

Université de Montréal

Unseen (Re)creation :
*Trafficking and Migrant Sex Work in Chris Abani's Becoming Abigail and Chika Unigwe's On
Black Sisters' Street*

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Ce mémoire intitulé

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*On Black Sisters' Street****

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Résumé

La littérature offre une occasion singulière pour transformer les postulats qui forgent notre compréhension des groupes marginalisés. Cependant, en raison de sa capacité à exposer des discours politiques, la littérature court aussi le risque d'exprimer des formes de représentations stéréotypées. Mon mémoire a pour objectif d'explorer l'industrie du sexe sous différents points de vue et à travers l'analyse de deux œuvres littéraires : « Becoming Abigail » écrit par Chris Abani et « On Black Sisters' Street » de Chika Unigwe. Ma recherche consiste à comprendre l'impact de l'économie globale sur la prolifération des industries criminelles telle l'industrie du sexe. En établissant un lien entre la sphère corporative et le trafic du sexe, on peut dessiner un portrait de la structure du capitalisme global et de son influence sur les comportements individuels. A cet égard, les romans étudiés dans ce mémoire présentent diverses représentations de l'industrie du sexe, des travailleuses du sexe jusqu'aux femmes victime de trafic. Le roman de Chris Abani se concentre sur les expériences traumatiques que subit Abigail et qui, par conséquent, la rendent invisible. En contrepartie, celui de Chika Unigwe offre une perspective nuancée de l'industrie, en se penchant sur les ambiguïtés du monde du travail du sexe. Mon mémoire met l'accent sur le fait que l'industrie du sexe est composée de sa partie visible, soit celle qui est décriminalisée, et de sa face cachée, soit celle portant sur le trafic du sexe. Entre ces espaces, nous y trouvons les femmes et les jeunes filles qui sont marginalisées et invisibles parce qu'elles ne possèdent pas les caractéristiques de la victime parfaite. Je cherche à démontrer que la littérature a un rôle important à jouer quand vient le temps de changer notre façon de percevoir ces femmes et jeunes filles, en les présentant comme des personnes qui ont de l'agentivité plutôt que des êtres nécessairement impuissants.

Mots clés : Trafic du sexe, Migrants travailleuses du sexe, économie globale, traumatisme, littérature

Abstract

Literature can present us with many opportunities to transform our perspectives of a marginalized group. Nevertheless, with its capacity for political expression, there comes the risk of falling within stereotypical modes of representation. In my thesis I not only explore aspects of the sex trafficking industry, but also how literary works such as *Becoming Abigail* and *On Black Sisters' Street* examine its underbelly. I will also examine the ways in which the global economy has helped criminal industries like this one to proliferate. In understanding the structure of global capitalism, we can trace similar patterns of exploitation between its behaviours in the corporate sphere and within the sex trafficking industry. The novels studied hereafter present different forms of representations of the trafficking industry. Where *Becoming Abigail* is focused primarily of the traumatic experiences the protagonist has endured, *On Black Sisters' Street* offers a nuanced perspective on this industry, by tackling the ambiguities of the sex trade. This thesis emphasises the fact that the sex industry is composed of its visible—and at the very least decriminalized—side of the industry known as sex work, and its shadow that we know as sex trafficking. In the spaces in between we find those who are marginalized, the women and girls left unseen because they do not fit within the criteria of a perfect victim. I seek to demonstrate that literature has an important role to play in shaping our understanding of who the marginalized people are, by contextualizing them within a frame of agency, rather than helplessness.

Keywords: Sex trafficking, migrant sex workers, global economy, trauma, literature

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*For you both, Mom and Dad,
for always supporting me and inspiring me.*

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Introduction: The Challenges in the Fight Against Sex Trafficking

1.1 The United Nations' Implication in the Matter

On November 15, 2000, the “United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocols Thereto” was adopted in order to fight criminal organizations specialized in arms, drugs, and human trafficking. The protocol to “Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children” (hereto known as the Palermo protocol) includes a definition of trafficking in Article Three, which states that any form of coercion is considered trafficking in persons:

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. (42)

It further states not only what exploitation entails but also, in subparagraph *b*, the irrelevance of a victim's consent. Legally speaking, if a person is a victim of exploitation, such as forced prostitution, this person's consent cannot be valid since they were coerced in the first place to become a prostitute. In cases where a woman would choose to be trafficked to a destination country, the choice cannot be considered valid or consenting since they do not have an offer containing all pertinent information and they are also indebted to the individual who sends them. They could not have full knowledge of the situation at hand and therefore could not make an informed decision. These two subparagraphs of Article Three of the Palermo protocol are paramount for two main reasons. The first being that the definition put in place is to facilitate collaboration between nations. This permits the signatories to have a common goal in the fight

against trafficking and to respect the first article of the protocol, which is to prevent and combat sex trafficking and to protect the victims and promote cooperation between the nations. The three P's (Prevent, Protect and Promote) are part of the protocol and therefore mandatory to implement in the development of the laws against trafficking. They also have further imperative to prevent, investigate and prosecute as dictated by the convention itself and stated in Article Three. Furthermore, the Convention and its protocol is all-encompassing and non-interventionist, which serves as an international legal obligation. This means that the UN cannot and will not intervene in domestic affairs, just as individual countries cannot intervene elsewhere. It is a cooperative effort and the main goal of the legislative measures put in place by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's (UNODC) convention is to fight against trafficking of human beings on a global scale. Therefore, it is up to each individual nation to incorporate UNODC's protocol and convention laws in order to have a legal strategy to fight against this industry.

In order to have a holistic view of the sex trafficking industry, we must first comprehend the function of international and domestic laws meant to combat trafficking respectively. The legislative measures put in place by the UNODC as well as the domestic laws created for the purposes of fighting human sex trafficking reveal that there are two major objectives of these laws: to protect and prevent—to protect victims¹ of trafficking and to use resources available to prevent further exploitation. The UNODC as well as domestic legal institutions such as the justice departments of England and Belgium have implemented protocols and laws to fight trafficking in human beings. However, such organizations often have difficulties prosecuting individuals who are a part of this now multibillion-dollar industry. Understanding the way legislative bodies

¹ I use here the word “victim” because that is the terminology within legal documents

combat the sex trade, as well as the challenges associated with this fight, gives insight into literature's own impact in either reinforcing or changing the narrative of trafficked people.

There are criticisms that have arisen against the UN's approach, particularly its definition of trafficking in the Palermo protocol. Trafficking is an umbrella term that includes both forced labour and forced prostitution. While both forms of trafficking include hard, physical labour, exploitative methods of psychological bondage, and the vicious circle of entrapment, sex trafficking mostly targets women and children since they are considered the most vulnerable. Additionally, sex trafficked persons are also subjected to rape, as well as other forms of sexual and physical violence. The lack of distinction between both forms of trafficking means that most sex trafficked victims remain unseen. Nevertheless, the UN, as stated above, remains an international organisation and cannot intervene in domestic affairs. The first article states that "[the] purpose of this Convention is to promote cooperation to prevent and combat transnational organized crime more effectively" (5). This statement of purpose clearly explains that international cooperation is needed to fight these criminal organizations (firearms trade, drug trade, and trafficking) because they are transnational. For all intents and purposes, the definition of trafficking in the Palermo protocol does not leave much room for interpretation and recognizes all forms of trafficking, as well as their methods of coercion. To paint a full picture of how the legislative measures, put in place by the UNODC, affect the domestic laws of the nations, two countries will be analysed: England and Belgium.

1.2 Destination Countries and their Legal Approach

England and Belgium are prominent destination countries of sex trafficking rings and will be featured and studied hereafter. These destination countries are of particular interest not only because they are the countries where each novel takes place, but also because of their proactive and severe approach on both trafficking and prostitution. In 2003, England passed the Sexual Offences Act with rape as its most severe offence, imposing a sentence of up to life in prison. Traffickers however can get from six months to fourteen years, whether a child is involved or not. In 2015, England passed the “Modern Slavery Act” (MSA)², which is a revision of the “Sexual Offences Act” of 2003. The MSA contains more severe sentences and a better strategy for the protection of victims. As a signatory of the Palermo protocol, England is required to fund NGOs and has hence funded Unseen, an organisation dedicated to awareness of the issue as well as helping those who have been trafficked. Secondly, Belgium is recognized as having some of the toughest laws against trafficking. In 1995, the country passed the “Act Containing Measures to Repress Trafficking in Persons,” which was amended in 2005 to outlaw all forms of trafficking.

The Palermo protocol aims to suppress and punish trafficking in human beings as well as protect the victims of the crime. As previously mentioned, there is no distinction between sex trafficking and trafficking for labour. Of course, the UNODC’s primary function is to fight transnational organized crime on a global scale with the cooperation of the participatory nations. However, collecting data on the success rate of prosecuted cases of sex trafficking is difficult because the terms forced labour and sex trafficking are combined under the umbrella term of

² The MSA of 2015 was released nine years after the publication of *Becoming Abigail*. In order to remain faithful to the novel’s time, I will not take into account the MSA 2015, but its mention is important as it presents, in brief, the progress that had been made since then.

trafficking to ensure convergence between nations and to simplify the prosecution process. This does not mean that the efforts made by the countries themselves are to be viewed as negligible. On the contrary, Belgium and England have made tremendous strides in fighting modern slavery. Nevertheless, one of the key components rarely discussed is the way the sex trade is affected by global capitalism.

1.3 Gore Capitalism and its Practices

Global capitalist practices play an important role in the culture surrounding sexual violence and creating what Sayak Valencia calls gore practices. In the book *Gore Capitalism*, Valencia defines gore capitalism as the “reinterpretation of the hegemonic global economy in (geographic) border spaces” (19). Gore capitalism is the response to consumer culture developed in the First World in order to increase global purchasing power through violent and illicit means. In other words, gore capitalism serves as a term that embodies the increasing violence we observe that is intimately related to underground criminal activity, such as the drug and sex trade. The capitalist agenda creates a constant demand while simultaneously supplying the desires of the everyday man to the wealthiest member of society. This has pushed Third World populations to resort to criminal activity in the hopes of a better economic future. Valencia explains that the violence that ensues often has a connection to the biomarket or the commodification of the body. This can mean the hiring of bodyguards to facilitate sexual exploitation or the outright sale of a person into bondage labour. Such practices correspond to what the UNODC qualifies as trafficking since this biomarket is managed by nefarious means (kidnapping, coercion, and deception). It is not only the commodification of the body for exploitative purposes (forced labour), but also for its abuse (forced prostitution). Nevertheless, gore practices are often perceived as an act of rebellion since

they defy the system which benefits the global north at the expense of the global south. Valencia explains that people who are facing a penury of available, legal work often fear financial ruin and so turn to criminal organisations to find an escape from poverty. Valencia uses the example of the Mexican drug trade as a prominent supplier of jobs, and many flock to it because of the economic opportunities it can offer. Other transnational criminal organisations such as the sex trade have similar situations where women are trafficked to other countries for prostitution and do so willingly. Valencia states that:

Third World responses to contemporary economic demands lead to the creation of an underlying order that makes violence a tool of production and then globalizes it. Gore capitalism could thus be understood as part of an intercontinental struggle of extreme post-colonialism, in which territory is recolonized via the desires for consumption, self-affirmation, and empowerment. (76)

Contemporary economic demands are fueled by the desire for novelty and instant gratification. This kind of economy produces two types of subjects, the hyperconsumer and the endriago. For Valencia, the hyperconsumer is created by capitalism's capacity to reinforce its systems of surveillance and control through social consciousness (43). In other words, the hyperconsumer, in demanding ever novel technology, social media, entertainment and consumer items, is increasingly vulnerable to insidious forms of control enabled by those products. The endriago is the proliferator of gore practices: "Under this rubric, the endriago subject—that is, the *entrepreneurs of gore capitalism*—can be understood as a new creature, an amalgam of *economic entrepreneur*, *political entrepreneur* and *violence specialist*" (64). This means that the endriago have the ability to create and legitimize any form of business and to break down borders through violent means. The third component is geographical in nature; through the tightening of border controls, the value of illicit

goods increases (41). Borders can intensify demand just as effectively as the endriago and the hyperconsumer. As such, blocking the passage of illicit goods, such as prostitutes, across national borders makes their value climb because of their exotic and exclusive nature. The sex trade relies on these two notions of exoticism and exclusivity. The sex industry relies in large part on racist and ethnic stereotypes. Sex slaves are marketed by their nationalities, features, and skills, and this is also true of sex workers. The relationship between the two is born of a shared history – that of a systemic exchange of women for material and social gain.

1.4 The Social Roots of the Sex Trade

Gayle Rubin explains an older aspect of the economy of sex in her text “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex” by analysing systems of relationships through various tribes and comparing them to modern society. Systems of relationship are a way to understand the cultural role of gender. While there is a variety in social structure—stemming from patriarchal/matriarchal to partible paternity—one aspect seems to stand out and be deeply rooted in the fabric of most societies, which is the concept of the exchange of women. This exchange of women, Rubin suggests, is part of the sex/gender system, “a set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which, these transformed sexual needs are satisfied” (158). In other words, one’s sex becomes an identifier (gender) of one’s role in a group, community, or society. The exchange of women is always a transactional process and with the creation of the hyperconsumer, sexual culture has been cultivated around the consuming subject through media and gore practices. Therefore, the exchange of women has transformed into a system based on female hypersexualization, objectification, and

commodification. As Rubin explains, the exchange of women is a concept that “places the oppression of women within social systems, rather than in biology” (175). This is an important distinction to make because Rubin identifies the systemic nature of this violation. If the system is culprit, then society and the individual, are accomplices. The consumer is ultimately responsible for enabling gore practices throughout the world, not the consumed. Laws against sex trafficking and prostitution are presented as tools to protect women and children against exploitation, but often protect the consumer and erases the exploited. For example, many countries have made buying sex illegal in order to protect sex workers and to discourage prostitution as a whole. Despite the desire to protect the women from potential exploiters, these laws tend to push the industry underground, creating a space where prostitutes (trafficked or not) are in danger from the permissibility of violence within the now shadow economy of the sex industry.

Considering how the economy of sex is structured around the commodification of the body, we can view this through what Elina Penttinen calls the silent point of globalization. In the introduction of her book *Globalization, Prostitution and Sex-Trafficking*, Penttinen explains that prostitution has become an economic method of survival. Furthermore, she makes a similar argument to Valencia by stating that “the global sex industry can be conceptualized as a shadow globalization” (7). This reference to shadow globalization is within the same vein as gore capitalism as both rely on illicit activity to exercise control over the economically desperate. Gore capitalism creates positions of economic power for those who have none. In relationship with prostitution, this becomes an active message of economic emancipation. It does not create positions of power, but rather entraps women with false hopes of opportunities that transform into “concrete constraints and controls” (7). Penttinen’s argument makes a clear distinction between genders and marks the position of women as vulnerable and malleable. In many cases, when one

accepts to be trafficked for prostitution, it is with the promise of economic emancipation that instead becomes the experience of abuse, rape, and entrapment. Agency is something these women do not possess because their choices, identity and body no longer belong to them. Penttinen explains that in a globalized, corporeal economy, “[bodies] are seen as sites, points of mediation between private and public, self and other, and not immutable raw material that follows the laws of nature. ... the body is a site onto which power is inscribed” (12). In the case of sex slaves, the will of the consumers and sellers is inscribed onto their bodies, which are no longer their own. However, such categorical explanations of the vulnerability of women does not take into account several factors that can motivate some women to seek out migration and sex work as a way to emancipate themselves from the inertia of their lives (economy, family, travel, independence). Literature then can become a useful political tool in that it offers new representations of the sex industry. In addition, it can produce novel ways to understand the workings and challenges of that industry, including exposing readers to voices that are traditionally unheard. Literature functions as a constructed representation of a certain reality and these representations can either change one’s perspective on an issue or solidify it.

1.5 Literature and its Influence

Literature has the capacity to be political because it can diversify our notions of truth. It is political in the ways it creates new meanings and can therefore transform the collective narrative. When examining the functions of theory, John Horton and Andrea T. Baumeister argue that:

The idea of the “creative genius” of the individual mind and the emergence of reading as an essentially “private” experience both contribute to a distinctive feature

of the modern understanding of imaginative literature as something independent and with its own canons of truth and its own standard of value. (“Literature, Philosophy and Political Theory” 7)

Horton and Baumeister explain in this passage that truth is a malleable concept and can be changed. Literature has the power to transform perspective. Perspective is a form of truth, often belonging to a single individual. However, common perspectives can become modes of understanding, and at times, modes of behaviour. As an example, the sex trafficking industry is primarily understood as a criminal organisation where all trafficked persons within are victims taken by force. This conceptualization of trafficked persons is not entirely wrong as this is often the story people are presented with. Horton and Baumeister’s notion of truth and standard of value is a direct statement that knowledge can be produced through literature, as a means to reimagine the collective memory and history of who we are in this global society. They explain that:

Rorty advocated what he called “redescription”, the practice of modifying our descriptions to make what we describe look better or worse, as the appropriate form of dialogue about political values; and the masters of redescription, for Rorty, are not philosophers but novelists. (11)

With the term “redescription” as the main focus of Rorty’s argument, we can begin to see how literature has an influential position in perceptions of social reality. It is a far more efficient producer of knowledge than philosophy or politics because it can transform meanings and reshape our individual understanding of reality.

Similarly to Horton and Baumeister, Rancière argues that literature is political simply by existing. To make sense of this statement, there must first be separate definitions of politics and literature. Rancière describes politics as a communicative art in debating things. He states that

“[politics] is the construction of a specific sphere of experience in which certain objects are posited as shared and certain subjects regarded as capable of designating these objects and of arguing about them” (3). This means that politics is a debate and that our ability to use speech is what makes us political beings. Rancière takes the idea of politics all the way back to Aristotle and Plato’s philosophy on the subject by denouncing the exclusivity of political practice and instead declares that politics begin when the community, as a whole, has a voice on the object of debate. Therefore, politics is the affair of all people. He also explains that “[political] activity reconfigures the distribution of the perceptible” (4). In other words, political activity exposes the different angles of an issue. The distinction of the political as an exclusive activity (belonging to the nobility) and the political as a common experience (belonging to the people) is vital to make when we talk about literature’s capacity to change the perspective and challenge the meanings of a particular issue since one recognizes that literature is speech written. More than that, literature does not have to stay within the boundaries of rigid definition and common understanding, but rather, it can push beyond said boundaries by relating human experience through the constricted social imaginary.

Literature, as Rancière explains it, is the art of speech in writing. To him, writers are producers of knowledge and to that effect are political beings. In his own words, “writers are in the business of producing meanings. They use words as communication tools and thereby find themselves engaged, whether they like or not, in the task of constructing a common world” (5). This suggests that writers are engaged in the task of constructing this common world through difference, but can also be caught within stereotypical modes of representation. Novelists are always in the business of producing perspective, of identifying or exposing difference through lived experience, whether it be personal or common. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie explained in her

TED talk, “The Danger of a Single Story,” that the “consequence of the single story is that it robs people of dignity.” Thus, reading and writing is a political act in itself because it breaks down the barriers of the singular perspective to create a multitude of them. Rancière’s theory on the politics of literature demonstrates that it challenges our understanding of the world by exposing the reader to a different reality, or more precisely, a different version of reality. To Rancière, the “expression ‘politics of literature’ thereby implies that literature intervenes as literature in this carving up of space and time, the visible and the invisible, speech and noise” (4). Literature creates a space for the unseen, and it is through the individual act of reading that the political act of literature can take global proportions. Within this context, literature has the power to change collective memory and readdress issues otherwise left untouched. It is through the production of meanings that literature becomes political and can challenge our view of cultures, society and how we contribute to them. Rancière’s methodical combination of literature and politics demonstrates the importance fiction has in an otherwise convoluted expression of the global. Literature theoretically has the capacity to allow the reader to acknowledge their own complicity in the erasure of the other and their demands for a re-evaluation of our own understanding.

Novels written by authors who come from previously colonised countries find themselves writing in the language of the colonizer to expose a different perspective of their culture and history, as opposed to the “cemented” representations of these countries by the colonizer. As Adichie points out in her TED talk, exposing ourselves to different stories from the same country would be the best way to understand its people and its culture, as well as its history. Writers from Nigeria and many other countries are offering this amalgam of experiences. These range from traditionally western forms of writing to oral tradition novelized, which can offer radically different perspective. The act of writing in itself can easily be proven as a political act because it

directly confronts the narrative imposed by the global north in relationship to the global south, by presenting perspectives of those who are marginalized.

The sex trafficking industry is a vastly complex subject that contains many facets of operation. Exposing the legal and economic reality of this industry through novels transforms the challenge of understanding this industry into a tangible narrative. Where some novels challenge the perspective of the sex trafficking industry, others tend toward reinforcing victimization and its singular narrative. Chris Abani explains in an interview by Zaudi Kauffman that he was inspired by two separate news stories about sex trafficking that he read in a London newspaper. In the interview, he explains that one of the young girls was trafficked by close family, forced into sex slavery, and escaped. The second story he read was about a girl who was trafficked for labour work (domestic help). When rescued, she fell in love with the judge on her case. Once they were forcibly separated, she committed suicide. These two women are the inspiration for the character of Abigail. Throughout *Becoming Abigail*, a novella by Chris Abani, there are identifiable markers of sex trafficking, from Peter as a trafficker, to Abigail's experience as a sex slave. However, the narrative constructed by Abani is indelibly focused on Abigail's traumatic experiences and renders her completely invisible. Conversely, Chika Unigwe's novel is nuanced as it emphasises the role women play in this issue thus forces the reader to contemplate the notion of choice. *On Black Sisters' Street* attempts a more conceptually daring and ontologically demanding perception of the sex industry and the women who become caught within it, by creating four different women with four drastically different stories of how they became prostitutes. Horton, Baumeister and Rancière all speak to the political prowess literature has by simply existing. As compelling as these arguments are, there is a need to acknowledge the privilege and power that an author has over their work. Authors like Unigwe and Abani are a part of the current literary community, thus they can

actively shape contemporary representations of the otherwise historically marginalized practice of prostitution. Repetitive narratives of the poor, helpless victim who was trafficked and forced into prostitution is not a false representation, but it only shows a sliver of the reality experienced by women who, in most cases, have an active role to play in their migration to destination countries. So, where Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* is a very narrow approach, Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* offers a broader perspective of experience. Furthermore, the main reason why the same narrative of captivity is reiterated is that it creates the perfect victim. Women who accept an offer to be sent to another country for sex work are too often seen as deserving of their fate—of asking for it—which excludes them from the story as they do not fit the criteria of this conventional victim (helpless, young, and violated).

This double standard of victimhood and invisibility will be analysed in the next two chapters of this thesis through *Becoming Abigail* and *On Black Sisters' Street*. For the first novel, the impact of chattel slavery and sexual trauma will be tools to analyse how Abani constructs a narrative that does not change the perspective of sex trafficking, but rather reinforces the perception of the trafficking victim. Christina Sharpe and Judith Herman articulate the difficulties of representation of black bodies and the atrocities of sexual assault, and these concepts will be applied to the context of modern slavery. The main problem of representation is that it runs the risk of reinforcing dominant patterns of representation—which Abani's novel does fall prey to—and reinforces the stereotypical status of sex trafficked women, which is the perfect victim. Throughout this narrative, Abigail is constantly imagined through her traumas and, as such, the character disappears entirely. As a novella, *Becoming Abigail* becomes problematic in many ways as the characters are underdeveloped and the women present in it are either dead or are abused. Abigail and Mary are two women who are embodied by their trauma. Because of this, their traumas have a much larger

presence in the novella than the individuals themselves and so, they become voiceless and invisible in the process. Avery Gordon, author of *Ghostly Matters*, argues that the ghost is a manifestation of a person not yet heard and such manifestations are necessary to understand how the other is misrepresented. In a way, Abigail is this stereotypical manifestation of sex trafficking and victimhood. She is the manifestation of Abani's own misrepresentation of the industry and as such, its survivors remain unheard.

For the second novel, representation of the sex trafficking industry is rendered in a more complex manner and the four women who are trafficked to Belgium offer a nuanced perspective of how they came to the country. Most importantly, *On Black Sisters' Street* identifies the economic reasons behind these women's choices and how their status in society is a precursor for emancipation. Joyce's narrative is considered prototypical as she is the only one who is forced into prostitution. Chika Unigwe's perspective is based on interviews with women who were trafficked and it creates a much more complex and nuanced narrative of the sex trade and its impact on women. In conjunction with such works as *Sex at the Margins*, Unigwe's novel will be studied through the perspective of the global movement of women—how such movement is related to forms of migration that necessitate illicit activity, and what the economic motivations of these women in the global south might be. My using these works allows me to frame Unigwe's novel within the context of global capitalist practices and their impact on women in the global south. Furthermore, Unigwe acknowledges the impact of trauma in her novel, but she does not make it the primary subject of the women's stories. She fleshes out their identities and makes them more human. Such representations of trafficking and sex work demonstrate that the sex industry is vast and much more complex than it might appear. Therefore, Unigwe's nuanced approach allows for

a more comprehensive perspective toward the women who find themselves limited by the gendered imbalances of power.

Literary works tend to be at opposite spectrums of representation of the law, by either presenting their flaws in very specific contexts, or by presenting it as a successful tool for rescue. In novels such as *Becoming Abigail* and *On Black Sisters' Street*, the law is represented through its rules of conduct put into place to protect the women who are trafficked. In doing so, these novels create a precedent for the criticism of its efficacy in these systems of rescue. Literature also has a role to play in the representation of sex trafficking that can be as expansive as it can be reductive. The power of literature arises from its offer of a range of perspectives to gain insight into the experiences of trafficked women, including the choices they feel they have had to make to survive. Novels like *Becoming Abigail* do not take on this revolutionary act, but rather reinscribe the same modes of understanding already etched in the social fabric. Unigwe's novel, *On Black Sisters' Street* demonstrates that this is not always the case. Some women find themselves resorting to prostitution in order to emancipate themselves economically. As Penttinen points out, this choice is made to cope with globalization and is a response to global capitalist practices. Novels such as the one written by Chika Unigwe produce this more nuanced understanding of being caught in the margins of this industry. I would argue that, conversely, *On Black Sisters' Street* actively informs and challenges the reader by presenting the industry through the perspective of the women, particularly how they assert agency through the process of telling their stories to one another.

Chapter One: *Becoming Abigail* by Chris Abani: A Haunting Unheard and the (Mis)representation of Sex Trafficking

1.1: Introduction

Chris Abani's *Becoming Abigail* retells the life of Abigail, a teenager living with her father in Nigeria, who is subjected to many traumas, notably the death of her mother (her namesake) in childbirth and her father's suicide. The latter's death leads to Abigail's traffic to England to be forced into prostitution by Peter, her in-law. Although the novella flows in time with its chapter divisions titled "Now" and "Then," it remains a narrative focused on trauma, from Abigail's rape by her cousin Edwin, to her suicide. Abigail's story is focused solely on her traumatic experiences, an atrocious series of events, leaving the reader to question the validity of this representation of sex trafficking and the people who are a part of it. In his interview with Zuade Kaufman, Abani explains that his novels are "more connected with ideas of redemption and the human element—and the becoming". To the author, *Becoming Abigail* is about the process of developing humanity within the individual, how we become who we are despite what has happened to us—how we push through the difficult chapters. This notion of becoming is at the center of his novella and raises a myriad of questions about how trauma affects and shapes women. This chapter will focus on three aspects of representations of the sex trafficking industry. The first will be an exploration of slavery through *In the Wake* by Christina Sharpe. It will serve as a contextualization of modern slavery, and how the theories of gore practices and the wake examine the impact on black, commodified bodies. Sharpe's work is dedicated to explaining the inevitability of the violation of black bodies, as well as identifying how women are, more often than not, produced by violent acts as Abigail is. Second, Judith Herman's book *Trauma and Recovery* help to define the invisibility of survivors, in favour of the hypervisibility of victims. As a psychiatrist, Herman deconstructs trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms among incest and rape survivors. Her goal is to bring

women's trauma to the forefront of psychological research. Third, *Ghostly Matters*, written by Avery Gordon, explores the notion of absence as a marker of ghostly presence. Her book theorises ghosts within a historical framework and contextualizes them within the fabric of Western society, where their presence signifies a message unheard. In other words, the haunting they create is a way for them to have a voice in collective, social experience. With the help of these works, Abani's novella is approached critically and interpreted with a more nuanced understanding of sex trafficking. In many ways, the novella draws on tropes of victimization and creates an atmosphere of sympathy whereby the reader is then led to react, rather than to reflect. The vicious cycle of violence, sexual trauma, and invisibility (ghostly figure) are all prominent factors of the industry that are blown out of proportion in *Becoming Abigail*. This cycle shapes the haunting of an abused minor who is inexorably tied to the misrepresentations of sex trafficking.

1.2: Modern Slavery and Gore Capitalism

The representation of sex trafficking in *Becoming Abigail* is limited by the author's narrow understanding of modern slavery and the people who are trapped by it. The current conceptualization of the trafficking in persons industry is divided into two major categories. The first is for cheap labour and the second is for cheap prostitution. Specifically, people who are forced into prostitution owe a tremendous debt to their traffickers and often find themselves trapped in their positions for years if they are not caught by either police or immigration enforcers. In most cases, women who are trafficked for sex work are not kidnapped, but sent by their own volition. However, the narrative that is most heard is the opposite. There are many reasons why stories of kidnapping and forced prostitution are told above those who willingly migrate to destination countries to do sex work. For the most part, these narratives attract sympathy and

therefore mobilize action. They are emotionally moving and identify the industry as a shadow economy that must be dismantled, because it thrives on the commodification of bodies. It is, in other words, a modern form of slavery. Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake*—which discusses how chattel slavery still has an impact in society today—establishes a link between historical forms of slavery, its modern counterpart, and Chris Abani's novella, *Becoming Abigail*.

The history of chattel slavery in the United States—from its inception to its cultural impact in the aftermath of the Civil War—has been discussed in many works since the practice was outlawed in 1865. Christina Sharpe, however, uncovers the impact it still has today; what she describes as the wake. Most importantly, she articulates the reiteration of the image of black bodies in various media in order to develop her argument which targets representation, and its impacts on societal perceptions. The wake has many definitions, but Sharpe focuses on the imagery of ships, creating waves born from their stern. This comparison is not chosen lightly, as the wake is also reminiscent of the Middle Passage and the re-articulation of the ghosts within the current context of racism, the commodification of black bodies, and the discourse that ensues. *In the Wake* revises the methods of representations of black bodies and states that “these images work to confirm the status, location, and already held opinion within dominant ideology about those exhibitions of spectacular Black bodies whose meanings then remain unchanged” (Sharpe 83). In effect, Sharpe explains that the imagery created of black bodies today is a reiteration of the stereotyped figure of blackness; perpetually keeping the Black community in a vicious cycle of violence. In other words, blackness is created, emphasized, and maintained in violence. Perpetuated misunderstandings of systemic forms of racism and violence make the imagery of the wake all the more poignant as it symbolizes the power that chattel slavery still holds over the perceptions of black bodies. By

repeating the narrative of the violation and violence onto black bodies, there is a significantly reduced access to different forms of imagining blackness outside of its narrowed spectrum.

Modern slavery practices, such as sex trafficking, often have a fixed narrative to encourage action from the average citizen. Although such narratives are not false, they are often misrepresentations of the operating system of shadow economies like the drug and sex trade. Trafficking is an industry that feeds on the desire for freedom, which is easily exploitable. Women who accept an offer to be sent to a destination country to be prostituted is closer to the reality of the modes of operation for traffickers, a fact revealed in the testimonies of female survivors³. Nevertheless, the stories that clutter the media often contain three key elements that can also be found in Abani's novella: exploitation by relatives; extreme forms of abuse and trauma; and the production of victimization—where the language used to construct the identities of these women targets their helplessness, poverty, and vulnerability. There is the added component of racialized bodies which can be perceived in *Becoming Abigail*, where black bodies are constantly commodified by violent means.

Abani explains in his interview with *Truthdig* that he is interested in the concept of the becoming, hence the title of his novella. When thinking of becoming, there is also the notion of transformation, and therefore change, which is why *Becoming Abigail* is often understood as a bildungsroman. The term bildungsroman suggests that the protagonist grows from a determining experience in their lives. Since Abigail commits suicide and is already hypervigilant before she is brought to England, the growth or—to the roots of bildungsroman—the education that Abigail

³ See: Agustín, Laura María. *Sex at the Margins: Migration, Labour Markets and the Rescue Industry*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2008

goes through is halted abruptly by her death. As such, *Becoming Abigail* can hardly be considered as a bildungsroman as one never gets to know Abigail as an individual. Furthermore, Abani himself is concerned with this notion of becoming, how people can become humane. However, Abigail is a character that is made in more ways than one. She is a fiction created from two real stories, and she is also “made” (93) by her cousin’s acts of violence toward her. Sharpe explains the phenomenon thusly: “[it] is a reminder that to be Black is to be continually produced by the wait toward death; that the cradle and the grave double as far as Black flesh is concerned” (66). Abigail’s story begins and ends with death. Her mother’s death in childbirth and her own suicide reiterate Sharpe’s previous statement of perpetual violence that black bodies are made to endure. This only accentuates the fact that Abigail only exists through the violence she is subjected to, and therefore, her individuality and identity disappear.

Chris Abani’s representation of women as well as his portrayal of the trauma they must face, is sensationalist and detracts from the characters’ complexities. Abigail is a character in a novella who emerges from the author’s often limited conceptualization of womanhood, where a stereotypical vision of commodified black bodies is prioritized. The primary focus of this narrative is the trauma sex trafficking survivors are burdened with. When, for example, a fourteen-year-old Abigail runs away from Peter’s home, she meets Derek, her social worker, who eventually becomes her lover. However, in the novella, the reader only discovers that Derek is this “man-child who was her social worker” (56) at the end of the chapter. It is centered around the romanticization of the relationship between Derek and Abigail, without drawing much attention to Abigail’s age and vulnerability. Not only is the relationship illegal, it is unethical in consideration of Derek’s professional status. Such a sensationalist format is meant to be jarring to the reader—to create a disturbing image, to shock. Abigail is continually performed this way as her narrative

is punctuated by declarative sentences, such as: “So she was always Abigail. Yet not” (46). Such a sentence fallaciously brings a stop to Abigail’s becoming, suggesting that she is but a body exclusively created by forms of violence for further violation. These depictions of her commodified and traumatized self confirms Sharpe’s theorization of the wake and the effects of unilateral representations of sex trafficking. Since Abigail is only ever described through her trauma, without any notion of who she is outside of it, how is the reader to understand her as human? Abani’s construction of female characters in this novella reiterates black bodies as vessels and recipients of violent acts. Sharpe describes the need to look beyond this understanding and to create a discourse around black bodies as human beings, not merely as traumatized victims, or traumatizing victimizers. Sayak Valencia describes a similar desire for the current model of understanding of violence in a capitalist context:

We understand this episteme of violence as the set of relations that join our moment to the discursive and non-discursive practices that arise out of violence, creating epistemological figures that no longer have direct relationships with now-inadequate models of the interpretation of reality. (36)

Valencia is demonstrating how individuals—these figures of epistemic violence—are no longer behaving within the parameters we are familiar with now that global capitalism is known to play an influential role in the behaviours and decisions of the traffickers and the trafficked. Sex trafficking survivors can no longer be considered within a model of victimization, but rather within one that weighs the economic motivation of the survivor and the trafficker. As such, traffickers are fulfilling their economic motivation while some sex workers can also fulfill their own. Relating back to Sharpe, *Becoming Abigail* depicts a version of reality in literature where black bodies are “characterized ... by gratuitous violence” (28). Such violence is described throughout the novella

and it takes away any means of understanding Abigail as a person, beyond the violence that she has lived through. These circuitous characterizations of trafficked women become a vicious cycle in which blackness is confirmed as existing only within the boundaries of violence—where black men are violent and black women are violated by men. In terms of the novella, we then have to question the implications of this circuitous violation inscribed onto Abigail. Sharpe demands that we rethink art that has become, in the context of expressing blackness, “pain for public consumption” (44). *Becoming Abigail* proves to be no different in this matter and even Abigail herself wonders if “maybe some of us are just here to feed others” (Abani 119). Since this novella does not remove itself from being a source of sensationalism, its objective, and the role it plays in representing sex trafficking, particularly Abigail’s experience, is dehumanizing.

1.3 Trauma and the Invisible Victim

Sexual trauma often finds itself at the centre of sex trafficking narratives, a process that ironically renders the survivor invisible. It can otherwise be understood that the trauma becomes the subject, not the person, who is often erased entirely. As such, the traumatic experience grows beyond the proportions of the individual mind and becomes an invasive force. Judith Herman, working on sexual trauma, deconstructs its effects in three different forms of expression: hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction. Hyperarousal is a state of constant alertness and irritability, and is often the primary symptom of PTSD. Intrusion is an after state where the trauma is constantly coming back in the person’s mind; their life is thus interrupted by this invasion. Lastly, constriction is a state where the individual goes into survival mode by shutting down completely or by freezing; it is when the traumatized surrenders (42). Another word for constriction is containment. Christina Sharpe considers containment as a primary concept when theorizing

blackness. Where Herman speaks of constriction as a form of self-containment, Sharpe refers to containment as a process imposed on blacks: “As we go about wake work, we must think through containment, regulation, punishment, capture, and captivity and the ways the manifold representations of blackness become the symbol, par excellence, for the less-than-human being condemned to death” (23). Abigail’s traumas contain her within the limits of her enslavement and constrict her psychologically. Abigail is an isolated adolescent who has no connection to any other women and is seemingly incapable of communicating with her father about what she is going through. Furthermore, Abigail’s existence is witnessed through her containment within the atrocities of her life and her suicide. Therefore, the reader is led through a very singular and narrow representation of sex trafficking which is often unrealistic and fantastic. As a matter a fact, sex trafficking is obscured within the novella, instead sexual trauma functions as the main focus of the narrative. Abigail’s story is a case of sex trafficking; however, the measure of this event has weight only within the traumas she has experienced before. Therefore, Abigail is firmly boxed inside these modes of representation—where sexual trauma prevails over the individual—which dehumanize her and ultimately lead to her death. This series of events is presented through Abani’s own perception of women’s trauma and sex trafficking. Abigail, who remains an underdeveloped character, is constrained by Abani’s eccentric representation of her life. Furthermore, her containment *within* her life make her into this unilateral vision of a sex trafficking victim and thus perpetrates inaccurate, co-dependant forms of victimization and trauma.

Through the chapter “Terror”, Herman creates a detailed and potent explanation of the impact of sexual trauma on women and girls. She describes trauma as a fluid concept that can tend towards what is termed traumatic memory, and explains that “[traumatic memories] are not encoded like the ordinary memories of adults in a verbal, linear narrative that is assimilated into

an ongoing life story” (37). These memories form a nexus of reiterations of the traumatic events with changing details, creating the impression that the survivor is not reliable and that she is therefore lying. Herman further states that “[the] intense focus on fragmentary sensation, on image without context, gives the traumatic memory heightened reality” (38). In other words, traumatic memory is difficult to identify as something real, as the original memory of the event can become distorted as it is itself an act of violence on the mind. In fact, there is a clear connection to be made between Herman’s framework and what Abani is attempting in his novella. One of the tensions within Abani’s work is the fragmentation of the narrative. Since traumatic memories take such time to crystalize in one’s mind, using a fragmentary form in *Becoming Abigail* is an adept representation of trauma and its ensuing symptoms. However, the piling on of abusive male figures in Abigail’s life and the continuous atrocities she has to live through beg the question of whether this is representational at all or sensationalist.

Abigail is, without a doubt traumatized by many acts of sexual abuse from her male family members. This sequence of atrocities in her life has warped her perception of reality as well as her emotional response to it. The novella is fragmented in such a way that three major symptoms of trauma can be observed: the distortion of reality, frozen watchfulness, and self-mutilation. The alteration of Abigail’s reality, as well as her unreliable memory are constantly restated in the novella. Most importantly, her story begins by expressing the difficulty she has in differentiating reality from fantasy when imagining her mother’s funeral: “This memory, like all others was a lie” (19). Abani’s positioning of Abigail’s narrative as unreliable creates this double standard that most trauma survivors have to face, where their memories fail them by their constant and uncontrollable re-articulation, a process that creates the impression that the survivor is lying. The fragmented structure that Abani develops in his novella—which flows between “Now” and “Then”, with short

declarative sentences and sentence fragments—suggest that Abigail has gone through and is experiencing sexual trauma: “Peter cornered her in the bathroom. . . . She just held her dress up and peed, not taking her eyes off his. Surprised at her fearlessness, he kissed her, his finger exploring her” (63). These expressions of trauma are what make this novella so compelling because they present a retelling of the events in order to put them back together within coherent memories. Regardless of the fragmentary state of the novella, there is a definitive progression in time of Abigail’s life, from when she was a baby, until her suicide. Furthermore, these experiences of trauma no longer belong to either the young women this story was inspired by nor to Abigail herself. The use of language renders the sexual trauma as something simultaneously beautiful and haunting, becoming by extension a means to create a powerful sense of sympathy in the reader.

Judith Herman explains that there are several factors that survivors often incorporate within their narrative in order to cope with their situation. Such factors are translated into recognizable symptoms of traumatic memory, fostering, according to Herman “the development of abnormal states of consciousness in which the ordinary relations of body and mind, reality and imagination, knowledge and memory, no longer hold” (96). The difficulty with such dissociative states is in recognizing that the individual is experiencing and re-experiencing the trauma through these symptoms (hyperarousal, intrusion, and constriction). Abigail does not simply experience these symptoms because of her trafficking, but they are also a product of her sexual abuse and the fact that she seeks a relationship with her deceased mother. Her memory and her relationship to her past is distorted by her traumas, and her memory then becomes fallible and intertwined with the fantasy of having a connection to her mother. The author’s decision to shift the perception of reality misrepresents trauma by refusing to contextualize it outside of incorporating it as mere aesthetic device. Therefore, the reader has little sense of who Abigail is apart from the eccentric

way she violates norms and is in turn violated. In many respects, the structure of the text suggests that she is asking for it and almost becomes a grown man's fantasy of a vixen through her gaze and her unruly behaviour. Furthermore, by creating a narrative only of the traumas Abigail experiences, she is simultaneously rendered invisible.

Robert J.C. Young explains in his article "Postcolonial Remains" that invisibility is a paradoxical state of being, imposed by those who are in power and set the status quo. Young explains that those who are in power establish the status quo and determine what or who is important to consider: "This is entirely paradoxical to the extent that its object was never, in fact, invisible, but rather the "invisible visible": it was not seen by those in power who determine the fault lines between the visible and the invisible" (23). Chris Abani has power over his novella and what it tries to demonstrate. Social change notwithstanding, he reiterates this status quo when it comes to sex trafficking by creating a simplistic and one-dimensional character of the traumatized victim, and in doing so, disassociates her from the atrocities she has survived and renders her voiceless. As such, Abani's decision to create a character who is excessively traumatized, marks her as, not only, a perfect victim, but also one that remains unseen. There is a phenomenon where victimization, being a state of hypervisibility, causes the individual to become invisible. Herman explains that "[society] gives women little permission either to withdraw or to express their feelings" (65). This hypervisibility creates a tension where women are no longer in possession of their experiences. Chris Abani takes possession of two traumas and transforms them to create a narrative that tells the common tale of sex trafficking where the survivor becomes a victim. When someone has a traumatic experience, there is the desire to step in and help save this person. Chris Abani's attempt to make women like Abigail visible, by denouncing such violent capitalist practices, does the complete opposite and as such, "she disappears in the description" (Sharpe, 86).

What becomes problematic in Abani's attempt at representing these forms of sexual violence is that it dehumanizes the character and therefore the women who have been trafficked, providing almost no insight into the specificity of their trauma.

Abigail's traumas are marked by several symptoms, notably her self-mutilation. Throughout her life, she burned marks onto her body, which represented the limits of herself: "And the words: Not Abigail. My Abigail. Her Abigail? Ghosts. Death. Me. Me. Me. Not. Nobody. She stared at them" (36). There is often a correlation made between self-mutilation and suicide, where the latter is considered the inevitable next step (Herman 109). Abigail is created through sexual trauma, its symptoms, and through the use of the pronoun "she". By writing Abigail in the third person, Abani takes over her narrative and distorts it. Abigail is dead at the beginning of the novella and so it becomes a retelling. Understandably, Abani would write in the third person as she is no longer alive. However, the author has chosen to write her story by piecing together her traumatic experiences—as well as her distant and disquieting relationship with her father—and her ensuing impulsive behaviour. This lack of development gives a very narrow view of who Abigail is and how she has lived her life, while her consciousness remains inaccessible to the reader, thus making her into an undifferentiated, flattened victim. Furthermore, the novella's form suggests that the progression of her trauma leads to her self-mutilation, which culminates in her suicide. As Herman explains: "[There] is a clear distinction, however, between repetitive self-injury and suicide attempts. Self-injury is intended not to kill but rather to relieve unbearable emotional pain, and many survivors regard it, paradoxically, as a form of self-preservation" (109). Abigail's self-mutilation becomes her form of self-preservation. In addition, she uses these marks to define her corporeal limits, including as an identity distinct from her mother's. Nevertheless, the fact that a social worker would see these and not be alarmed is disconcerting. These modes of self-

preservation are presented as a form of sexual release and is not only disturbing, but it also dehumanizes Abigail and becomes a misrepresentation of her complex psychological state. The underdevelopment of characters raises many questions as to who these individuals are, notwithstanding the narrow view it creates about sex trafficking, and the infrastructures put in place to fight it. Although there are many similarities between Herman's explanation of trauma and Abani's representation of it, there is still the matter of Abigail's invisibility.

1.4 Ghosts and the Tropes of Invisibility

The figure of the ghost and its repeated presence in *Becoming Abigail* aims to reshape the perception of sex trafficking survivors within a context of resilience and agency. However, the use of sensationalist language and the beautification of these atrocities reinforce the sentiment of pity and helplessness, and therefore reiterates stereotypical understandings of sex trafficking and victimization. Alexandra Schultheis Moore and Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg argue in their text that Abani develops an aesthetic of risk in order to transfer the current perception from victimhood to agency. As they explain, their term aesthetic of risk “foregrounds both the dangers and the potential of literary representations of violations” (61). Moore and Goldberg recognize the difficulty writers have in representing these forms of violence that are uncomfortable to witness. *Becoming Abigail* however stretches the use of this risk to the point of erasing Abigail entirely. The aesthetic of risk plays on this rather dangerous line that stands between reality and extreme, gory scenes meant to shock and to entertain. This is an attempt, not to shock the reader to a heightened emotional state, but to shock back to the hard reality of the situation in question. Even if Abani may be attempting to create such an aesthetic in his novella, the line is crossed into

sensationalist representation as he overwhelms his narrative with sexual trauma: “She had been ten when her first, fifteen-year-old cousin Edwin, swapped her cherry for a bag of sweets. ... ‘I will kill you if you tell anyone’” (30). Abigail is plagued by sexual abuse, which is all coming from her male relatives. The risk behind such repetition of this abuse throughout the novella is that the trauma becomes the sole focus of the story, while Abigail’s responses are never registered. Moore and Goldberg inadvertently fall into the sensation of this novella because of its apparent straightforwardness and raw material subject:

Here we focus instead on how Abani avoids the competing narratives of the classic victim who needs saving ... not only the protagonist’s degradation and suffering at the hands of her trafficker, but also her crossing the boundaries of propriety in her affair with the older, married social worker (77, 79)

Moore and Goldberg allude to the idea that Abigail’s character has agency, that she is not the classic victim. However, considering her age and what has happened to her, it is difficult to accept that Abigail is truly in a position of power to make decisions for herself. In relation to Herman’s work on trauma, it seems as though these theorists have forgotten the crucial fact that Abigail has not only gone through trauma, but also that she is traumatized, and that her behaviours are not a question of crossing the “boundaries of propriety” (79), but are rather symptoms of PTSD. When someone is traumatized, especially this severely and at such a young age, it becomes difficult to make responsible decisions, since social boundaries become blurred or disappear altogether. Derek seems to have been more of a reaction than an actual decision. Since he is significantly older than she is, and is in a position of power, Derek is also taking advantage of her. It is doubtful, then, that Derek and Abigail’s decision can be taken as a true testament of love over the clear problematic nature of Derek’s desire to pursue a relationship with the child he is meant to protect. By declaring

Abigail as some form of rebel who breaks boundaries for love, Moore and Goldberg are not arguing for agency, but rather for an apparent sense of it. On all accounts, *Becoming Abigail* presents classic tropes of victimhood and renders its protagonist invisible and without voice or agency. It is through this sense of invisibility that Abigail often describes herself as a ghost.

Avery Gordon, writer of *Ghostly Matters*, articulates the significance of ghosts within society. For Gordon, the ghost is a figure that presents things unsaid, a manifestation of what has been forgotten or misunderstood. The protagonist in *Becoming Abigail* is constantly referred to as a ghost who is ignored or forgotten, suggesting this same need for recognition and comprehension. As such, *Ghostly Matters* is useful in framing the representation of Abigail as a ghostly figure that is left unseen. Gordon's book begins with an analogy:

I look for her shape and his hand; ... This is a project where finding the shape described by her absence captures perfectly the paradox of tracking through time and across all those forces that which makes its mark by being there and not there at the same time. (6)

This idea of looking “*for her shape and his hand*” comes directly from Patricia Williams book *The Alchemy of Race and Rights* where she mentions, as Gordon explains it, that there is a habitual nature of men's power over women's choices. Abani is an agent within this scheme since he appropriates the voices of two young women in order to create this one character who is born and dies in violence—not to mention the fact that the male characters of this novella impose their power over Abigail's life through violent means. Williams's reference to these gendered and fragmented bodies reveals the direct influence of men over women's lives. The paradox itself is in the representation of women as ghosts. Unseen, ghosts are not recognized as real, but as specters of our imagination. Nevertheless, ghosts exert a presence that is felt, in actions they commit, in the

influence that they create and in the hauntings they perpetuate. Abigail embodies this paradox of being there and not there at the same time. She has a presence because, to some extent she has a foothold in actuality. Sex trafficking and its ensuing trauma is something rarely publicized or discussed since its atrocities can be difficult to bear: “[she] was a ghost” (112). This mention of being a ghost is described in many different contexts throughout the novella, from being a ghost of her mother to being ghosted by her cousin Peter since he stole her identity and forged her a new name on a fake passport. Abigail then becomes both a fiction produced by a slew of exploitative men and a site of expression of the sex trafficking industry.

Gordon’s book theorizes that ghosts are a manifestation of the things missed within the fabric of social life. She explains that ghosts, whether or not acknowledged, actively shape our perception of social issues like trafficking: “The ghost is not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life” (8). Abigail is this site, not of social life, but of its shadow. As a character embodying the victim of sex trafficking and sexual trauma, she occupies a fixed position of representation. In other words, she is recognized as the familiar manifestation of the disposable body. As such, she cannot be understood as anything but a traumatized victim of sex trafficking: “And this is how she was made” (Abani 93). This declaration not only suggests that she was broken by her rape and torture, but also that her previous self floated without an identity; she was only ever acknowledged once she gained this status of helpless, less than human victim. Her body becomes a site where violence is reinscribed onto it as the only means of identifying her. Gordon brings the implication of the ghost further by explaining that their visibility or invisibility is a “constant negotiation between what we see and what is in the shadows” (17). The recurrence of the theme of victim within novels that address sex trafficking suggests that the ghost of this industry is not being

represented beyond conventional notions of a feminized trauma. Gordon's conception of systematic haunting (18) describes then the need to rethink the representation of the ghosts that manifest unaddressed issues such as sex trafficking and avoid, as she states, mere reflectionism (13). Within the context of the novella, Abani reflects the constructed reality that is being presented by media and does not avoid this trap. Although the author has attempted to represent a realistic reaction to sexual trauma, it does not erase the fact that the representation of the survivor is a misinterpretation of the women who are trapped within the sex trafficking industry. In fact, it does not acknowledge the desires of the ghosts who wish to be recognized as he inevitably creates a vixen over a realistic character:

The first is that the ghost cannot be simply tracked back to an individual loss or trauma. The ghost has its own desires, so to speak, which figure the whole complicated sociality of a determining formation that seems inoperative (like slavery) or invisible (like racially gendered capitalism) but that is nonetheless alive and enforced. ...The ghost is not other or alterity as such, ever. (Gordon 183)

One cannot look at the ghost and the haunting it creates by simply addressing the violence that it has lived through; rather, one has to acknowledge its desires and what it wants to accomplish by haunting. In relation to *Becoming Abigail*, the haunting that Abigail creates has to go beyond her traumas and present these desires Gordon discusses. This, however, is in no way accomplished. As such, whatever haunting Abigail does create is overshadowed by the sheer weight of her traumatic experiences, the overwhelming place they take in her life and the lack of humanity she is granted by the author.

1.5 Conclusion

Modern slavery cannot simply be viewed as a template story applicable to every person who has survived it. It must be understood as a complex and diversified symptom of capitalism and its gore practices. In viewing this issue through these angles, it is possible to envision a different kind of subject, one that must make a decision in order to safeguard their future and become financially independent, without discrediting those who were traumatized in the process for one's own financial gratification. *Becoming Abigail* falls within the stereotypical vision of sex trafficking by positioning an underdeveloped protagonist within a context of trauma and helplessness, rendering her a victim and nothing more, in other words, a kind of ghost. Chris Abani's focus was meant to be sex trafficking. However, it reverted back to sexual trauma. Although his work describes the potential symptoms related to sexual trauma quite well, it also erases Abigail herself as anything more than a victim or a caricature. Both form a literal and figurative point of view; Abigail has no identity beyond the abuses that she has endured. This makes it so that the traumas themselves have become the subject, not the individual, who remains only an object of its violence. When coming across ghosts and hauntings in novels, there is often a desire that is not being met. In the case of *Becoming Abigail*, this desire seems to transcend the individual woman and reach collective form. In many ways, being recognized is the desire that is expressed by all survivors. Grouping them together creates a different and bigger picture of what sex trafficking is and who the women who have survived it are. As such, consistently looking at this industry through the helplessness, exploitation, and vulnerability of its survivors only reinforces their association with victimhood. Chika Unigwe's polyglossic novel allows the reader to gain access to women with diverse experiences and personalities. Rather than passive and

undifferentiated victims, these are complex individuals exhibiting a range of responses to challenges that are at once psychological and economic. Ultimately, instead of functioning as a single story, her novel demonstrates the dynamism and multiplicity of female agency.

Chapter Two: Complexities and Ambiguities of Trafficking: Recognizing Agency

2.1 Introduction

The sex industry has a long history that often includes trafficking within its parameters since organized crime is assumed to prey on the vulnerable. Its representation in the media, as well as through government and NGO websites leaves little room for the general public to understand trafficking as anything but violent and predatory. However, the conflict with this conceptualization lies, not only within stereotypical representations, but also in the ways it is removed from any clarification of terminologies such as exploitation and vulnerability. For one, trafficking in persons can either be labour or sex work. These jobs are usually filled by transnational migrants. Those who choose to do sex work are labeled as trafficking victims and are erased from the narrative entirely. Chika Unigwe's novel *On Black Sisters' Street* reveals the various motivations of female migrants who leave their home to become prostitutes. Through the lives of four women—Efe, Sisi, Joyce and Ama—the novel explores how each of them becomes a prostitute and why she has made this choice. Unigwe dives into their pasts to create a connection between what they have been through individually and why they have chosen to migrate to Belgium. By weaving each of these women's stories together through the unveiling of Sisi's posthumous story, Unigwe renegotiates the landscape of migrant sex workers and, therefore, the implications of trafficking. Using works, such as Laura María Agustín's *Sex at the Margins*, this chapter analyses how migration functions as a defining point in revealing the ambiguities of terms such as trafficking, exploitation, and vulnerability, and reiterates why these terms need to be redefined and clarified when applied to migrant sex workers. As such, Unigwe's novel deepens our understanding of sex trafficking by

incorporating migration as a center piece in identifying women's motivation for sex work. She thereby creates a representational narrative of an otherwise marginalized part of the sex industry.

2.2 Vulnerability and Exploitation: the Finer Points

Vulnerability and exploitation are terms often used when theorizing the issues of trafficking and sex work, but seldom thought of in terms of their political implications and impact on the individual. Before one can understand what exploitation means in the context of sex work and trafficking, one must understand vulnerability. Vulnerability derives from the Latin *vulnerabilis*, or wounding, and, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, refers to someone who is “able to be physically or emotionally hurt; liable to damage or harm especially from aggression or attack, assailable.” Although this definition provides a basis for a conversation on sex trafficking, it also assumes that anyone is susceptible to vulnerability. Resorting to such a general definition maintains a lingering notion that all women are vulnerable, thus incapable of surviving on their own. Understanding vulnerability as such, allows for organizations, such as governments or NGOs, to apply this word in many different contexts. Venessa E. Munroe and Jane Scoular contextualize vulnerability within its myriad forms, mainly concerning sex trafficking. To them, using the term “vulnerability” is “increasing rhetorical insistence on ‘victim-centered’ initiatives” (190). Although this approach can help with the fight against sex trafficking, it fails to acknowledge the various experiences associated to states of vulnerability, such as those of migrant sex workers, who are often identified as sex trafficking victims regardless of the veracity of that claim. Furthermore, Munro and Scoular explain that such identificatory processes operate as both a path to progressive change (in policy) and as a mechanism for greater social control (194). It

exposes sex workers to surveillance as a way to protect them—in this supposed state of vulnerability—rather than analyzing or investigating the process of trafficking holistically:

Even if vulnerability as a concept *can* work in progressive ways, then, its potential to serve regressive agendas cannot be ignored, trivialised, or eliminated, since its construction and operation is mediated by processes of recognition and complex relations of power. In the context of sex work regulation, the fact that ‘vulnerability’ is tied so intimately to femininity and to the body means that analyses of the transactional nature and structural (including legal) conditions of commercial sex are often side-lined. (Munro 201)

Vulnerability clearly has a place of consideration when it comes to sex work and sex workers, as it should. However, women in particular are so often categorized as vulnerable people that institutions regulating policy on commercialized sex tend to reinstate normative conceptualizations of sex work as a predominantly violent industry that preys on women. What Munro and Scouler demonstrate in this article is that vulnerability, while often being used without specific parameters of definition, is both necessary and overpowering. This paradox creates an all-too-focused approach to the construction of victims in the sex industry, forgoing a deeper analysis of consumer behaviour (transactions) and the overall structure of the industry and its criminal connections (trafficking). In other words, buyers are protected and their behaviour is justified whilst madams, traffickers, pimps, facilitators, and procurers are all identified as exploiters of the vulnerable (i.e.- poor women) by forcing them into prostitution. What becomes problematic about this seemingly clear-cut definition is that it does not allow either for a reconsideration of the position of sex workers and trafficked women within a space of agency or clarity about what they are involved in.

Consent, then, has no measure within commercial sex and the women are automatically perceived as victimized and considered subject to exploitation.

The term exploitation is often paired with vulnerability as its inevitable next step. However, just like vulnerability, exploitation is seldom defined as anything but a method of manipulation and violence against the most vulnerable in the context of sex trafficking. At first glance, exploitation, being understood as a method of coercion, may seem like an appropriate definition for the act of trafficking itself. Looking at the definition provided by the Palermo Protocol, exploitation means any form of “coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or receiving of payment or benefits to achieve the consent of a person” (42). This exhaustive list, some critics would argue, does not consider or recognize the trafficked person’s ability to make a choice, and therefore, renders any decision regarding trafficking, whether by the trafficked or trafficker, morally wrong. Arneson explains that exploitation, in its technical sense (appropriating the surplus of another’s labour), is only considered wrongful because it violates the rights of the producers (204), which means that any production made is taken without proper recompense. The Palermo Protocol’s definition remains within this technical understanding of exploitation and its listing of ways in which it is wrongful, permits for certain parameters of understanding that dictates to the signatories what to punish and what ought to be considered morally wrong. However, exploitation becomes a murky concept when sex work is involved. Migrant sex workers who arrive in a destination country illegally often resort to getting help from a third party who has the means to send them to a different country. As Munro and De Guista explain in their book, *Demanding Sex: Critical Reflections on the Regulation of Prostitution*, there is an unrecognized exchange between the would-be prostitute and the trafficker where both could benefit:

the exchanges that are recognised as exploitative may nonetheless bring about a level of advantage to both parties (when compared against a pre-transaction baseline) the existence of conditions of poverty and so on render entrance into those exchanges not only likely but also profoundly rational. (86-7)

These exchanges Munro and De Guista speak of are transactional. The trafficker offers the potential prostitute a sum to be sent to a country to do sex work and that person accepts the terms of payment as a means to an end. As a way to reach the goals she may be after, whether it be economic independence, providing successfully for her family, or simply to travel without restraint. The important thing to understand about exploitation and vulnerability is this: there are situations where an individual is in a vulnerable position that increases their chances of being exploited. However, there are other situations where vulnerability can permit exchanges between two parties as a way to break away from the state of inertia individuals find themselves in. We cannot simply concede the notion of exploitation as an all-encompassing concept that applies to every trafficked person because their migration, even if illegal, might be a decision based in rational thought and a desire for freedom. As argued by Munro:

invoking a claim to exploitation in itself does little to avoid difficult questions about what constitutes wrongful objectification of another, about what conditions of work and levels of reward are intolerable, about what relevance we afford to the existence of coercion or harm, and about how we respond to instances of exploitation in a world in which global and gender power imbalances generate personal vulnerabilities and then limit the opportunities for alternative forms of repair. (Munro 94)

Munro clearly states the implications and importance of ambiguities in defining exploitation. Not only should alternative forms of repair be considered, but also alternative forms of understanding the decision process these women go through to arrive at the conclusion that sex work abroad is a good alternative to their situation. In many ways, women's choices are ignored in the discussion because of a very simple legal premise that one cannot consent to a contract (of any form) if not fully aware of the stakes and not clear on the implications of what is being accepted. Such a premise finds itself with a slight flaw that does not take into account such gender power imbalances, as Munro puts it, and avoids the need to consider the limit of opportunities for women in economically impoverished countries like Nigeria.

On Black Sisters' Street brings together the stories of four women who each have a different economic background as well as different motivations for becoming prostitutes in Antwerp. The efficiency of Unigwe's novel lies within a more nuanced approach to representing migrant sex workers. Sisi propels the narrative as a form of ghostly memory that lingers in the minds of the three other women. Most prominent about Sisi is the fact that she is the only one who admits to regretting her decision to go to Belgium as she wonders "[why she had] been taken in by promises of wealth and glamour and happiness that knew no bounds" (212). Sisi is a telling example of how capitalism is constructed to feed individuals with these notions that wealth is just beyond the border. Unigwe infuses her novel with subtle indications of exclusivity and uniqueness of products on the market, especially in the chapters that focused on Sisi's life (exclusive brands, stores, allusions to being spent or items bought). These markers of material wealth shape a character that is influenced by capitalist notions of purchasing powers, "[now] the shops sparkled and called to her, and she answered, touching things that took her fancy, marvelling at the snatches

of freedom” (3), where these tactile impressions give Sisi a permissiveness to aim for economic freedom.

Patricia Bastida-Rodriguez wrote in her text that Sisi acts as an invisible *flâneuse*. In the same fashion as Benjamin understood the existence of the *flâneur* as an expression of the desire and boredom of the upper middle-class male pedestrian, the *flâneuse* serves as a counter part to it, as it ““appears as their troubling object”” (207-8). The invisible *flâneuse* is a mirrored response to the window shopper. Where men stroll about to window shop for girls to rent, the women are behind the windows, luring them in. Bastida speaks to the troubling object because the women are both sexually objectified, while also creating this unease in the nature of their profession. Bastida develops the argument that migrant sex workers offer this prohibited desire, this escape route from the boredom of the middle-class man. As such, Sisi’s thirst for life is based in materialistic desires and embodies this attraction for the always available, exotic goods that are for sale. Her strolling about in the city of Antwerp, mainly in De Keyserlei, the market square of Antwerp, copies the behaviour of the men who stroll the red-light district to either window shop or pay for sex. In many ways, Sisi’s attraction to the marketplace is based on this desire to appropriate the city’s culture through objects. As such, her *flâneries* then become an expression of her desire for emancipation and freedom. Herein lies the difficulty of Sisi’s situation and the complexity of Unigwe’s representation. As Sisi herself remarks, “*I’m very lucky to be here, living my dream. If I stayed back in Lagos, God knows where I’d have ended up*” (15). Sisi has this initial sense of gratitude for her chance to move to Belgium. Her awareness of what sex work really is, however, comes later as the reality of her situation begins to sink in. By observing Sisi posthumously, one begins to notice that her walks in the city are also an escape from the life she chose for herself. Unable to cope with her decision, she ran away as it seemed like the only option that could make her

disappear but also keep the other women safe from persecution. As such, Sisi's vulnerability lies not only within her own regret about her own choices but also from her isolation in Belgium. As Munro explains:

Against this backdrop, the malleability of the concept of exploitation presents the opportunity for anti-trafficking commitments to be interpreted narrowly by destination states, reducing the categories that qualify for victim status (and the support and protection this entails) through reliance on criteria of coercion and harm, and perpetuating the current prioritisation of sex trafficking over its equally significant labour counterpart. (94)

Since sex trafficking remains within these boundaries of coercion and harm, Sisi, Ama, and Efe would not necessarily qualify for a victim status as the decision they made came with an understanding that they would be prostitutes. Munro discusses the problematic legal parameters that arise from this issue and how they often misuse the term of exploitation as a scale to permit or deny help to those who have need of it. There is no denying that the women who populate Unigwe's novel have been trafficked, but one must question whether the choices of these women to be trafficked should affect the help they receive if they so need. Unigwe's representation of Sisi, Ama, Efe, and Joyce demonstrates the complexity of their situation as it goes beyond the traffic of their bodies and into their motivations—what drove them to this decision. Sisi's character embodies the question of the limits such decisions have for women who become a part of this industry, seemingly made to cope with globalization, and if the end results—whatever they may be—are worth it.

When thinking of the women in this novel—who they are and why they have chosen to become sex workers—Joyce is at odds with the three characters. Formally known as Alek, she is

the only one who could be considered as a trafficking victim, and where the formal conceptualizations of vulnerability and exploitation could apply. A survivor of the civil war in Sudan, gang rape, and the murder of her family, Joyce is not vulnerable because of her gender or state of poverty. Her vulnerability emanates from the traumas she has survived as a child. Like Abigail, Alek has a similarly constructed story, from her tomboy personality, “[her] grandmother’s regality had completely passed her by, leaving her with a tomboyishness that both disappointed and worried her mother” (158), to her successive traumatic experiences. Nevertheless, Alek’s past is not what defines her as a whole. Her traumas seep into her behaviour and manifest themselves as symptoms of PTSD and distress, but do not dominate her narrative: “Alek felt the dust worming its way into her nose, filling up her lungs, and the pain she felt almost had her doubled up” (189). There are several mentions of dust, dusting and sandstorms in Alek and Joyce’s chapters, as an insidiously invasive element on and in her body. These particles of dust create an image of intangibility of what troubles the mind—the sandstorm being the representation of things too big to grasp or control. When her boyfriend Polycarp left her, he arranges for her departure to Belgium with Dele to become a nanny. This is a false pretence as Dele sent her to Belgium to be a prostitute. Whether Polycarp was aware of the true nature of the work or not is unknown, however, the weight of the betrayal Joyce experiences solidifies her position as a trafficking victim because she is trapped within the industry: “‘Which children? Which *yeye* children?’ she felt a sandstorm whirling in her, painting the walls a dusty, murky brown” (199). Her anxiety and distress is born of the realization that she was coerced into a line of work she did not consent to. As a singular character, Joyce is a reminder of the distinction between a trafficking survivor and a migrant sex worker. Her position as a victim is justified as she was, in many respects, helpless, but this does not remove from the fact that Joyce still gained independence and agency in Belgium.

Vulnerability and exploitation are words that are used freely and often without any other context save that of violence. The female protagonists of *On Black Sisters' Street* reveal that such terminology may not always be useful or as specific as it might seem. Although these women are exploited for their bodies—and what their bodies represent (the unattainable exotic)—the women also exploit the system to have the opportunity to migrate and work toward their goals and dreams. Regardless of the circumstances in which these women were brought to Belgium, they each tried to survive as sex workers and demonstrated resilience and agency in the process. Nevertheless, where Sisi saw degradation and humiliation, Ama, Efe and, Joyce looked back on their experience in different ways and even came to terms with their situations, eventually becoming independent businesswomen. This is not to criticize Sisi for changing her mind, but to shed light on the complexities and ambiguities of sex work for migrants; that their choices matter in spite of the taboos associated with this line of work that is mainly occupied by women.

2.3 Conflating Sex Trafficking with Sex Work: Reasons Behind the Taboo of Purchasing Sex

Prostitution has proven to be a taboo subject as it suggests this notion of vulnerability in women through bodily commodification. Terms such as “sex trafficking”, “sex work”, “prostitution” and “migrant” all revolve around this one concept that the women who occupy these positions are all vulnerable and exploited. Their vulnerability is in many ways related to the stigma of their presumed poverty and status as illegal immigrants. Sex trafficking is often conflated with migrant sex workers since, according to certain feminist groups such as the CATW (Coalition Against Trafficking in Women), no one can consent to becoming a prostitute. Chika Unigwe’s

novel demonstrates that, although poverty may be a common factor in these women's decisions, they can, in fact, agree to become sex workers. Prostitution is considered exploitation from a political, economic, and social perspective. However, many scholars are beginning to expand on the subject of sex work and migration. Therefore, the taboo is becoming less of an issue and counterarguments are feeding the discussion of this very simple question: is prostitution exploitation of women? The answer cannot, of course, be a simple "yes" or "no". Prostitution is just as much of an economic opportunity for some—as certain women feel it gives them freedom of mobility and access to financial resources—as it can be a source of trauma for others (Agustín). On a political scale, using terms such as "prostitution" and "sex trafficking" interchangeably gives way to the possibility of surveillance and tighter border control. Thus, by conflating the terminology and centering on the narrative of criminal activity, governments can focus their efforts on border security and develop immigration policies that are more severe. In "Biopolitics and the regulation of vulnerability: the case of the female trafficked migrant," Sharron A. Fitzgerald states that governments tend to interchange trafficking and prostitution. In doing so, they conjecture that sex workers are all coerced into the sex industry (279). Because of this, governments "tend to prioritise surveillance, immigration controls and border controls over human rights' (Sullivan, 2010, p.99)" (281). This does not allow for trafficked migrant workers to voice their opinion, as there is an inherent assumption that they are victims, and so must rely on others to fight for them.

Questions of protection of the person's rights then disappears entirely and reappears only once they are rescued from the industry. As such, governments, by justifying their border policies as a means to protect trafficking victims—and their nation's values—also strengthen the pre-existing economic disparity and the gendered imbalances already prevalent in society. This dilemma is addressed by Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble*:

On the one hand, representation serves as the operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects; on the other hand, representation is the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women. (2)

From a gendered perspective then, political agendas that reinforce a narrative of vulnerability about trafficked migrant women who work in the sex industry are designed to normalize the perception—or representation of these women—as exploited victims in need of rescue. Such a political process of normative representation also dictates “social and cultural mores about ‘appropriate’ female sexual behaviour, and deeper value judgements about prostitution” (Fitzgerald 279). Furthermore, such attempts to safeguard the virtue of these women is also paired with anti-trafficking measures aimed at preventing traffickers from crossing the border of a given destination country with these women. Trafficked female migrants who work in the sex industry are not only constructed as victims of sexual slavery, but they also become, paradoxically, a challenge to the nation on a moral, ideological, and political scale. Therefore, these women feed the notion that border security is vital to preserving the values of the nation in question as they represent a threat to its integrity (Fitzgerald 282). Female migrant sex workers occupy a space divided by normative representations of their gender, a condemnation of their trade and movement. These women are then left without a space to voice their experiences, and as such, remain in the margins.

The global economy is a capitalist system which has led to severe income inequality in Western democracies, as well as the creation of a super-rich class of individuals who hold an inordinate amount of economic power by virtue of their control over large swaths of the economy.

With such a system in place, the exoticization and exclusivity of a commodity becomes key in creating a loyal clientele. The biomarket functions on this basis of creating exclusive, rare, and exotic bodies. What were once considered formal ways of conducting business have now brought to light their informal twin that most recognize as the shadow economy and what has been referred to in this thesis as gore capitalism. In *Sex at the Margins*, Laura M Agustín explains that the “regular economy of capitalism [was never considered] ‘wholly formal’” (20) as there was always some form of black market. As such, this shadow economy has made available the opportunity for migrants to navigate through borders to find more lucrative work, and for women this often means sex work. From a social standpoint, prostitution has almost always filled a position of marginality and immorality in society.

To understand why so many people have trouble reconciling choice with prostitution, there are two things one must recognize. The first is that there are women and men who are forced, coerced, or tricked into this line of work and, as a result, are what is conceived as sex trafficking victims. They are not consenting and they do need help to escape their traumatizing situation. Second, since this previous narrative is so deeply ingrained into the social fabric of the global north—and since governments tend to conflate migrant sex workers and sex trafficking victims—migrant sex workers are constructed in the same light as those who have been kidnapped and their consent and choices on the matter are presumed to no longer belong to them. Agustín’s book is an exploration of this amalgamation of terms. Her goal is to separate trafficking victims and migrant sex workers, as the latter are usually ignored (23). There is, without a doubt, a stigma attached to prostitution (also referred to as commercial sex), as one woman stated in a conference Agustín attended:

‘prostitution’ is always, in all situations, abuse and violence. It is imperialism, invasion of women’s bodies. It is the antithesis of love. It ruins good marriages. The men are cruel, egotistical perverts who should be put in prison. No woman ever, ever wants to sell sex, she is only forced to, and if she says differently then she is lying or doesn’t understand her own situation. (173)

This woman is reiterating phallogocentric discourse on the morality of women’s sexuality in the same way that men speak of what a proper woman is or ought to be. She speaks to this patriarchal notion that sexuality is expressed in virtue and sobriety in women, and becomes permissive and uncontrollable in men. Furthermore, it negates any form of agency, desire, and consent on the part of the women who have chosen to become sex workers. Agustín describes the myriad ways in which society’s reaction to commercial sex is neither new nor productive in solving the problem of sex trafficking because “[these] arguments begin with a presumption as to what sex is supposed to be; the expression of love for a particular partner” (58). But, as most people understand it today, sex does not have to express anything more than a desire to gain release. Sex trafficking and commercial sex both stand on the precipice of now fast-changing sexual morals. As such, consent is just as much a part of how one gives it as the way it is culturally defined. Forgetting this vital piece of information can quickly dissolve the current situation where sex workers are marginalized in order to protect the moral values of the dominating state.

Coming back to Unigwe’s novel, these conflicts of the political control of borders and the social stigma attached to commercial sex are revealed in the way the women come to terms with the decisions that they have made. Efe and Ama are two of the four characters that provide insightful details about women who are accepting of their situation. Efe became pregnant at the age of sixteen by a man who seduced her with his wealth. Already at this age, Efe regarded sex as

a transactional affair. For her, Titus, the man who slept with her, was one who could give her what she wanted: “He was old. Experienced. But most important, he had money” (45). Because Efe sees sex as an economic exchange, her relationship to Titus is not and never was romantic, but rather transactional. From a very young age, Efe envisioned sex as a means to an end, not as a symbol of love between two people. To Efe, like Sisi and Ama, sex is the conduit to economic opportunity or to “buying bits of happiness” (50). For many women in the global south, being the sole earner for their family can be difficult as there are not many jobs available to them other than menial work (maids, for example). Becoming a sex worker was, for Efe, a way to “earn easy money” (72) and provide for her son. This decision kept Efe in Belgium for thirteen years, where she herself eventually became a madam. Efe’s story demonstrates that some of these women even become complicit in this illicit business and it gives them a broader perspective of how it works and how they can benefit: “Like Madam, Efe would have some police officers on her payroll to ensure security of her girls and her business. She would do well in the business, buying more girls to add to her fleet” (240). This is not to say that just because the women become complicit, it signifies that the trafficking business should be legal. On the contrary, Efe’s story demonstrates just how complex the situation can become. Furthermore, women are often faced with implicit social rules that dictate their behaviour. Unigwe constructed her novel with this deeply anchored notion that “[it] was up to women to make sure they did not put themselves in a position where they would be used” (119). This blanket statement raises important questions, but mainly centers on what the definition of “used” might be. In the context of the novel, being used is about sex before marriage and it is about being raped. The comment made by Ama’s mother concerns how women ought to behave and how they are solely responsible for the violations they endure. But this statement also collapses when we consider what the four women eventually become: prostitutes. Sex work is a

way for these women to survive, to provide, and to gain independence. It is a way for them to learn how to be used on their own terms.

The background of these women commonly revolves around the sense of entrapment, not within the sex industry, but within their own lives. Each of the women describe, at some point in their story, the element that suffocates them. Sisi's greatest desire is to have material wealth but this is stifled by her inability to find a job, her parents needs and her boyfriend's employment that offers little—sometimes no pay. When she describes the state of her family home, the first thing she mentions is the “[walls] stained yellow over time—the color of pap—that she could no longer stand, their yellowness wrapping their hands around her neck, their hold on her life tenacious” (17). Her state of poverty, her broken-down home, and the fact that her boyfriend Peter cannot provide for her because of his own economic precarity has become suffocating for Sisi and this is where her need for novelty, independence and freedom comes from. Ama as well, has the distinct recollection of the colour of the walls in the house she lived in: “The walls in the sitting room were pink ... *Fucking bloody pink. Can you imagine?*” (105). However, her confinement is not embodied by the state or colour of the walls, but by what she survived within them. Ama was molested by her stepfather when she was a child and the walls were the ones she would tell her secrets to, as a way to solidify their existence within the home. When she tried to confront her mother about it, she was shunned and thrown out of the house. Ama experienced traumatic events in her childhood and has since developed an aversion to religion and the colour white, as her stepfather “floated into her dark room in his white safari suit. Ama thought he was a ghost” (113). Her sense of entrapment is caused by her molestation, until she is banished by her mother, who rejects her daughter rather than give up the entitlements allowed by her marriage to the man her daughter has assumed was her biological father: “She could not decide which was better, the

claustrophobic cage or the scratchy thorns. At least, she thought after a while, she could get up from the thorns and walk away” (127). Ama declares, in that train of thought, that she needs to take her life into her own hands, make her own decisions, and fight for herself. Efe was trapped in the circumstances of her pregnancy without a way to properly provide for her son and extended family, while Joyce, caught within the tumult produced by civil war, is first trapped within her boyfriend’s apartment and then in the brothel in Antwerp. These four women embody the myriad reasons why women choose to leave Nigeria and become sex workers abroad. Their lives present the context of sex trafficking and sex work as a muddier terrain than is usually perceived.

2.4 Migrant Sex Workers or Trafficked Women?

The distinction between migrant sex workers and trafficked women is often dismissed when considering women’s motivation to leave their country. *Sex at the Margins* focuses its attention on migrant sex workers and what that means. Agustín emphasises that there is a fluidity of perception within this industry, where terms, such as “sex trafficking victim” or “prostitute,” vary according to how well a person fits the profile of appropriate victim. The problem, as she explains, with using an umbrella term like trafficking to describe all migrants who sell sex is that “[here] the focus is on the age of the victim, her helplessness, and the barbaric conditions she is forced to endure. Repeated continually with little variation, these treatments keep the gaze squarely on the non-European Others who have moved onto the sex scene” (3). Many women who enter this line of work do not necessarily fit this criteria of helplessness and violence. On the contrary, some enjoy the work and others consider it simply as a job (Agustín). For many in the industry, sex work is an opportunity to travel and to make money along the way and one cannot categorize

them as victims of trafficking or even as prostitutes *per se* (2). What Agustín implies is that the amalgamation of subaltern women in this neat box of trafficked victims fails to account for their motivations and the choices that led them to become sex workers in the first place. What is paramount in this discussion is to recognize that these women are rendered voiceless in this issue that concerns them so intimately. Organisations, like Unseen or the CATW create a unilateral vision of sex trafficking in order to create awareness in their communities. This singular mission to fight sex trafficking, however, does not acknowledge migrant sex workers and fails to recognize the influence it exercises in reinforcing the perception of these women as victims of the sex industry. *On Black Sisters' Street* has many instances where the women explain how they came to make this choice, but perhaps one of the more telling examples concerns Ama:

‘I don’t know if I’m happy or not. I don’t like Madam. She’s a snobby bitch. I meet interesting people at work. In what job do you earn money just for lying on your back? Heaven knows there is no way I can be any of the other alternatives open to us here. No way I am fucking ruining my manicure cleaning up after snotty women too busy or too lazy to clean up after themselves. I can’t braid hair. Even if I could, I don’t know that I want to stand for hours on end doing that for peanuts. Remove Madam from the equation, and I might be doing fucking cartwheels.’ [...] ‘You know what Joyce? I made this choice. At least I was asked to choose. I came here with my eyes wide open.’ (99)

This revelation from Ama exposes many of the things unconsidered for these women. Joyce had asked her if she was really happy and, by claiming that she does not know, Ama is stating that this is not a question of happiness, but rather pragmatism. Ama is not doing this job to be happy, but to make money. For her, sex work is a means to an end, a way for her to realise her dreams and

accomplish her goals. It was the same for Sisi as well. The stigma associated with sex work derives not only from dictated morality, but also from this privileged position where choices are limitless, and amongst them, happiness is a prioritized option. However, subaltern women have limited choices and, as such, migration is an attractive option to create more opportunity: “Migration is described as caused by the desire to make better money, by loss of land, by recruitment by employers abroad, by flight from violence, persecution and war, by the need to reunite with family, and by the ‘feminisation of poverty’” (Agustin 17). These reasons listed are all reasons why Ama, Efe, Joyce and Sisi decided to leave Lagos. Sisi wanted to be wealthier and, despite having a degree in finance, could not find work in her field. Joyce fled from her country consumed by civil war after being gang raped, and although she is the only one who was forced into sex work, she survived and found camaraderie with the women she lived with. Ama and Efe wanted to, in some sense or another, provide for their family. Understanding these women’s pasts is a way for Unigwe to demonstrate that the judgment imposed on sex workers is too often misguided by the implication that prostitution is exploitative, rather than recognizing how the global economy affects these women’s choices. Judith Butler explains in *Gender Trouble* that, not only are women united as one gendered entity whether desired or not (21), but also that this unity tends toward systems of control. Furthermore, Butler reveals that these systems, regulated by governments and NGOs, is often perceived negatively:

Juridical notions of power appear to regulate political life in purely negative terms—that is, through the limitation, prohibition regulation, control and even ‘protection’ of individuals related to that political structure through the contingent and retractable operation of choice. (Butler 3)

What the governments then imply, is that an individual's choice is conditional upon the parameters that they have set around the question of trafficking, and therefore exploitation and vulnerability. Judith Butler even contends that there is regulation and control within these systems of power that seep into the construct of protection. What is now understood as the rescue industry, has taken a political stance to justify its action in rescuing women all over the world from sex slavery, without questioning whether these women were in need of saving in the first place. Agustín straightforwardly declares that “women provoke the scandal” (11) and do so because of their inherent position as vulnerable people. Women have occupied a space where they have always been considered vulnerable and easy to exploit because of their gender. Therefore, agency is something they are rarely afforded, especially when they are from the global south since their vulnerability is also attached to their state of poverty. Nevertheless Agustín warns against “[the] obsessive gaze on poverty and forced sex [since] it disqualifies working people's participation in global flows, flexible labour, diaspora and transnationalism” (191). By focusing on these two points—the feminization of poverty and forced sex—there is a failure, on our part, in recognizing that motivations for such migratory displacements go beyond the work and the money and that other, deeper, and more important factors, such as family, can come to prioritize one's decision on the subject as well. Therefore, Unigwe's presentation of the four women in her book is a way to demonstrate this fact, while also recognizing that not all are willing or consenting.

Sisi, Efe, Ama and Joyce each have different stories and motivations that bring them to Oga Dele and eventually to Belgium for sex work. There is a significant problem that lingers within the pages of Unigwe's novel, and that is the question of choice. Specifically, in writing the novel, Unigwe is presenting a moral dilemma of what consent and choice are. Throughout this chapter, questions of agency have been intermixed with those of circumstance. However, this dilemma is

often debated from a position of privilege and considers that all women have the same freedoms and the same rights. Feminist groups such as the CATW fight against trafficking with a universal perspective on rights and freedoms of women. Universality in many respects can be useful and important when it comes to global issues like the sex trade, however, one must not forget that the choices these women are presented with are very limited and their opportunities are fewer because of the manifest control the global north has over the world (through capitalist ventures and colonialism mostly). Fitzgerald explains,

female trafficked migrants often start their journeys as willing agents in specific places that are connected to processes of globalisation at a variety of scales (Askola, 2008). Sometimes they become victims; at other times they occupy places in between (Augustin, 2005).

Occupying these spaces in between, as Agustín states, is predicated on the simple premise that people can make mistakes. Some of these women decide to move to an EU country and end up regretting this decision. What often identifies them as victims, is the fact that they left to do sex work. For example, Sisi was a willing agent when she accepted the offer from Dele, but soon came to regret her decision: “A constant yearning to escape herself would take over her life, so that being Sisi would no longer suffice” (Unigwe 104). What made her a victim in the end, was the fact that she despised her work and felt forced to do it, as well as her murder. However, Ama and Efe are both occupying this space in between where they do not enjoy the work necessarily, but continue on because their end goals are more important to them than their happiness and pleasure. For Ama especially, as seen previously, she could have found some measure of happiness in Belgium had she not Madam in her life. She also still claims that “Oga Dele just wanted to help” (98). She does not see him as an exploiter, even though he forced her to have sex with him as a way to test his

product. The only woman out of the four who is evidently and immediately identified as a victim is Joyce. As a refugee from the war in Sudan, she has lived through a measure of traumatizing events before she met Dele. When she was sent to Belgium, it was under the false pretence of becoming a nanny. Although she eventually paid her debt in full, she remained in Belgium for years in order to save enough money to open a school for underprivileged girls in Lagos. She also chose to stay so that she could gain independence. The four women in the novel all made a common decision and that was to take their lives into their own hands, demonstrating that, regardless of their situation, they have agency. They cannot be viewed as mere victims of an exploitative man but should also be acknowledged as resilient women.

2.5 Conclusion

Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* offers an insightful look at migrant sex workers and how their marginality, as women, provides them with a sisterhood that can go beyond the boundaries of trauma and difference. By exploring the lives of these women from their own perspective, of their past and how they came to Belgium, Unigwe reveals the complexities of the sex industry and the women who are a part of it. More importantly, Unigwe demonstrates that trafficking is not as clear cut as one might think. Since trafficking is often used to include both victims of trafficking and migrant sex workers, the migrant women are marginalised and rendered invisible in the process. Terms such as "vulnerability" and "exploitation" become convoluted and result in an amalgamation of these groups of women, rendering them both voiceless and invisible in the process. Writers such as Judith Butler and Laura María Agustín have theorised gender as one of the principle reasons behind such marginalisation of women in the sex industry, not only

because they “provoke the scandal” (Agustin 11) but also because of the politicisation of the sex industry through increased surveillance and methods of control. The majority of migrant sex workers are initially willing to this job. However, some can eventually come to occupy these spaces in between victimization and emancipation—where they could come to regret their decision, flourish in the industry, or find themselves trapped in a situation that make them question the worth of their decision. Such a spectrum demonstrates the necessity to present the issue as a more complex system, and to go beyond the borders of criminality and into a space of recognition, agency, and choice. Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street* broke the boundaries of stereotypical forms of representation of the sex industry. Her novel transforms the one-sided portrayal of the helpless victim into a multifaceted representation that reveals their subjects’ experiences, motivations, and ultimate desire for independence.

Conclusion

The aim of my project is to demonstrate that outside of legal, social, and political frameworks of understanding, literature has a vital role to play when it comes to representing the sex industry within a more complex and nuanced context. The myriad ways in which literature represents the sex industry tends toward two opposite ideas. The first is that those involved in it are either victims or perpetrators; the second celebrates the active involvement (most often) of women as sex workers. While these narrative forms are not untrue and must be addressed, there is a risk of falling within stereotypical modes of representation that sensationalize and simplify this complex economic system. This thesis addresses the ways in which such sensationalist modes of representation are problematic, as well as arguing for a multifaceted perspective on the issue. My project demonstrates that a clearer understanding of this global industry can be effected through the recognition of women's complex subjectivity, including the line dividing coercion and choice. Gale Rubin has argued that the sex/gender system is at the root of common and ancient practices of the exchange of women, where relationships are a transactional process. Contemporary economic processes of such exchanges are known as sex work or sex trafficking, and are traditionally perceived as forms of exploitation. However, this point of view often ignores the fact that choice is limitless only to those born of privilege, and that the concept of choice changes drastically when opportunities are fewer. Women of the global south find themselves with limited opportunity to the extent that sex work becomes an option as it can provide economic independence. It is through this perspective—where there is a clear economic benefit for both women and the sex industry—that sex trafficking is proliferating on a global scale, and where the question of the vulnerability of women is paramount. With the outgrowth of the trafficking

industry, strategies to fight this criminal organization often begin with a single narrative of violence, perpetuated by organizations like the UN or NGO's such as Unseen. This narrative of the poor woman (or girl) who is kidnapped and forced into sex slavery is a way to mobilize people into action. However, such representations can be misleading as many of the women who are trafficked for sex work understand where they are going and for what reasons. Representation, then, becomes key and literature can then have a hand in shaping it. In theory, it has the capacity to change common perspectives through the individual act of writing and reading. Authors' creations have weight in their representations of a certain issue and in the construction of a social imaginary, by either maintaining it or by challenging it.

Chris Abani's novella *Becoming Abigail* fits within that trope of representing victimhood, over agency. This novella focuses on the traumas Abigail has survived throughout her life before her suicide. Throughout this story, the teenager is described, paradoxically, as mature and erratic. In fact, she seems to exist only because of the sexual abuse and trauma she has endured, and remains within a perpetual cycle of abuse and violence. Abigail is situated in this inescapable doubling of cradle and grave where she is born from death, to then commit suicide, all to produce her as a sensationalist object of sexual violence. *Becoming Abigail* is a novella filled with various forms of traumatic expressions, including the distortion of reality, frozen watchfulness, and self-mutilation. Where self-mutilation is misunderstood as a precursor to her suicide, the distortion of reality demonstrate how traumatic memory fails her by constantly changing the narrative of the event. Nevertheless, the representation of Abigail's story within the strict boundaries of the atrocities she has lived through, simultaneously trap her within them. Such forms of containment, as represented in the novella, lead the reader through a very singular and narrow representation of sexual trauma, which is often unrealistic and fantastic, and takes the question of sex trafficking

completely out of context. As an underdeveloped character, Abigail is dehumanized throughout, and her containment within the text creates this unilateral vision of a sex trafficking victim, which hedges on and perpetrates, in turn, inaccuracies based on co-dependant forms of victimization and trauma. In many ways, Chris Abani's decision to shift the perception of reality misrepresents trauma by refusing to contextualize it outside of mere aesthetic. Abigail's eccentricity in which she violates norms, and is in turn violated almost gives the reader the impression that she is asking for it. By creating such a narrative, Abigail's traumas become the subject and she disappears entirely. She therefore no longer has possession of her experiences as they are appropriated by another who wished to offer her a voice. Abani's decision to piece together her story through the fragmented, traumatic episodes of her life creates a flattened, ghostly image of a sex trafficking victim. Sensationalist language and the beautification of the atrocities that followed Abigail's traffic to England, reinforce the sentiments of pity and helplessness over any rearticulation of resilience and agency. In light of such violent characterizations, there is a profound need for nuanced forms of representation and for recognition that these women are human, not ghostly creatures hidden in the shadows.

On Black Sisters' Street, however, presents a more nuanced perspective of the sex industry, and as such, the novel produces a different perspective of who these women are and why they have become sex workers. Chika Unigwe's novel develops important insights into the motivations of female migrants who have left their homes to become prostitutes. By exploring the motivations of Efe, Ama and Sisi, one begins to understand the complexities of the sex industry in relation to the economic behaviours of the West. Joyce's story, in counterpart to the other three, is one of sex trafficking, but unlike Abigail, it is centered on Joyce—the portrayal of her inner emotional landscape, and how she survives—rather than on the fetishization of her traumatic experiences.

What resonates in this novel is the fact that these women, except for Joyce, are migrant sex workers and not sex trafficking victims. This nuance brings about questions on the manner in which vulnerability and exploitation are freely used in this context of the sex industry without reflecting on the validity and impact of the definitions in place. Although vulnerability is generally thought of in a one-dimensional scope where a person is susceptible to psychological or physical violence, there is less thought for how exterior factors enable this state of vulnerability in the subaltern. Generic definitions like this one can be useful in fighting sex trafficking; however, it focuses on victim-centered initiatives and fails to acknowledge the various experiences associated with states of vulnerability. Furthermore, such processes of identification function as both a path to progressive change—to make visible the otherwise forgotten people who were trafficked—and as a mechanism for greater social control. In the sex industry, women in particular are categorized as vulnerable people. As such, institutions regulating policy on commercialized sex often reinstate normative conceptualizations of sex work as an obviously violent industry built on coercion and physical abuse. This paradoxical notion of necessity and control constructs this idea of prostitutes as victims, and where the terrain concerning vulnerability and its relationship with exploitation is muddied by innate assumptions regarding the sex industry.

In the context of sex trafficking, exploitation is associated with methods of manipulation and violence, since it is understood that those who are vulnerable will inevitably be exploited. As such, exploitation is an act considered morally wrong, because consent on the part of the trafficked is not considered within the context of this definition. Therefore, exploitation becomes a murky concept when transnational sex workers are involved as they occupy a space between the two extremes of violation and legalized sex work. Alternative forms of understanding the decision-making process of the women involved in the industry is necessary when we account for economic

and gendered imbalances. *On Black Sisters' Street* demonstrates the various economic reasons why women choose to migrate for sex work as, mainly, a path to greater independence. Each of the four women in the novel has a different economic background as well as different motivations that leads her to sex work. Where Sisi embodies the *flâneuse* and wanders about the city of Antwerp in search of material belonging, Ama and Efe desire to provide for family members, and Joyce desires self-sufficiency.

Prostitution is a taboo subject that suggests women's inherent vulnerability is commodified through the exploitation of their bodies. Sex trafficking, sex work, prostitution and migrants centralize the conversation on the mobility of women, as vulnerable and exploited bodies. Coupled with the feminization of poverty and an undocumented status, migrant sex workers are often identified as sex trafficking victims because consent in such a line of work is not acknowledged. Nevertheless, Chika Unigwe demonstrates through her novel that, although poverty may be a common factor for many women to become sex workers, it is not the only motivator. While many scholars have expanded on the subject of sex work and sex trafficking, the field remains divided between those who believe that sex work is exploitative and some who believe that it *can* be exploitative. By taking a more nuanced approach and analysing the nature of these women's choices, researchers like Laura María Agustín believe that exploitative operations would be easier to identify and women would therefore be protected, rather than prosecuted. Furthermore, the attention brought to sex trafficking has been criminal in nature and by interchanging concepts like sex trafficking and prostitution, governments then have justification for tighter border control and greater surveillance. Since institutions focus their efforts on border security rather than the women trapped within the industry, the protection of person's rights disappear entirely and only becomes of import once the individual is rescued. As such, governments, by justifying their policies as a

means to protect trafficking victims, strengthen the pre-existing economic disparity and gendered imbalances already prevalent around the world. It creates a discourse of rescue of the women who are identified as sex trafficking victims, thereby protecting their virtue—whether that virtue was ever in question or not. In many ways, this rescue industry is very much a mask for the economic activity at play.

Within the sex industry, whether it be legal or not, exoticization and exclusivity are key in creating a loyal clientele. The biomarket depends on these markers, and what were once considered formal ways of doing business have now turned into informal ones. What most understand as the shadow economy is not a new concept, but rather a permissive one for conducting illicit transactions that has also made it easier for migrants to navigate through borders to find work. *On Black Sisters' Street* offers various representations of economic movement, mainly from the perspective of Ama and Efe, as both have goals that concern their care for others as well as their own economic independence. Furthermore, Efe also embodies the complicity that some women have in the process of the migration as well as in developing the business. In many respects, claiming status as a sex worker is a way for women to reject this deeply ingrained notion that women are responsible for preventing their exploitation. Prostitution can then become a method of survival, of providing for their family, and for them to learn how to determine the terms of their own exploitation. For the women in this novel, entrapment does not come from being trafficked, but from the way their lives have turned out. Agustín emphasises the existence of a fluidity of perception within the sex industry when it comes to identifying victims of sex trafficking as they must be deemed appropriate. Agustín argues that the amalgamation of subaltern women within a neat box labeled as “trafficked victims” fails to account for their motivations and their choices that led them to become sex workers in the first place. Such identification renders these women

voiceless in this issue that concerns them, only to make room for organisations to create awareness, without recognizing their own involvement in victimizing the individuals who are a part of it. *On Black Sisters' Street* has many instances where the women give their impressions of their situation. By divulging their past to one another, they reveal that they occupy spaces in between, where agency and resilience are at the center of their identity.

Throughout this thesis, issues of politics, migration, victimization, and exploitation have been explored through the scope of literary representation. While many other avenues, such as the media's influence on trafficking and technology as either a detriment or an asset to said industry are valid and important areas of discussion, my aim was to understand where the stigma of trafficking came from, on a socio-political level. What came from this research is that sex trafficking and sex work, although vastly different, are both a part of the sex industry. It seems apparent from collected testimonies, data and theory that sex can, in fact, be a business that observes both formal transactional methods as well as its shadowing, informal counterpart. Women occupy a unique position in this industry as they become the symbol of sexual exploitation *par excellence*, simultaneously, the truth of their situation, embodied in their own stories, remain unheard. Trafficking victims—whether girls, boys, women, or men—exist and are traumatized by their ordeal. There is no denying that these people are the reason why the Palermo protocol was created in the first place. The criticism from researchers and this thesis alike is meant to shed some light on those who are identified as victims when they do not believe that they are. By creating this automatic state of vulnerability and imposing it on these women, it not only becomes a detriment to them, but also to those who remain unseen.

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