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Neither Slavery nor Involuntary Servitude

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“Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude”

—13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

As a young man, assistant professor Monti Datta visited one of Japan’s most notorious red-light districts on a dare. He came away shocked and saddened, but in that experience were seeds he is sowing today as part of a growing, modern abolitionist movement. During this 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, he hears a renewed call to end human bondage, starting right here in Richmond, Va.

By Monti Narayan Datta

Photo by Casey Templeton

Fukuoka, Japan, summer of 1999 Neon signs atop skyscrapers scorch the midnight sky in flares of red, blue, and yellow—electric swirls written in the scripts of Hiragana, Katakana, and Kanji. On a dare, my friend Matt and I trespass on a Saturday night along the thoroughfare of one of the most notorious red-light districts in southern Japan. They call this place Nakasu.

The streets of Nakasu are drenched with drunken Japanese businessmen groping younger women wrapped in traditional kimonos, their faces painted as white as porcelain, their mannerisms just as delicate. Businessmen stumble from a labyrinth of alleys, each leading onto the main dragway, dotted by a small fleet of idling black limousines with tinted windows. On one side of the strip, in a moment of vertigo, one inebriated, heavyset businessman clutches onto another, bracing the door of an awaiting limo into which a Kimono-garbed woman stuffs him and gingerly bows goodbye before it speeds off into the night.

On the other side of the street, a teenage girl who sounds sadder than Fantine from *Les Misérables* sits squat on the sidewalk and busks, wailing on her acoustic guitar, riffing off the Beatles. “Yesterday” echoes throughout the Pachinko Parlors and drinking establishments sandwiched between the skyscrapers. One passerby—an older man with a scantily clad young woman—drops the equivalent of \$500 into the girl’s guitar case and strolls off.

Matt and I pause in front of a drinking establishment smoldering in neon and Las Vegas-style lights so bright that we no longer have shadows. A large, well-built young Japanese man, impeccably dressed in all black, beckons us into the light. He offers two large black binders stacked on top of his hands and thrusts one of them open. He flips through the pages, and his fingers dance across snapshots of young women dressed in traditional Japanese schoolgirl blue-and-white sailor uniforms, many of them looking like teenagers, most draped across a bed or a sofa in a dimly lit room, faces down and eyes cast upwards. To our disbelief, a girl dressed like those in the pictures emerges from the drinking establishment and rounds the well-built man, sucking on a red lollipop. She appears to be South Asian and is wearing bright blue contact lenses.

“You wanna taste?” she teases. The man in black pushes her away with the back of his hand and makes us an offer. We politely refuse in our broken Japanese.

What surprises us more than anything else is what we see next. Just down the main strip are other well-built men in dark suits standing near a local police station—a police box really, complete with a large blue police shield on top—in the middle of the red-light district. The men in dark suits smoke cigarettes with the police officers, casually exchanging conversation. They laugh and smile.

It sinks in. These men in dark suits are the local Japanese mafia—the *Yakuza*—in league with local law enforcement. This means that all of Nakasu, most likely, is under the protection of organized crime.

What I wouldn’t learn until nearly a decade later is that many of the prostitutes in Japan’s red-light districts are victims of modern-day slavery, trafficked from other countries on “entertainer” visas to service Japanese men. According to Kevin Bales of the not-for-profit Free the Slaves, in Japan, “the entertainer visa is a gift to human traffickers from politicians who are willing to do favors for organized crime. In 2003, 80,000 of the ‘entertainers’ came from the Philippines; another 6,000 to 7,000 came from each of the United States, China, and Russia. Over the years, some 40,000 young women have come from Latin America to Japan on the visa.”

Many of these girls are lured to Japan on false pretenses, promised a job at a bar as a waitress—all with the requisite legal framework—but, upon arrival, are told by their Japanese employers that they owe an exorbitant debt that they must pay off by servicing men on a daily basis. Should a girl refuse her newfound situation, she is then most likely “broken,” which means she is drugged and brutalized until she understands she has no choice but to

pay off the debt. Given that many such girls new to Japan do not speak the language and that the police are cooperating with the *Yakuza*, such “entertainers” have little recourse but to become sex slaves.

The sex trade grabs headlines, but modern-day slavery takes many forms across the globe, spreading like a cancer in the 21st century. Scholars estimate that there are as many as 27 million slaves today; the majority are not in forced prostitution, but instead in other heinous forms of exploitation (though rape and/or other forms of torture are often tools of coercion).

Slavery permeates northern India, where children, to help pay off their family’s exorbitantly high debts to corrupt local businessmen, hunch over in the dark for hours at a stretch as they weave carpets on looms until their small, delicate fingers bleed. Slavery is embedded in Nepal, where children and families in debt bondage spend years making bricks by hand, never making enough money to pay off their debts. Slavery is also rooted in Brazil, where poor farmers are lured to remote forests and forced to work in hot kilns to produce charcoal for the production of pig iron, which goes into the steel of the cars we drive and the appliances in our kitchens. Slavery is found in West Africa, where the cocoa industry obtains about half of its world crop, in part from child labor, for the chocolate we enjoy and the cosmetics we use. Contemporary slavery touches us all.

Corruption and human trafficking go hand-in-hand around the globe, like gin and tonic, wherever demand fuels supply, even in the United States. My stomach turned over when I learned that Super Bowl Sunday is the largest annual sex trafficking event in the U.S. According to Texas attorney general Greg Abbott, “The Superbowl is the greatest show on Earth, but it also has an ugly underbelly.” Think about it: a major city like New Orleans on a festive day with tens of thousands of boisterous young men with fistfuls of cash and access to bars and limitless alcohol. The demand for sex is invariably sky-high. Accordingly, organized crime profits handsomely from selling girls, some of whom are runaway American teens.

But what harrows me most is that 150 years after the Emancipation Proclamation, slavery still exists here in Richmond, where I live and breathe, where I work and teach. In February, NBC12 reported the arrest of a man and two women pimping a 13-year-old from Miami to men via online ads. She was found, the story noted, “at a pretty nice hotel on Paragon Place in Henrico County.” Nineteen such cases were prosecuted in Richmond’s federal courthouse last year, and all but two of the 29 victims were teens or children, according to the report. Gangs traffic schoolgirls around the state, relocating them from one brothel to the next to elude law enforcement. Forced labor most likely exists in some of our restaurants, to which immigrants are lured by the promise of the American dream but, upon arrival, find they owe several thousand dollars for their travel—a debt that they have as little chance of repaying as the children weaving carpets in India or making bricks in Nepal.

My curiosity about contemporary slavery became very personal when I spent an afternoon in Richmond’s Shockoe Bottom touring the site where African-Americans were bought and sold on the open market a century and a half ago. I viewed the site of Lumpkin’s Jail and heard the stories of people confined there prior to their sale, and I couldn’t help but imagine and wonder what it was like for these souls to endure such a hellish life. When I reflect on

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I came to Virginia from California four years ago when I took a job as an assistant professor at the University of Richmond. When I arrived, I did a doubletake at the statues along Monument Avenue—gigantic stone edifices honoring the Confederate elite: Jefferson Davis, J.E.B. Stuart, Stonewall Jackson, and, of course, Robert E. Lee.

As time went by, and as I settled into teaching at UR and transforming my doctoral thesis (on the politics of anti-Americanism) into a book-length project, I bided my time. I knew I wanted to focus more on the subject of human rights and modern-day slavery, but I still didn't know enough to get started, let alone have the community or national connections to begin exploring this issue in a substantive way. My heart and soul were alive with the issue, but, intellectually and professionally speaking, I had much to learn.

I began to educate myself, reading books like *Disposable People* and *Ending Slavery* by Kevin Bales, one of the intellectual pioneers of the contemporary antislavery movement. Then, as if on cue, in September 2011, at the invitation of UR's Women Involved in Living

and Learning program, Bales came to campus to give a guest lecture on modern-day slavery.

After his presentation, we chatted. "You know," he said, "I've been looking for you for quite some time now, but I just didn't know it."

A strong friendship developed quickly. I found myself with an insatiable appetite for thinking about human trafficking and modern-day slavery, but from the perspective that my graduate school training had engendered—as a social scientist.

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When I think back to that summer in Japan, I think not just about the pain and sorrow of those girls, but also about Japan and other countries as variables for developing predictive and explanatory empirical models on the growth of contemporary slavery. I want to generate more hard data with which to inform policymakers and international organizations so that they may, I hope, engender more potent government reforms with an eye toward eradicating slavery.

What's even better than research, though, is teaching, and here I am thrilled about the opportunities I can offer students at the University. This fall, during the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, I will teach a yearlong course titled Human Rights and Modern Day Slavery. This course is part of a new Sophomore Scholars in Residence living-learning community. The beauty of the SSIR class is that the students apply, interview, and self-select into it, and there is a budget with which to immerse our students in a number of off-campus experiences beyond the so-called campus "bubble."

This fall, my SSIR class will investigate human rights and modern-day slavery around the U.S., but we will begin with a tour of the Richmond Slave Trail and Lumpkin's Jail. We will also hear from President Ed Ayers, a historian of the American South, who will discuss what we can learn about the abolitionism of the past so that we may better frame our understanding of the contemporary abolitionist movement. We will visit the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, which is fast becoming the hub of the modern-day abolitionist movement in the U.S. Our journey will take us to visit several not-for-profits in

Washington, D.C., and the Coalition Against Slavery and Trafficking in California, probably the most active antislavery nonprofit in the nation.

I cannot tell you how good it will feel to devote the first couple of weeks of this SSIR course to the legacy of slavery right here in Richmond. It will be a chance to invite my students to reflect upon the past in a way that is not critical or condemning of its bloody roots, but in a manner that, I hope, can inspire us to find creative solutions toward ending slavery's cancerous spread today in the 21st century.

"Do you really think you can end slavery? Come off it!" a colleague recently smirked at me over lunch at Heilman Dining Center.

I stared at him and felt a rush of blood to my face. But I settled down and then said, "I would like to think that I can at least try. If we can't work toward its eventual eradication right here in Richmond, Va., the former hub of the American slave trade, then what does that say about us as teachers and activists?"

I recently attended a conference about abolition at Yale University. Although some of the top names in the contemporary antislavery movement were there, the person who struck me most was Ken Morris, the great-great-great grandson of Frederick Douglass.

Morris is a soft-spoken man with features not unlike his famous relative. Although his family is steeped in the history of abolitionism, Morris didn't get involved in the contemporary antislavery movement until very recently. There had been so much pressure on prior generations of his family that his mother wanted him to escape the burden of his intimidating lineage. And yet, perhaps because it is in his blood or in his soul, Morris felt the call to fight against modern-day slavery when he began learning the stories of slaves today.

I think that call is in all of us. As I learn more about the roots of Richmond and the rich—albeit bloody—history it embodies, I feel like I might know the real reason why I came here from California. Certainly, it was to secure a tenure-track job in my area of study. But I also like to think it was a greater purpose that brought me here, a purpose that has proud and noble roots and wants to honor the city of Richmond in a way that dignifies the lives of so many slaves that lived and died here centuries prior, and the lives of those slaves who still dwell in its shadow today. ✨

Monti Narayan Datta, assistant professor of political science, teaches classes on human rights and modern-day slavery. He is the author of Anti-Americanism and the Rise of World Opinion: Consequences for the U.S. National Interest, forthcoming with Cambridge University Press, and is developing several projects on human trafficking and modern-day slavery with Kevin Bales of Free the Slaves (freetheslaves.net) and Helen Sworne and Siobhan Miles of Chab Dai (chabdai.org). His email address is mdatta@richmond.edu.