Bearing Witness

Since the 1990s, modern slavery has been recognized as a global problem, with campaigners around the world providing assessments of its nature and extent, its drivers, and possible solutions for ending it. However, largely absent from the global antislavery movement's discourse and policy prescriptions are the voices of survivors of slavery themselves. Survivors' authentic voices are underemployed vital tools in the fight against human trafficking and modern slavery in all its forms. Through close readings of over 200 contemporary slave narratives, Andrea Nicholson repositions the history of the genre and exposes the conditions and consequences of slavery, and the challenges survivors face in liberation. Far from the trope of "capture, enslavement, escape," she argues that narratives are rich and vitally important sources that enable the antislavery community to gain important insights and build more effective interventions.

Andrea Nicholson is Associate Professor in the School of Politics and International Relations, and a member of the Rights Lab, University of Nottingham. Her research primarily concerns survivor testimony and the support frameworks in place for survivors of human trafficking and modern slavery. She has previously undertaken research and consultancy for a range of nongovernmental and governmental organizations, including the EU Fundamental Rights Agency and the UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery.

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Contemporary Slave Narratives and the Global Antislavery Movement

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial,
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Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781316510803
DOI: 10.1017/9781009039741

First published 2022

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
NAMES: Nicholson, Andrea, author.
TITLE: Bearing witness : contemporary slave narratives and the global antislavery movement / Andrea Nicholson, University of Nottingham.
DESCRIPTION: New York, NY : Cambridge University Press, 2022. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
IDENTIFIERS: LCCN 2022022861 | ISBN 9781316510803 (hardback) | ISBN 9781009039741 (ebook)
SUBJECTS: LCSH: Slave narratives. | Slavery – History.
CLASSIFICATION: LCC HT869 .N64 2022 | DDC 306.3/62–dc23/eng/20220714
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2022022861

ISBN 978-1-316-51080-3 Hardback

Man is the storytelling animal
Graham Swift, *Waterland*

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Preface

This book offers a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of over 200 contemporary slave narratives. The analysis is drawn from 196 contemporary slave narratives from autobiographies, nongovernmental organization (NGO) reports and collections, congressional testimony, and print narrative collections. The book also includes extracts from five additional new contemporary slave narratives gathered using cognitive interviewing methods to offer new rich testimony on survivors' own terms.[1]

Survivor narratives have informed our understanding of human abuse throughout time. Not only do narratives serve as a form of testimony and an opportunity to bear witness, but they can be a form of protest literature. They are a vital and underemployed resource, revealing unique first-person insights that can be weaponized to progress abolition. This book challenges the perception of narratives as historical "stories" of limited value. The historic and contemporary corpora comprise rich first-person sources that reveal weaknesses in systems and provide unique authoritative insights into risk factors, strategies for abolition, and the impact of slavery on survivors and their consequent recovery needs, having ramifications for the development of central and NGO support mechanisms.

Through their own voices, this book attempts a richer and deeper understanding of the needs of those who have been enslaved to help inform policy formulation for the prevention of slavery and for the support that is needed for those who have been liberated from slavery. By

[1] The full narratives range from 9,000 to 40,000 words and are therefore too long for complete inclusion in this book, but can be accessed in full at www.antislavery.ac.uk.

contributing to the number and discussion of contemporary slave narratives, and by analyzing these carefully, it is hoped that these important testimonies will affect the development of the antislavery agenda, identify gaps in existing strategies, and offer recommendations to deal with those gaps based on survivors' voices. Placing new narratives in the public field will also assist researchers and NGOs and will help expose the complexity of slave narratives and that of the experiences of enslaved women, children, and men, both during enslavement and in liberation.

TERMINOLOGY

In writing this book, I have used the term survivor to refer to those with lived experience of slavery. However, I recognize that this is less than ideal. Some of those with lived experience of slavery do not always identify themselves as survivors, or they feel it is an inadequate and limiting term or expect negative consequences from identifying themselves as survivors.[2] However, in the absence of a succinct alternative, the term survivor has been adopted throughout this book but without any intention to minimize the lives or full personhood of those previously enslaved. If the word victim is used, this is typically in the context of prosecution and adopts the language of criminal law, but in some instances, it is also used to refer to those who did not survive their enslavement.

A NOTE ON METHOD

In selecting narratives, I have taken a broad approach. Transatlantic chattel enslavement is the dominant image of slavery in contemporary discourse and has become the paradigm against which enslavement today has been measured. Images, records, and testimonies of transatlantic enslavement are often used to explain the conceptual boundaries of slavery as an institution, but such an approach presents a problem for defining the parameters of contemporary slavery in the absence of legality and fails to consider other historic enslavements over human history.[3]

[2] Alexandra Lutnick and Minh Dang, Researcher-Survivor-Ally Evaluation of the Mayor's Task Force on Anti-Human Trafficking Draft Final Summary Report, August 2018, Prepared for the National Institute of Justice, Washington, DC, 11–12.

[3] See Katarina Schwarz and Andrea Nicholson, "Collapsing the Boundaries between De Jure and De Facto Slavery: The Foundations of Slavery Beyond the Transatlantic Frame." *Human Rights Review* 21, no. 4 (2020): 391–414.

The complexities of defining the condition of slavery so as to capture the elements consistent over time are widely debated and do not account for survivors' own conceptions of enslavement.[4] While these debates on definition are important conversations to be had, most narratives do not provide sufficient detail to make a judgment as to whether survivors have been enslaved, whichever definition we might seek to apply. The archetype also inhibits survivors' own understanding of the nature of their exploitation; many do not associate their experiences with slavery until someone provides that label for their experiences. The consequence of the above is that rather than limiting the analyses only to those who explicitly identify as having been enslaved, I have examined narratives from a broad range of extreme forms of human exploitation. Some may fall somewhere along the scale between severe labor exploitation and slavery, but those wishing to consider the contents by archetype will certainly find examples within the corpus that meet the traditional framing of chattel slavery.

In order to engage with survivors' meanings, the five new narratives I gathered have been analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis, with constructivist grounded theory coding techniques employed for the typically shorter preexisting 196 narratives. A table of the narratives analyzed, including the survivors' names/pseudonym, their countries of origin and enslavement, the year of their narratives, and sources, is included in the appendix. The book explores the emergent categories over six thematic chapters on the value of telling, perceptions of freedom, the destruction and reconstruction of identity, trauma, recovery, and activism.

I endeavored to adopt interview methods that attempted to redress issues that have plagued narrative gathering across the genre and that were designed to address the power imbalance between researcher and participant. I tested emerging theory against a the larger corpus, comparing findings and revisiting the narratives countless times so that findings were, as far as possible, emulated across the majority of narratives. As Louise Kidder explains:

> Qualitative researchers return home with hours of field notes, voices on tapes, intimate knowledge of communities under siege, [and] they grow uncomfortably aware of many incompatible responsibilities. There is a responsibility to

[4] Andrea Nicholson, Minh Dang, and Zoe Trodd, "A Full Freedom: Contemporary Survivors' Definitions of Slavery." *Human Rights Law Review* 18, no. 4 (2018): 689–704.

hear what informants are saying about their lives and the meaning of their experiences, and a responsibility to construct interpretations that may or may not conform to what informants have told us .... Whether we agree with the words of informants or not, whether we even like them or not, we have an obligation to surround their words with analyses for which we are the authors .... Partial, temporary and tentative, we have a responsibility to position ourselves in relation to our data, and our position will not necessarily be the same as our informants' (have no illusions – they will not agree with each other either).[5]

Where narrative extracts have been brought together on a theme, care has been taken to ensure that they have not been taken out of context or that important or contrary material has not been removed (and so misrepresentation avoided). Extracts from the other narratives analyzed have also been reproduced exactly, including punctuation, language, and spelling as provided by the publisher or author.

RECOGNITION OF THE SURVIVOR STANDPOINT

During the years it took to research and write this book, I have had the privilege of meeting with survivors both as part of my research and as colleagues and activists. I have learned much from my connections and conversations with these individuals, in absorbing the research they have undertaken and the perspectives they have communicated. I am acutely aware that as a nonsurvivor my understanding will always be incomplete.

While the objective observer brings their own value to analysis, as Minh Dang eloquently explains in her epistemology of survival, I can never know the entirety of slavery, and the subjective brings insights that I will be unable to see.[6] I am acutely aware of my position as a nonsurvivor and the challenges this poses in interpreting survivors' narratives. As a nonsurvivor, my experience of freedom limits my understanding of survivors' meanings. Survivors' epistemologies are fundamentally different from those of nonsurvivors; survivors *know* differently from nonsurvivors.[7] Recognizing this is key to acknowledging the potential limitations of the book and a call to survivors to see in this corpus what I cannot. The contents are unlikely to describe every survivor's meaning or

[5] Louise H. Kidder and Michelle Fine, "Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology: A Radical Tradition," in *Critical Psychology: An Introduction*, ed. Dennis Fox and Isaac Prilleltensky (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998), 48–49.

[6] Minh Dang, "Epistemology of Survival: A Working Paper," 2021, 5. www.minh-dang.com/publications.

[7] Minh Dang, "Epistemology of Survival," 1.

perspective; indeed, it is impossible for them to represent every survivor. I am sure survivors will see things in the narratives that I have missed, and I welcome (and we need) further scholarship on contemporary slave narratives and the content here, particularly from survivors' perspectives.

In gathering my own narratives for the book, I have informally witnessed more than could be expressed in this research. Confronted with survivors' realities, their openness and confidences, I have been able to develop a deeper understanding of the effects of enslavement. It was impossible not to be deeply affected by their truths. As Kevin Bales notes in the conclusion to *Blood and Earth* – you cannot unknow what you know.

Acknowledgments

I could not have adopted the interview method that proved so crucial to this book without the financial support of the University of Nottingham postgraduate fund that enabled me to undertake training in cognitive interview methods from an external specialist. My interview expenses were also supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council Anti-slavery Usable Past project, and thanks also goes to the Rights Lab at the University of Nottingham for supporting a visiting fellowship, enabling me to finalize this work. I have been fortunate to have been encouraged in my work by a number of people, but of particular mention here are Celeste Marie-Bernier, Zoe Trodd, Todd Landman, and Kevin Bales. Thank you for your unerring support for this work.

My interviews would also not have been possible if it had not been for the support of governmental organisations and various NGOs who have fed back on ethics, taken the time to speak with their clients, offered or arranged private rooms for me to interview (in some cases, supplying unexpected coffee and biscuits), supported survivors through the process, and generally supported the research. In this regard, particular thanks go to Paul Fern and Paul Broadbent at the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority, Jimmy Zachariah at Baca, Bronagh Andrew at Trafficking Awareness Raising Alliance, Diana Mankai at Dover Migrant Help, Yvonne Hall and all the staff at Palm Cove Society, Victoria Oji at Hestia, Jenette Carey and Atleu, and Phillip Clayton at City Hearts.

Last but not least, my heartfelt thanks go to all the survivors who have shared their stories, to the survivors unable to do so, to the survivors who did not survive to tell, and to the survivors who were willing to be interviewed: Tung, Pranus, Val, Keith, and Dwain. Without your testimony and activism, the antislavery community would be an impoverished space.