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Laura Agustín on Crossing Borders – Karen Herland

A century ago, newspapers regularly reported stories of young women who were tricked by fraudulent employment agents, seduced by men promising marriage or drugged with hypodermic needles on the tramway, and awoke behind a brothel's locked doors. In every 'chop suey palace' or ice cream parlour lurked madams, pimps, and their agents, responsible for stealing tens of thousands of young women each year to feed the growing sex trade. Conservative clergymen, women's associations, philanthropic organizations and progressive social reformers were equally passionate about the need for legislation to protect girls and women. Plays, movies, magazines and books were all platforms for cautionary tales.

The panic was so entrenched that when the well-funded coffers of John D. Rockefeller's private foundation turned up no trace of coordinated international networks of criminals kidnapping women, this lack of evidence was seen as further proof of their power.

I came across those early front-page newspaper accounts of drugged and stolen women regularly when researching vice in Montreal in the early 20th century. Further back in the paper, less sensational follow-up stories described young women who had decided to elope, or who fabricated stories to avoid punishment for staying out too late. One young woman faked her own kidnapping to try to win back an ex-boyfriend. Women were using the presumption of their powerlessness to get what they wanted.

And yet, the story still persists. Current campaigns against human trafficking closely parallel concerns about the white slave trade. Although the theme encompasses child labourers and migrant farm workers, the focus remains on stories of young women sold or stolen into exploitative conditions dependent on cruel pimps and

indifferent clients. The need to protect these young women and girls is regularly deployed to galvanize people across any number of disparate political positions. And, following in Rockefeller's well-heeled footsteps, Google recently announced an \$11.5 million donation to fight human trafficking around the world. An entire network of NGOs, programs, charities and projects exist to fight trafficking. Despite the vast amount of resources devoted to the cause, there are still only a handful of arrests every year.

Laura Agustín is one of the few theorists willing to challenge this particular legend. Since the early 1990s she has been speaking with, and writing about, migrant workers. What emerges is a complex set of stories presented from the point of view of the forgotten subjects in these narratives. Her research suggests that some women do choose sex work over other forms of labour available to them as migrants.

Although this contradicts the accepted mythology of trafficking, Agustín says: "I always say I take as a basic value that if someone tells me something, I believe it." Her writing is also critical of what she calls "the Rescue Industry"—the growing, and well-funded network of NGOs and programs whose existence depends on the helplessness of women and the conviction that they need to be saved.

I had the pleasure of meeting Laura while she was traveling through Montreal in November 2011. We had many fabulous conversations over drinks. Unfortunately, my attempts to properly record our subsequent conversations were only marginally successful. We found ourselves trying to recreate conversations over and over "for the record", losing a little bit with each successive copy.

What follows is fragments of our conversation, examining the ideas inherent in the mythologies of these campaigns and the very real impact those stereotypes have on the lives of the women involved.

Karen Herland: I want to start with this narrative. It's always the same story: an innocent woman, wherever she may be, somehow seduced by power or promise, or coerced and trapped....

Laura Agustín: It involves the idea that there are innocent girls, and there are men (or bad women) who tell them a story, and they go along with it. It relies on the idea of isolated women in jungles and mountaintops who don't know anything... but, of course, there are grass-roots agencies, and NGOs and journalists in those places, too.

It isn't because the story is more credible, it's more appealing. It presents a scenario with clear good and evil. Not many people like ambiguity and complications. They'll hear a story that's entertaining or thrilling and that's it.

KH: It is interesting that you say it's a kind of entertainment — it is. As a melodrama, it becomes simply entertainment. Nobody wants to know what happened to these women after the raid.

LA: I think the women have become irrelevant. I started to see that years ago. I doubt many really care about the women.

KH: The story ends when the brothels are shut down, and the women no longer have to be there. But where the women end up, or what their options might be, is never considered.

LA: A lot of money is spent on (rescue) shelters, but there isn't any mechanism for overseeing them, some of them are more like asylums or concentration camps. And there's no solution for the fact that women who have migrated to another country don't have any citizen rights.

I've met people who feel 'rehabilitated', in the sense that they have a roof and food, and a chance to calm down

and think about what they want to do. They are grateful for that, but they are not going to be able to stay in the country they happen to be in. And they don't want to go home.

Of course, a woman in this situation can't just walk away, because she's not legal and doesn't know anyone. She's calculating the whole time as well, "what should I say to these people to make them bend the rules for me."

KH: It is a constant calculation. Women who decide to leave home in the first place, make those calculations — 'should I work as a domestic in a home and care for kids, or work in a bar?'. Then after they have been "rescued", they have a whole new set of calculations to make.

LA: But if you have crossed a border, you are constrained. What if the shelter people are abusing you? Some people might try going back to the brothel, if they know the way. And even if someone offers to help them, they are vulnerable, as recognizable foreigners who don't speak the language.

KH: In the developed world, we put all these values on these choices and the people making them. The fact that you would leave your family, and go into debt, to sell sex is completely incomprehensible to a lot of western people. Why would you leave your family unless you were forced to or lied to or desperate? And why would you sell sex unless you were forced, or desperate or lied to....

LA: Of course, we know that some people do want to leave home, and run away. But adult women in "other" places are considered children. That's colonialism.

KH: And their choices are not valid. How many North American women willingly leave their homes and go to school and go into debt. Those women are leaving home to better their lives. And in the context of that, they're incurring debt. Somehow we accept the need for the debt of higher education. Finally the occupy movement is addressing this in a really clear way. You see sign after sign: I went to school..., I got that degree...

LA: I did what you told me to do...

KH: ...and now I have a 20, 30, 100 thousand dollar debt. And with the earning power of my English degree or humanities degree, I have no way to pay that back in any reasonable amount of time.

LA: At least two kinds of big debt are invisible: student debt and mortgages on houses that people can't pay and they are thrown out on the street.

People get into boats and go to Vancouver and owe \$20,000 and that's considered uniquely horrible. If you talk to them, they say "well, it's a lot of money, but my plan is to I'll be able to pay that back in a few years...." People may be duping themselves, but it is rational to think that way. Women migrating and incurring debt to sell sex is just considered so much worse. Anthropologically, it's very strange to see one kind of debt as demonic and especially terrible.

KH: The assumption is that everyone in the West, or with an education or whatever that marker is, never has to compromise. I don't understand how anyone can live a life and assume no one has to compromise. We all compromise.

LA: When I'm giving a talk, there's always a conversation about choices. I look at everyone in the room and say: "I would like everyone in this room to think about whether they have always had a full and interesting gamut of choices at every point in their life — when they never felt obligated or coerced by a parent, or an

institution, or the need to get money, or to get the hell out of a stupid marriage ...” Everyone always seems on board with that.

KH: But difficult choices and compromises are somehow worse for women in developing countries. This is precisely where the rescue industry exists. It is intended to protect women from abusive conditions, however, to do so, it has to presume that there are only abusive conditions, and women who have been tricked and betrayed.

LA: If you talk to people in NGOs they all know how messy and confusing it is. They talk with migrants and try to figure out what each person can do. But the funding comes from governments with policies. And right now, taking an anti-trafficking position is a condition for funding. So you have to couch your requests for funding in a particular way.

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KH: So, what is the utopia? Do you see what exists now and take a pragmatic approach of harm reduction? Do you try to improve the situation, such as it is? Or do you say no I want to build a better world where this doesn't exist at all.

LA: My kind of view is considered amoral by utopians. They say I'm willing to let everyone have a mediocre life. But I'm not interested in utopia.

KH: Because you don't think it's realistic.

LA: I don't believe we'll ever reach there. I am personally more interested in the slow plodding amelioration of bad situations, the small things that you can do. But there is a lot of pressure to only present one version, the simplistic, idealistic one. I've been called irresponsible for not doing that.

KH: So how would you address some of the problems as they are framed now?

LA: Well, I would never say, *this* is the solution. There are too many different situations. It's all been totalized by the melodramatic story into one simple idea, but there have to be a variety of solutions.

KH: The problem is sex work is so often illegal, wherever people end up. It's a bit of a chicken/egg situation. If I come from somewhere and don't have the papers that allow me to work legally, the fact that sex work is more often than not undocumented makes it an option.

LA: Even in the countries that have legalized or regulated sex work – Holland and New Zealand, say – they've excluded sex work as a way to prevent trafficking.

It can be an advantage that sex work is not regulated. If you get into a country and you have the right contacts to get into sex work and then find it tolerable or you manage to adapt to it, well then in fact you have the ability to move from different levels of the industry and try different jobs.

And for domestic workers, the family that employs you is often named on your papers. So women doing domestic work can't even move sideways. It can be better to do it in an undocumented way, and then move around.

KH: I want to go back to what you said before, about believing what people say about their own experience. Because, sometimes, when I hear certain stories, I'm wondering if I'm being told those

stories because of those calculations we discussed before.

LA: I don't work in an NGO. If you're on the front line, then you are faced with those very confusing situations. Sometimes I think "that sounds fishy." The people who process asylum claims are in exactly the same situation. They always have to evaluate: is this something to make a claim on...Social workers have to ask the same kinds of questions, do these people deserve or need my help or not?

KH: Even how you pose that question: do people deserve or need my help? In the rescue industry, no one is asking that question. The default is to assume victimization and a lack of agency — not to figure out what's needed, or wanted, by the women themselves.

LA: Well, we're back to colonialism, then.

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While it's easy to see how both the idea of the white slave trade and trafficking discourses stem from western anxieties about immigration and gender, it's less clear why the stories depend on such archaic depictions of helpless women in need of rescue.

The spectre of victimized women in need of protection creates a satisfying narrative that allows westerners the opportunity to sweep in and 'save' misguided, abused and neglected women (and girls).

As Agustín has pointed out, the language of trafficking is circling back to the turn of the last century, and being replaced by the language of 'slavery'. This shift reinforces the helplessness of those involved, and the urgency of some form of intervention. International legislation is increasingly based on the imperative to stop trafficking, although arrests of traffickers are not increasing in proportion to the attention or resources devoted to them.

Although human rights NGOs uniformly take an anti-trafficking position, the rights of sex workers (including the right to be a sex worker) are rarely considered. Usually, the "rescued" women are forced to return to the same economic, social or cultural conditions that drove them to choose to leave in the first place.

More to the point, legislation and policy that has, as its basis, the intention to protect a supposedly less capable segment of society has rarely actually served that community. Many of the Canadian laws, recently deemed by Justice Susan Himel in her 2010 ruling to put women in harm's way, were intended to protect women. In practice, their enforcement has had quite the opposite effect.

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Image Credit: War on the White Slave Trade, Ernest A. Bell
First published 1909.

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Laura Agustín blogs as [The Naked Anthropologist](#) and is the author of [Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour, Markets and the Rescue Industry](#) (Zed Books, 2007). She writes as a lifelong migrant and sometime worker in both nongovernmental and academic projects about sex, travel and work.

Karen Herland has only rarely left Montreal.