁷ The left neoliberal position arguably traces its origins to the free labor program of the mid-nineteenth century. Opposing chattel slavery to the autonomy of workers selling their labor, antebellum free labor ideology embraced markets while criticizing the commodification of labor.⁸ Some of the same contradictions inform criticism of twenty-first-century slavery, as the immanent critique of anti-trafficking narratives that follows will demonstrate. In these narratives, we find a left neoliberal affirmation of the labor market, an account largely unable to explain or contest the persistence of slavery in a capitalist economy.

The Master Narrative of Anti-Trafficking Discourse

In 2000, the United Nations' so-called Palermo protocol defined trafficking as

the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced

labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs.⁹

This laundry list links sexual exploitation with nonsexual forced labor. It defines exploitation independent of consent, and it makes a distinction between human smuggling and coercive enslavement difficult to sustain, while also linking practices involving partial and indirect payment of wages to outright slavery.

Despite the breadth of the protocol's definition, activist depictions of human trafficking consistently narrow the scope of activities representative of trafficking and restrict the range of possible responses. The anthropologist Edward Snajdr isolates three features of activist rhetoric: 1) asserting that "trafficking-in-persons exists on a massive and ever-increasing scale"; 2) blaming trafficking on "a set of legal shortcomings on the part of other states"; 3) endeavoring to "to strengthen laws and law enforcement...and to encourage the non-profit sector to assist with helping victims" (231). Snajdr points out the use of questionable statistics, simplified maps, and emotionally manipulative images; he also notes the preoccupation with women and children coerced into prostitution. These innocent victims make anti-trafficking narratives feel "oddly similar to urban legends or modern-day myths," Snajdr argues (239). He concludes that these myths exist to justify interventionist rescues and transformations of the legal regions of developing nations.

Other observers also note the prevalence of salvation plots that begin and end with the victims' legibility to state authority.¹⁰ The sociologist Wendy Hesford explains how trafficking narratives depend on spectacle, infantilization, and ethnocentric representations of supposedly backwards cultures.¹¹ Anti-trafficking discourse reminds some observers of Victorian-era moral panics and others of the evangelical activism of the first Bush presidency.¹² This discourse also relies on well-established American oppositions between supposedly shameful enslavement and self-respecting waged labor.¹³ Commentators agree that by framing the story of trafficking as a rescue plot orchestrated by police, these activist narratives implicitly endorse both the state's monopoly over violence and the rectitude of a supposedly free labor market in which the formerly trafficked person will presumably thrive. Anti-trafficking narratives envision the freed slave as necessarily benefiting from entry into a *laissez-faire* market in labor, a market defined by precarious autonomy.

The function of this master narrative of labor, as Paul Willis reminds us, is to "confirm those aspects and resolutions of cultural processes which are most partial to the current organization of interests and production and dislocate...those which retain a degree of critical penetration of that system."¹⁴ In other words, whether by design or not, anti-trafficking activist narratives in effect endorse reigning neoliberal ideologies about the ideal form and relations of labor.

Narrative confirmation of dominant ideologies, however, tends to be incomplete. For instance, rescued victims may not consider the conditions they have experienced to be trafficking; they may have given consent to their servitude, or they may view rehabilitation facilities as inadequate care or even as form of imprisonment.¹⁵ Apparent victims may also exercise agency by framing

their stories (sometimes for profit) for willing auditors with well-known narrative expectations.¹⁶ Some organizations representing sex workers object to the one-dimensional portraits of trafficked persons and suggest depicting them instead as “capable individuals navigating extreme, unjust, and complicated circumstances.”¹⁷ In short, various actors disrupt the artificial clarity imagined by anti-trafficking activists.

Efforts to contain potential ideological irritants can stimulate the literary imagination. This is evident in contemporary crime fiction published by reputable commercial presses since the Palermo protocol entered into force in 2003. Corban Addison’s *A Walk Across the Sun*, James Lee Burke’s *Feast Day of Fools*, Linda Fairstein’s *Hell Gate*, M. C. Grant’s *Beauty with a Bomb*, Brandon W. Jones’ *All Woman and Springtime*, Ed Lin’s *Snakes Can’t Run*, Ridley Pearson’s *Choke Point*, and Joseph Wambaugh’s *Harbor Nocturne* all employ the dominant anti-trafficking ideology of labor.¹⁸ While affirming nineteenth-century oppositions between freedom and slavery, these novels also introduce disruptive elements in their depictions of contemporary conditions. Analyzing the resulting tensions in this fiction thus fosters recognition not only of the narratological expression of neoliberal ideologies of labor, but also of their fault lines.

Depicting the Victim

All of the anti-trafficking fictions examined here envision the same passive victim described by activists; often the victim is an orphan.¹⁹ Addison’s *A Walk Across the Sun*, for instance, begins with two Hindu sisters whose parents die suddenly in a tsunami. A middle-class upbringing and multilingual convent education do not protect the heroines from being sold into a Mumbai brothel. Jones’s *All Woman and Springtime* starts with two teens in North Korea. Their dreary routine in an orphanage and factory makes the girls susceptible to a slick smuggler who transports them to South Korea, where they are sold into sexual slavery. Orphaning the victims allows these narratives to sidestep any more complex explanation for the supply of trafficking victims. Sentimental conventions make the extreme vulnerability of poor orphans so ideologically redundant that no other motive or reason feels necessary.

Even when the trafficking victim is not technically an orphan, her isolation from a family of origin is crucial. Of the novels considered, only one provides a scene depicting the hero’s encounter with a trafficked child’s family. Pearson’s *Choke Point* is set in Amsterdam, and it follows the fortunes of child laborers in a “knot shop” producing hand-tied carpets. Investigators interview the mother of one of these laborers, a “plain-looking Slavic woman” named Yasmina (175). When they ask how and why the family deals with the traffickers, she responds “I do not expect you to understand...I do not want your sympathy. Maja is an important part of this household. She helps us all” (178). As the questioning escalates, the mother mutters “without her...we starve” (181). This self-consciously stereotypical scene is framed by hostile judgement; wondering how much the grandmother’s cigarettes cost, a photographer shoots a silhouetted image of the matriarch. Similarly stripped of detail, the truncated and unsympathetic back story flattens the account of the family’s motives.

Simplification is not clarity, though. In *Hell Gate*, Manhattan District Attorney and sex crime expert Linda Fairstein injects some perplexing context into an interview with a Ukrainian survivor who washed up on a New York City beach: “Olena described life in her small town and her dreams of escaping it. The fall of the Soviet Union caused many of the small satellites formerly in its grasp to suffer economic collapse. I knew that its borders had become porous, and that human rights activists estimated that as many as 10 percent of the female population of countries like Ukraine had been sold into prostitution” (173). As in *Choke Point*, Olena’s story is immediately rendered generic and supposedly representative of the “10 percent of the female population of countries like Ukraine.” This confusing pseudo-statistic (which countries are “like Ukraine”? What is 10% of an unknown quantity?) behaves as if it were knowledge, and the victim’s subsequent story of being smuggled, married off, sold, abused, and trapped is thus positioned not as a personal confession, but rather as an allegorical one. Olena is a type, and she disappears from the novel as soon as the witnessing investigator transports her to a safe house. In such narratives, trafficking victims are statistics, legible to others but not to themselves. They are feminized, passive, and largely inarticulate; they exist to be rescued and deposited in the arms of the state.

Only two of the novels considered take men as their trafficking victims, and both concern nonsexual labor. Ed Lin’s *Snakes Can’t Run* explores restaurant labor in Manhattan’s Chinatown, and James Lee Burke’s complex borderlands novel, *Feast Day of Fools*, introduces trafficking into an espionage plot when Russian gangsters capture and try to sell an MIT weapons expert to al-Qaeda. Even these exceptions incorporate prostitution in subplots, however, feeding the genre’s preoccupation with debasement. Pearson’s *Choke Point* also quickly migrates from the knot shop to prostitution; the novel’s title refers to a key transition when pubescent girls age out of manual labor and are sold into the sex trade. This motif reproduces a dominant ideological association between forced labor, moral humiliation, and sexual shame.

Prostitution stories dominate the trafficking genre even though researchers agree that forced sexual exploitation may account for as little as 22 percent of human trafficking.²⁰ While unrepresentative, the prostitution motif is ideologically useful because it makes exploitation involuntary, stressing menacing violence, physical deprivation, and melodramatically dependent victims. Often these scenes are mediated through a described image — usually an internet site or a photo. Unlike literary fiction (such as Joseph O’Neill’s *Netherland*), these crime novels do not directly invite sadistic titillation or an erotic response to the voluntary renunciation of consent. They attempt to distance readers from the spectacle of the slave’s debasement. In *All Woman and Springtime*, for instance, the North Korean heroines are tutored by a more experienced prostitute: “everything in this business is about pleasing men,” their tutor asserts. “Once you understand men, then you can be in control of the situation. Mr. Choy will still be the boss, of course. There isn’t anything you can do about that. But what I mean is, men are not really all that complicated. They like tits, they like ass, they like pussy, and they like a pretty face” (195). The world-weary speaker creates moral horror by naturalizing and neutralizing the dynamics of sexual exploitation. In the same mood, she describes an experiment with male turkeys: “They discovered that male turkeys will try to mate with a stuffed, dead female turkey just as readily as they would a live one...Men are just like turkeys — it doesn’t matter how artificial we are,

they will still behave the same way” (195–196).²¹ Similarly, in Addison’s *A Walk Across the Sun*, an experienced federal agent explains that “trafficking will stop when men stop buying women. Until that happens, the best we can do is win one battle at a time” (312–313). Both speakers locate male sexual demand outside the marketplace and ground trafficking in a laissez-faire attitude, one that naturalizes the connection between sexual desire and commodification and makes self-marketing in an irrational environment the only plausible form of female agency. Acceptance of normative misogyny is thus not an inadvertent side-effect of these narratives, requiring a demystifying exposé; it is an explicitly acknowledged ideological ground.

The account of labor presented as a hard-hitting truth in these novels relies, in short, on a confirmation of the conditions of alienation, not its refusal. Accepting one’s status as “a stuffed, dead female turkey” and learning to exploit this position is the distasteful path to personal dignity outlined in these novels. Other routes are depicted as implausible. In particular, plans for escape consistently fail, because forced labor is assumed to damage the capacity for autonomy. Even the climax of Grant’s girl-power-inflected *Beauty with a Bomb* repeats the required clichés about pathetic, cowering, undignified slaves. “The woman’s eyes grow wide in panic as the other women clutch at each other and start weeping again,” their would-be rescuer observes (185). Together with chained ankles, saucer-eyed passivity provides an iconographic shorthand for the trafficking victim. This image reinforces the idea that spectacular and alienating male desire drives trafficking by making the least powerful women into paralyzed observers of their own humiliation. To watch is to participate, and the trafficked women witness their own debasement, thus confirming the power of a system that defines them as its prey. The victims’ passivity, in other words, is the moral inverse and necessary complement to the active, rebellious but always failed escape narrative. The rare individual who attempts escape necessarily abandons a more numerous group of trafficked women, because they create the negative ground of passivity against which she defines herself. The autonomous free laborer is the exceptional fantasy that sustains conditions governed by neoliberal enslavement.

These two facets of the ideology of trafficked labor — the naturalization of predatory alienation and a moralistic but impossible standard of personal agency — cohere in a cynical worldview that confirms existing relations of production. In this worldview, dignity reduces to the necessary effort to escape as an individual from collective conditions created by nature. Even though this task appears to be impossible, the enslaved are indelibly tainted. Their lost virginity is thus simultaneously sexual and ideological, and they must undergo ritualized cleansing and rehabilitation before re-entry into social life is permitted. These processes are not depicted directly in anti-trafficking fiction, but they appear in supplementary fantasy spaces such as the aristocratic manors converted into safe houses in Addison, Fairstein, and Jones’s novels. These frankly utopian refuges are required to convert the morally contaminated former slave into run-of-the-mill embodiments of free labor eligible for full citizenship. As part of this magical transformation, former victims either die or are tearfully reunited with their siblings — or, as in *All Woman and Springtime*, they magically discover a hidden talent (e.g., mathematical genius) that ensures their instantaneous success in a post-trafficking economy. They are reborn as self-sufficient individuals, the mythic heroines of neoliberalism.

Of the novels considered here, Ed Lin's *Snakes Can't Run* does the most to interfere with this fairy tale of labor — mainly by eroding the barriers between the victims, investigators, and operators of trafficking networks. Lin's title refers to snakeheads, Chinatown slang for human smugglers who lead strings of illegal migrants (or snakes) across borders. The immobile snake in question in this novel is both the trafficker under investigation and the investigator's father. Although family lore attributed the crankiness of Robert Chow's deceased parent to his efforts to pay off debts to traffickers, an old ledger reveals that Robert's father was actually part of the trafficking organization and scarred by his deception: "the sour man who was left was beyond redemption. He was already pickled by the poisonous choices he'd made in life. My father was a snakehead who couldn't handle his own bite," Robert concludes (284).

Paternal sourness here replaces sexual shame as the affective hangover from enslavement, but the trafficked subject is still defined by the failure to rebel individually — that is, freely. The trafficked person is still disparaged for his presumed passivity in Lin's narrative. However, the novel also directs attention to the cycle of entrapment and attempts to modulate an absolute distinction between victims and criminals. The snakehead himself is also trapped, bitten, and pickled in this novel, and he is already dead. Lin also historicizes trafficking through the metaphor of the parent-child bond. This generational figure allows a fleeting recognition of the fact that labor relations entangle all parties and (in the old Hegelian motif) damage the master as well as the slave, although certainly not to equal degrees.

In Lin's novel, the opposition between free and slave labor shifts to the question of debt. To envision the conditions of labor as continuous indebtedness alters the neoliberal matrix of anti-trafficking discourse somewhat. The debt motif removes the moral imperative for liberation from the isolated subject and focuses attention on more clearly calculated, social, and negotiable forms of social exchange.²² Debt also shifts the definition of free labor from an exertion of individual agency over desire to a skillful and shared manipulation of symbols in an information economy. Cracking open the trafficking narrative, in other words, allows moralistic scenes of victimization to give way to investigative interpretation.

The Investigator's Eye: Police Labor

If the victims in contemporary anti-trafficking crime fiction recall the pliant heroines of sentimental romance, the investigators typically derive from mid-twentieth-century hard-boiled fiction. They work in or around law enforcement — as journalists on the crime beat, employees of private security firms, sheriffs, lawyers, or beat cops — and despite the novels' rescue plots, they are more likely to be cynical critics of the powers that be than heroic defenders of justice. Regardless of the investigators' professional affiliation, in other words, they express the occupational ideology of the police.

Positioned between the working class and local elites, urban police officers in English-speaking nations have well documented workplace ideologies that encode their unusual situation. In her study of gender in the Canadian police force, Marilyn Corsianos describes the "occupational themes that dominate police culture" as including "conformity and/or solidarity, loyalty, secrecy, autonomy, authority, uncertainty, danger, suspicion, 'us versus them' mentality (i.e., the police

versus the public), administration and being distinct from other occupational cultures.”²³ Similarly, historian Sam Mitrani identifies a “deeply pessimistic view of human nature” with the core ideology of the Chicago police.²⁴ Charged with executing the laws that protect an economic elite of which they are generally not members, police serve as indirect regulators of working-class life as well as providers of informal social services such as youth counseling. Officers are thus split off from the working-class milieu to which they often belong by virtue of origin and/or racial or ethnic affiliation, and their repeated exposure to criminal behaviors in those milieu tends to calcify into an “us versus them” mentality. This sense of distinctness is bolstered by the police force’s paramilitary structure and monopoly over legitimate forms of violence directed at the urban proletariat. British scholar Michael Brogden concludes that through policing “the working-class problematic becomes incorporated, through the mediation of state functionaries, within the problematic of the dominant class, rendered harmless and a unity knot tied between the classes.”²⁵ On this analysis, the police articulate an occupationally specific ideology that justifies their own social function as mediators and symbolic resolvers of social contradictions.

The occupational ideology required for this “unity knot” loosens somewhat, though, where it connects to free-labor thinking. From the perspective of free labor, the worker’s fullest autonomy is realized in the acquisition of his own land or shop and thus his independence from employers and official networks of social support; this is obviously not a route open to public employees, such as the police.²⁶ Perhaps for this reason, vigilantism or “going rogue” is heroized. The idealized maverick or on-the-job vigilante ideologically compensates for the officer’s incorporation into the bureaucratic police force. As public employees protected by powerful unions but valorizing Wild West individualism, American police developed a particular hard-boiled sensibility that encodes their unique and contradictory position within free-labor (or perhaps more properly *laissez-faire*) ideologies. Operating at the periphery of the free market in labor but serving as regulators of that market in the interests of local elites and in transparent contradiction to their ideologically valorized roles, police have developed a distinctive cynicism about state, freedom and “human nature.”

This multilayered occupational ideology receives regular scrutiny in noir-influenced police procedural fiction. The genre is commonly understood as confirming the existing social order by introducing criminal disruptions that investigators rationally explain and defeat. Sharply delineated social differences are thus crucial to the genre: “a legitimate ‘us’ is defined in relation to a deviant ‘them,’” one genre analyst observes.²⁷ Transferring an occupational sense of uniqueness into a generic distinction, procedurals use a clear narrative formula or “frame” that Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek argue in essays on Raymond Chandler and Henning Mankell, respectively, stimulates close observation of the criminal (i.e., social) scene.²⁸ Žižek in particular is interested in the way that Mankell’s commitment to generic formulas creates a parallax view of geopolitical contradictions arising in the zone between a Swedish social democracy in crisis and Mozambiquan condition of deprivation. Understood in this spirit, the investigator’s conventional eye in anti-trafficking crime fiction offers both a transfer into narrative form of the occupational ideology of police and a moment of reflection on the conflicted global economy that it observes.

These moments of insight into the global economy do not necessarily occur in the places in anti-trafficking fiction where the investigator presents his (or, less often her) hackneyed account of criminality. As already noted, anti-trafficking fiction generally focuses on sex crimes and attributes these crimes to a naturalized male desire for female debasement — i.e., the “dead turkey” theory of trafficking. Transparently ideological, these explanations tend to confirm rather than disrupt dominant ideologies of prostitution and involuntary labor; they easily coexist with misogynistic accounts of masculine courage and autonomy presumed to be requisite for policing itself.²⁹ Turning from scenes of explanation to novelistic action — especially scenes of police labor — introduces a different issue: the shift from face-to-face street-level policing to technologically mediated information management. Comic treatment of this theme appears in *Beauty with a Bomb* when the police-affiliated investigator grudgingly accepts an iPhone from her employer — eventually finding it useful during the final rescue operation. In *Choke Point*, the shift is even more literal; it features two investigators: an old-school ex-military wasp and a younger, ethnically Chinese forensic accountant. At one point, the latter literally leaps up into the information hardware stowed in a false ceiling, evading capture and facilitating victory over traffickers because of her familiarity with computer systems. Ideological closure insists that street-level and informational styles of policing complement one another this way, but the tensions created by transitioning between forms of police labor are not always easily contained.

After all, expertise in digital networking belongs mainly to the traffickers in these narratives. Forcing girls to participate in internet porn ventures features prominently in *A Walk Across the Sun*, *All Woman and Sunshine*, and *Choke Point*. Consequently, not only the digital tools, but also the decentralized labor involved in nerdier forms of police work are often depicted as ethically compromised or insufficiently macho in this fiction. Increasing entanglement with digital information flows also threatens the historical arrangement of the police force into hierarchical paramilitary structures. When police work starts to resemble the activities of white-collar workers and criminals, the process of social mediation falters a bit — potentially dislodging the us/them opposition that supposedly justifies the sacrificial labor performed by the police on behalf of an oligarchic social order. Perhaps for this reason, we discover an excessive exertion of physicality and moral rectitude in the more digitally mediated trafficking narratives. The cult of the hyper-physical maverick officer intensifies in anti-trafficking fiction in direct proportion to the digitization of police labor.

This ideological disturbance also pulls anti-trafficking narratives into climactic chase scenes. During these set pieces, the distinctive humor of Raymond Chandler’s hard-boiled repartee gives way to an ideologically necessary shoot-out. After escalating tension in scenes of techno-surveillance, these novels redirect tool use into a fantasy of hyper-aggressive hand-to-hand combat. A heavily armed multinational team assembles, for instance, at the climax of *A Walk Across the Sun*, in order to rescue a handful of traumatized girls from a suburban Atlanta brothel. Information management gives way to militaristic invasion.

Perhaps paradoxically, these scenes of weaponized physicality seem to disrupt the reigning neoliberal orthodoxy most fully when the would-be maverick officer colludes with official state military functions, as in James Lee Burke’s *Feast Day of Fools*. This novel layers its

treatment of policing in the US/Mexico borderlands with religious reflection and parallels to wartime conflict. The investigating sheriff in Burke's novel teams up with a female war refugee, and the pair atone for their misdeeds in Korea by pursuing traffickers. Sacrificial physical encounters allow former combatants to expiate some of the sins of their wartime pasts.

Where Burke's novel puts historical and geopolitical wrongs at the center, others make more indirect reference to their position in a post-Cold War global economy. They use the investigators' labor to represent the informatization of American violence in a decentralizing world system. While still displacing and disavowing elite control over working populations, this post-hegemonic police labor spawns new investigative heroes — private security agents, border-crossing vigilantes, renegade journalists, love-struck lawyers, and the like. The bureaucratic entanglements of the neoliberal police affiliates them slightly with the trafficking victims' enslavement; both are objects of empathy in these novels. The police themselves are usually exemplary figures of tolerance — often involved in partnerships that cross racial, ethnic, or age barriers. But, these mournful statist liberals³⁰ are also snared in a digital web that threatens them with obsolescence and restricts their physical movements. Melancholic, ineffective freedom within the labor market characterizes the investigator's condition, and these figures often acquire a tragic moral authority by observing the abusive power exercised by a ruling class that they serve but do not respect. The police retain their ties to an old order displaced by neoliberalism, because they rely on, without advocating for, a public sphere. The investigators serve, in short, as the vanishing mediators of a neoliberal social logic.

The ideological error of these novels, then, is not that they involve rescue plots that overstate the power and authority of these tragic police liberals vis-a-vis their presumed objects. That too-common empowerment story hopes to shatter an imagined monopoly of agency, believing that the investigator pulls all potential for action into his own orbit, and less socially privileged (and female) actors' access to action is presumed to be uplifting and ideologically disruptive. By contrast, this analysis argues that labor and action — not characterization — confirm the neoliberal status quo in trafficking narratives. In the context of neoliberal deregulation of the labor market, the failures of a cynical state operative when faced with market-based enslavement spiral back to figure the irrelevance of state actors themselves — even when these narratives heroize the investigator's sacrifices and see the world through his eye. Like the trafficking victim, the investigator also experiences limited agency as a laborer, and this is one of the ways in which the investigative narration reproduces (although with some small degrees of friction) neoliberal ideologies about the confusion of freedom with servitude.

What Kind of Labor Is Trafficking?

Shifting attention from the victim/rescue motif to the ideology of labor in anti-trafficking narratives brings the figure of the trafficker and his (almost always his) relation to the investigators to the foreground. As the previous section argued, in this fiction investigators commonly signal a weakening of state authority and mourn the displacement of their function as moral regulators by the responsibility to operate systems of techno-surveillance. From this vantage point, the trafficker makes a difficult villain, since he simultaneously triggers a moral

scandal, an administrative and technological threat, and an aspirational ideal in his capacity for confidently wielding violence and exerting authority on the global stage. The task of anti-trafficking crime fiction is to contain this disruptive figure and redirect its appeal toward goals endorsed by the neoliberal status quo. This necessarily incomplete task requires multiple variations on the genre formula. Anti-trafficking narratives innovate in order to find newly effective ways to neutralize the ideological incoherence triggered by the trafficker.

This fiction usually begins by depicting the trafficker as a tediously perfect neoliberal subject. He rigorously applies free market logic to capitalize on local resources, extract profit, and concentrate resources within the organization, regardless of state regulations and obsolete moral or cultural limitations. The trafficker's mentality and practices are quite nakedly those of neoliberal entrepreneurship. In *All Woman and Springtime*, for instance, the narrator reports that the Korean trafficker "Mr. Choy finished his degree [in Seattle], a business major with a minor in computer science — not with honors, as he had hoped, but well enough... He had a million bright ideas and boundless energy"; on graduation, he expected that "one of the large corporations was bound to snap him up and make him a star" (177). His ideals and self-image are continuous with those of American business, as are those of smaller-scale traffickers such as Hector in *Harbor Nocturne*. Hector reflects that there are many "options for a smart white man around the harbor if he took the time to check things out. The Armenians from Hollywood had made a bundle when they'd shipped in imported vodka in fifty-five-gallon drums labeled 'window-washing fluid.' They knew that the LAPD didn't investigate international smuggling, and that at worst it would be a tariff violation that nobody would really bother with" (245). The rhetoric of callous entrepreneurial self-interest is also crucial in the dialogue given to Mr. Ng, a trafficker in *Snakes Can't Run*. "They make more money now than they ever would have in China.' He switched to Mandarin so some of the men could understand. 'Yes, these people have suffered, but in the long run they will be much better off than if they had stayed in China. They will remember me for helping them'" (271). These novels describe traffickers, their opportunities, and their relations to others in the language of legitimate free-market business. There is nothing especially eccentric or ideologically corrupt about the traffickers' labor. They simply mobilize the inexplicable and naturalized misogynistic desires of their target market. "I abhor child pornography, the kiddie sex trade," a trafficker insists in *Choke Point*; his girls are sold to "Asian buyers" for purely pragmatic reasons — because "the hormones and the mess are bad for business" once they begin to menstruate (378). Traffickers simply capitalize on existing physical and social conditions in this fiction.

The trafficker's turn toward crime rather than legitimate business is regularly attributed to local or historical irregularities within the capitalist system. Racist exclusions meant that "for an unknown, unconnected Korean kid the gates to success seemed closed" to Mr. Choy in *All Woman and Springtime* (177). Class snobbery and secret social clubs underlie the Manhattan trafficking ring described in *Hell Gate*; "Those rich boys didn't want me anywhere near their dinner parties," the ringleader sneers (360). These confessions insist that it is not moral failure but rather irrational social exclusions limit access to capitalist goods and thereby produce as perversely unanticipated effects the illegal activities of traffickers.

Once excluded, the traffickers rely on own historical and cultural solidarities to facilitate their criminality. Ed Lin's traffickers, for instance, insist they are patriotic in supporting their "fellow Chinese" (271), while in the ethnically divisive *la* of *Harbor Nocturne*, a faux-Russian crime boss reveals his Serbian roots and irrational old-world habits: "'Croats,' Markov said, and his lip curled slightly" (272). Residual racism and ethnic hostility as well as patriotic pride are original sins in the neoliberal universe of these novels, and they mark those who articulate these sentiments as historical residues of a territorially differentiated globe fading into obscurity. Old-fashioned ethnic and racial solidarities create secret organizations from the *tontine* of elite Manhattanites in *Hell Gate* to the *tong* system in *Snakes Can't Run*.

In fact, any clan-like ethnic or familial network has the potential to convert itself into a criminal organization in anti-trafficking fiction. The contradictions of this racist anti-racism are efficiently presented in an explanatory speech in *Harbor Nocturne*: "'What you have to understand about these organized crime foreign nationals from former Eastern bloc countries,'" the jaded detective Bino Villasenor professes, "'and I'll lump the Koreans in there with them, is that they don't do business like our OC types. They're basically cold war hoodlums. No matter what kind of show they put on with big cars, and tailor-made suits, and houses on Mount Olympus, they're still thugs. Which makes them unpredictable'" (203–4). In the guise of distancing criminal thugs from legitimate capitalists, in other words, the detective invents the bizarre category of cold war hoodlums by lumping together the products of struggling post-Soviet and rising Asian economies — i.e., old and new threats to US hegemony. In the familiar logic of American political alterity, all those on the margins of the dominant merge into a generic other. All traffickers are arguably "cold war hoodlums" in this fiction because they fill the place of the monstrous totalitarian villain that was vacated with the fall of the USSR; they menace freedom and the market by too perfectly embodying their principles until or unless they face limits created by their embeddedness in a non-dominant culture and history. In anti-trafficking crime fiction, the trafficker excludes himself from the legitimate neoliberal projects he himself ardently desires by allowing himself to remain marked by race, ethnicity, culture, and history. He becomes criminal by exposing the limits of a supposedly culture-free neoliberal market.

That said, a full erasure of difference is not the aim of anti-trafficking fiction. Quite the opposite. These novels are not written from the point of view of a right-wing neoliberalism that endorses a total capitalist evacuation of culture. Instead, the figure of the ethnically marked trafficker in these crime novels is simultaneously villainous and admirable; he becomes a utopian alter ego hovering on the perimeter of what is permissible to the investigator. In the recurring confrontation scenes that appear essential to this genre, the investigator's task with respect to the trafficker turns out to be, first, interpreting his motives back to him and, secondly, exacting extra-legal vigilante justice. The investigator recodes the trafficker's business logic into explicitly moral terms relative to his identity group and then eliminates him. "'It's very patriotic to exploit your fellow Chinese, isn't it, Ng?,'" Robert Chow sarcastically inquires a moment before firing at the man who insulted his father (271). Similarly, "'that's horseshit,'" the security agent Knox asserts at the climax of the trafficker's police station confession in *Choke Point*, and "'The saddest part...is if you actually believe that'" (378). This combination of judgement and execution closes down the investigator's pursuit of the trafficker. The investigator must expose

the trafficker's motives in order to claim his initiative (but not his identity) for himself. "Young girls, high prices, fancy settings," the DA summarizes in *Hell Gate* just before she pushes the bad guy down a stairwell (360).

Because identification with the criminal is scandalous to the somewhat nostalgic investigator, this moment of judgment must culminate in the investigator's extra-legal brutality. The DA is shocked but successful in her shove; Robert Chow shoots his interlocutor, and many other traffickers die in similar turning point battles. The exemplar of a weak and compromised state thus activates the police function not by turning over the ultimate neoliberal subjects to legal prosecution (and thus reinforcing the juridical authority of the state), but rather by seizing the traffickers' own propensity for coercion and turning it back on the perpetrator. The investigator's violence supplements the weak state with righteous violence on behalf of a version of left neoliberalism that is visibly American in its articulation and practice.

The dead traffickers in anti-trafficking fiction serve, in other words, a perversely utopian function for American readers. They legitimate an apparently on-going need for direct expressions of US state power in a global economy that actively erodes the basis for ethnic, cultural, and, by extension, national solidarity. In *The New Imperialism*, David Harvey describes this arrangement as a neoliberal force countered by neoconservative territorial power. "The fundamental point is to see the territorial and the capitalist logics of power as distinct from each other," he asserts (29). Strongly associated with neoliberal business practice, the traffickers represent that ideology's distinctive fusion of brutally embodied and digitally immaterial labor; their deaths then fulfill a presumed desire (on the part of the nostalgic reader) for a state capable of dominating and stabilizing global relations. As unpredictable thugs and "cold war hoodlums" living on, zombie-like, in the present and exploiting inexplicably persistent desires for sexual predation in particular, the traffickers trigger a hypothetical and nostalgic public longing for an American-dominated global order.

Given the open acknowledgement of historical traumas (war, exploitation, inequality) in this fiction, this desire appears contradictory, and this in turn suggests refinements to Harvey's clean distinction between neoconservative territorialism and neoliberal globalism may be necessary. Here we can turn to Giovanni Arrighi, who contests Harvey's conclusion that neoliberal globalization amounts to a new imperialism organized on behalf of an overextended American hegemony. Arrighi asserts that the United States' cultural and moral authority as a hegemon moved into a visible crisis phase during the post-9/11 invasion and destruction of Iraq.³¹ He describes the subsequent situation as "domination without hegemony" and points to the transfer of ownership over US debt as a major sign of a shift in economic and cultural authority to East Asia (especially China).

Arrighi's scenario most closely approximates the geopolitical imaginary of anti-trafficking fiction. In these novels, human trafficking exemplifies a neoliberal practice associated with moral panic; it invokes a need for police functions enacted on a global scale — practices enacted by subjects aware of the futility of their efforts to constrain their ideologically authoritative opponents. Anti-trafficking narratives use the trafficker as a pretext for supergluing US domination into a central place in the global distribution of power, even though the ideology of free labor and

laissez-faire autonomy that the United States supposedly upholds is clearly not well regulated if trafficking is a major global industry.

In other words, this fiction shores up the fantasy space of a waning hegemon, not through appeals to regressive territorialism, as Harvey would have it, but through the creation of zones of delirious moral free space — a neoliberal utopia — in which domination without hegemony works, and free labor is preserved by unfree, borderline obsolete, and paramilitary means. By vanishing into the mobile trafficker’s universe, anti-trafficking police carve out a role for free-floating domination. The investigator rescues himself, on Arrighi’s analysis, by absorbing some of the trafficker’s functions and redirecting them toward the vacant position known as the victim. The trafficker serves as the utopian ideal not only for neoliberal business logic, then, but also, when severed from his residual prejudices, for the weakened state operative to the extent that he employs the tools of domination without the constraints of legitimation. The grimly compelling story of trafficking thus exposes a range of tensions, disruptions, and containments that illuminate neoliberal concerns about free labor. Furthermore, these assessments of contemporary slavery deepen our understanding of the horrific paradoxes of global precarity. They teach us not only to recognize trafficking as an exemplary form of precarity but also to grapple with the profound ideological difficulties surrounding its eradication.

Notes

¹ Friedrich Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 234.

² Friedrich Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1943), 27.

³ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford 2007), 3.

⁴ Guy Standing, *The Precariat*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

⁵ Jonathan Parry, “Introduction,” *Industrial Labor on the Margins of Capitalism* (London: Oxford University Press, 2018), 3.

⁶ Sharon Pickering and Julie Ham. “Hot Pants at the Border: Sorting Sex Work from Trafficking,” *British Journal of Criminology* 54 (2014): 2–19; Edward Snajdr, “Beneath the Master Narrative: Human Trafficking, Myths of Sexual Slavery and Ethnographic Realities,” *Dialectical Anthropology* 37:2 (2013): 229–256; further citations in text.

⁷ Walter Benn Michaels develops the concept of left neoliberalism in several places, including “Let Them Eat Diversity,” an interview published in the first issue of *The Jacobin*. <https://jacobin.com/2011/01/let-them-eat-diversity>.

⁸ Eric Foner, *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men: The Ideology of the Republican Party Before the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

⁹ United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Article 3, section (a).

www.unodc.org/documents/treaties/UNTOC/Publications/TOC%20Convention/TOCebook-e.pdf.

¹⁰ Crystal DeBoise, “Human Trafficking and Sex Work: Foundational Social-Work Principles,” *Meridians* 12:1 (2014): 227–233; Julietta Hua, “Telling Stories of Trafficking: The Politics of Legibility,” *Meridians* 12:1 (2014): 201–227.

¹¹ Wendy Hesford, *Spectacular Rhetorics: Human Rights Visions, Recognitions, Feminisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹² See Vivienne Cree, Gary Clapton, and Mark Smith. “The Presentation of Child Trafficking in the UK: An Old and New Moral Panic?” *British Journal of Social Work* 44:2 (March 2014): 418–433 and Denise Brennan, *Life Interrupted: Trafficking into Forced Labor in the United States* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2014).

¹³ The shame motif appears in Eric Foner, “Free Labor and Nineteenth-Century Political Ideology” in *The Market Revolution in America: Social, Political and Religious Expressions, 1800–1880*, eds. Melvyn Stokes and Stephen Conway. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1996), 99–127.

- ¹⁴ Paul E. Willis, *Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 161.
- ¹⁵ Brennan (op cit.) addresses victims' resistance to being characterized as such. On imprisonment, see Anelynda Mielke, "Challenging Humanitarian Images the Case of Anti-Trafficking," *International Journal of Social Science and Humanity* 5:12 (December 2015): 1056–1061.
- ¹⁶ Soraya Chemaly, "How Not to Report on Sex Trafficking," *Rewire News* (June 21, 2014), <https://rewirenewsgroup.com/2014/01/21/report-sex-trafficking/>.
- ¹⁷ DeBoise, "Human Trafficking and Sex Work," 230.
- ¹⁸ Corban Addison, *A Walk Across the Sun* (London: Quercus Press, 2012); James Lee Burke, *Feast Day of Fools* (New York: Simon & Schuster 2011); Linda Fairstein, *Hell Gate* (New York: Dutton, 2010); M. C. Grant, *Beauty with a Bomb* (Woodbury, MN: Midnight Ink, 2014); Brandon W. Jones, *All Woman and Springtime* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin, 2012); Ed Lin, *Snakes Can't Run* (New York: Minotaur, 2010); Ridley Pearson, *Choke Point* (New York: Putnam's, 2013); Joseph Wambaugh, *Harbor Nocturne* (New York: Grove/Atlantic, 2012).
- ¹⁹ Sister Judith Sheridan, Marist Missionary Sisters in San Diego, CA, asserts that orphans are uniquely vulnerable to trafficking for purposes of prostitution, <https://www.voanews.com/a/nun-human-trafficking-children-criminals-victims-internet-exploit-prostitution/2822272.html>.
- ²⁰ Stephanie Hepburn and Rita J. Simon, *Human Trafficking Around the World: Hidden in Plain Sight* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 1. These statistics are derived from International Labor Organization data, a standard reference on the topic.
- ²¹ The turkey experiments conducted by Martin Schein and Edwin Hale actually demonstrated that male turkeys would engage in sexual display even when confronted with a bodiless female turkey head on a stick. "The Head as Stimulus for Orientation and Arousal of Sexual Behavior in Male Turkeys," *Anatomical Record* (1957): 617–618.
- ²² Richard Dienst makes a similar argument in *The Bonds of Debt: Borrowing Against the Common Good* (London: Verso, 2011).
- ²³ Marilyn Corsianos, *Policing and Gendered Justice: Examining the Possibilities* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 95.
- ²⁴ Sam Mitrani, *The Rise of the Chicago Police Department, Class and Conflict, 1850–1894* (Champaign-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 11.
- ²⁵ Michael Brogden, *The Police: Autonomy and Consent* (New York: Academic Press, 1982), 32.
- ²⁶ For more on free labor, see Mitrani and Foner (1970), op cit.
- ²⁷ Madeline K. MacMurrough-Kavanagh, "What's All This Then?: The Ideology of Identity in *The Cops*," in *Frames and Fictions on Television*, eds. Bruson Carson and Margaret Llewelyn-Jones (Bristol, UK: Intellect Books, 2000), 40.
- ²⁸ Zizek on Mankell appears here: <https://www.lacan.com/zizekmankell.htm>; see also Fredric Jameson, "The Synoptic Chandler," in *Shades of Noir: A Reader*, ed. Joan Copjec (Verso, 1993), 33–56. In *Crime and Fantasy in Scandinavia: Fiction, Film and Social Change*, Andrew K. Nestingen counters Zizek's argument, pointing out discontinuities in the neoliberal order.
- ²⁹ See Marilyn Corsianos, *Policing and Gendered Justice: Examining the Possibilities* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).
- ³⁰ As Sean McCann explains, the hard-boiled is conventionally a liberal. See *Gumshoe America: Hard-Boiled Crime Fiction and the Rise and Fall of New Deal Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000).
- ³¹ Giovanni Arrighi, "Hegemony Unravelling I," *New Left Review* (March/April 2005).