Trafficked Women in Press Journalism: Politics and Ambivalence in the Quest for Visibility

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This article explores discursive constructions of women trafficked for sexual exploitation in newspaper articles in the United Kingdom and the United States. I draw on the results of a multimodal discourse analysis of 25 articles published in 2018 across seven newspapers. The framework of politics of pity is used to analyze the politics of representation of trafficked women. The analysis yields six categories that fall into two themes: Agency is depicted through trafficked women as *deceased*, *controlled*, and *injured* subjects, and visibility through the categories of *strangers*, *victims*, and *survivors*. These ways of appearance suggest that, in newspaper content, trafficked women are placed on a hierarchy of victimhood. Appeals to compassionate care are reserved for "ideal victims," while those lower on the hierarchy are construed as ambivalent subjects lacking a political voice. The study shows that dominant constructions of public suffering reflect a neo-abolitionist politics of representation, while marginalized identities and subjectivities are framed through ambivalence. To expand the remit of care, ambivalence could be productively used to contextualize social oppression in media accounts of human trafficking.

Keywords: human trafficking, ambivalence, gender, discourse, politics of pity

Distressing stories of modern slavery, shocking reports about young women being groomed and lured into the world of organized crime, and narratives of blackmail, sexual exploitation, and injury routinely feature in the press coverage of women trafficked for sexual exploitation. As such, stories within this media genre contribute to public perceptions of trafficked women. The types of narratives and subjectivities that dominate media depictions, however, are a matter of politicized debate that dates back to the 1960s when the feminist movement became divided on whether sex work should be considered a form of labor and decriminalized or if it constitutes exploitation and should be abolished. This division is a key matter of debate underlying media constructions of trafficking for sexual exploitation, with the abolitionist view dominating both media and policies. Meanwhile, as Ticktin (2011) argues, victimhood is veiled in gendered language in

both media and policies because gender-based violence is imagined both as routinely occurring and as exceptional. This double conception, she explains, depoliticizes violence because it obscures the structural causes of women's oppression. The key argument of this article is therefore that, within the politics of representation of human trafficking, a view of women as vulnerable victims rather than as agents who make choices within difficult sociocultural contexts is highly associated with how they are constructed as subjects. This is problematic, I argue, because it leaves certain women on the margins of public care.

Press journalism is an important vehicle for the public understanding of trafficked women as gendered subjects of care. It is an environment where numerous representations coexist and compete for dominance and where a variety of actors, including trafficked women, attempt to demonstrate to the publics the meaning of their experience. Critiques of newspaper content indicate that, in this genre, trafficked women are routinely depicted as young, innocent, and helpless, and hierarchies of victimhood prevail where some women are seen as ideal victims while others are marginalized because they are constructed as culpable or responsible for the violence they endure (Kempadoo, 2015; Soderlund, 2011). However, these are not the only two positions that trafficked women can occupy as subjects of public emotion. As I demonstrate here, press discourse facilitates multiple views and emotional orientations toward trafficked women through its intrinsic ability to form, uphold, and challenge media representations. To make this claim I draw on the results of a multimodal discourse analysis of 25 articles across seven U.K.- and U.S.-based newspapers. I utilize the framework of a politics of pity, extended via media and gender theory, to analyze how trafficked women are constructed in dominant trafficking discourse as subjects of public care. As such, this article's contribution is to highlight the political potential of journalistic depictions to facilitate the recognition of trafficked women not only as ideal victims but as subjects of power relations and inequalities. The analysis yields six categories in which trafficked women appear as *deceased*, *controlled*, and *injured* subjects, and as *strangers*, *victims*, and *survivors*. I propose that despite a variety of discourses present in newspaper content, an ideological and political debate that underlies trafficking representations and policies is pre-settled and obscured. Namely, the politics of representation falls almost exclusively on the side of the abolitionist approach to trafficking while leaving other identities and subjectivities in ambivalent positions. This results in ambivalent proposals of care toward some women, and I argue that a feminist form of collectivity—through the contextualization of oppression—is a way to offer a political voice to women who occupy these marginalized positions within the remit of public care.

The Genre of Press Journalism and Trafficked Women as Subjects: A Literature Review

In offering discursive visibility to trafficked women, press journalism raises questions about its own framing of trafficking and of the discourses it establishes. As reporters of public events, journalists witness suffering and trauma and contribute to formulating public discourse (Schudson, 2008). They form what Zelizer (1993) calls interpretive communities, employing journalistic practice to interpret key public events in their unfolding and retelling. Internal logics of the genre constrain and enable the possibilities of meaning in mediated discourse and expose audiences to perspectives that journalists choose to privilege, although, as Chouliaraki (2008) asserts, audiences derive a range of meanings from these texts. Newspaper articles are therefore sites where trafficking discourses become salient through journalists' interpretations of events, thus forming, upholding, and challenging notions of public responsibility toward suffering others (Chouliaraki

& Stolic, 2017). Put differently, they are vehicles for orienting public dispositions toward trafficked women as subjects of pity.

News coverage of human trafficking is criticized for highlighting trafficking for sexual exploitation while neglecting labor exploitation, forced begging, and other forms of trafficking (Marchionni, 2012; Sanford, Martínez, & Weitzer, 2016), as well as for constructing dramatic narratives about the buying, trickery, and coercion of ideal victims (Johnston, Friedman, & Sobel, 2015; Ras & Gregoriou, 2019; Vance, 2012). Migration and trafficking scholars who advocate for sex workers' rights have critiqued such portrayals for hiding personal experiences and failing to show varied voices and subjectivities (Pajnik, 2010; Sobel, Friedman, & Johnston, 2019). In a similar vein, campaigners and policy makers commonly refer to trafficking for sexual exploitation as "sex trafficking" and "modern slavery" to emphasize the violation of human rights and the exploitative nature of forced labor, and yet postcolonial and feminist scholars caution against this terminology. Discourses of modern slavery, they argue, result in portrayals of trafficked women as forcibly enslaved and devoid of agency as a context-dependent capability for action (Doezema, 2010; Mai, 2018; Snajdr, 2013).

Accompanying this selective representation of trafficked women's identities and subjectivities is the absence of their voices. In press journalism, trafficked women are largely spoken for and acted on rather than speaking or acting on their own behalf (Stiles, 2018). Critical migration scholars argue that such formulations reflect and reproduce geopolitical frameworks of policing, border control, surveillance, nationalization, and the criminalization of sex work (Gulati, 2011; Sanford et al., 2016). They also fail to address the root causes of trafficking, shifting attention away from political questions about the dominant social order that creates and perpetuates gender, class, racial, economic, and other inequalities (Stiles, 2018). Additionally, those who speak for trafficked women represent their own political and ideological viewpoints and agendas and not necessarily those of the women themselves (Stiles, 2018). The overall argument, then, is that the media tend to perpetuate dominant trafficking discourses, which in turn construe trafficked women as sexually innocent and pure, in other words, as ideal victims whose victimization is framed as a cause for rescue that justifies the control of women's movement and sexuality (Plambech, 2016; Szörényi & Eate, 2014). Such portrayals, this argument goes, create discursive hierarchies of victimhood where women's innocence, virtue, and powerlessness are the characteristics that constitute the ideal trafficking victim (Andrijasevic & Mai, 2016; Bernstein, 2007; O'Brien, 2016). In this study, the framework of pity facilitates an analysis of who those ideal trafficked women are and what kinds of subjectivities and experiences are positioned elsewhere on the victim hierarchy.

Politics of Representation and Politics of Pity: A Theoretical Framework

To examine how trafficked women emerge in press journalism as subjects of public pity, I bring together two key claims in a dialogical cross-fertilization. First, Boltanski's (1999) framework of a politics of pity applied to, on the one hand, media as an institutional and symbolic space that frames, reflects, and circulates meanings, and on the other hand, a feminist outlook on subjectivity as a way to approach gendered oppression. Second, a look at the politics of representation in the context of human trafficking provides a way to probe how dominant and marginalized experiences and subjectivities appear in media discourse. The politics of pity is therefore the theoretical background for empirically analyzing the politics of representation underlying the media constructions of trafficked women. Boltanski's (1999) theorization of a

politics of pity as the notion that pity is socially constructed stems from Arendt's (1958) conception of the public space of appearance as a space where images and language are symbolically arranged to produce meanings and therefore a political space that carries potential visibility for all. A space, in other words, that facilitates the process by which the spectacle of trafficked women's suffering becomes meaningful to audiences. In the space of appearance, Chouliaraki (2004) notes, meanings are arranged politically, so pity "is not the natural sentiment of human empathy, but rather, an historically specific and politically constituted principle for relating spectator and sufferer" (p. 190). Pity, therefore, mobilizes and affects public sensibilities and orientates them toward trafficked women as subjects of care. It is particularly useful in the literature on distant suffering and humanitarian ethics where critics have analyzed the significance of showing others' suffering and speaking and acting on their behalf as political acts with the potential to mobilize compassionate action (e.g., Fassin, 2012). This is important in the context of human trafficking because it is a phenomenon whose visibility in public life is highly dependent on the media. It also matters because the discursive constructions of trafficked women's identities and experiences in the space of appearance impact the forms of responsibility, if any, that these depictions offer to the publics. Pity's orientation to action is therefore key to its relevance as a theoretical framework for this study.

Alongside the work of critical media scholars in elaborating how pity is socially constructed in media (Silverstone, 2007) this perspective also features in feminist media studies. According to feminist critics, media and cultural imagery of women are key sites of critical engagement with issues of inequality, social oppression, and domination (Richardson & Wearing, 2014). Following post-structuralist theory, gender is treated here as a discursive construct and as a category contributing to women's construction as social subjects, so media discourse is a site of conflict and contestation where ambiguous and contradictory possibilities of meaning exist in tension (van Zoonen, 1994). Subjectivity, that is, personal interiority, is therefore far from unitary. It is fragmented and contradictory and, in media texts, exists in a constant state of struggle and negotiation over meaning (Richardson & Wearing, 2014). This highlights the conditional freedom of the spectator inasmuch as texts make a variety of fragmented proposals for subjectivity for trafficked women, including opportunities for resistance. This Foucauldian-inspired approach to feminist studies explains the observations made by scholars of trafficking and migration about the prevalence of the ideal-victim discourses and the resulting hierarchies of victimhood and marginalization of those trafficked women whose experiences do not fall within dominant narratives. In practical terms, it provides a way to characterize and sort analytical categories in a way that goes beyond the binary of victimhood and agency.

Politics of Representation in Human Trafficking

Much critical debate on human trafficking centers around women's victimhood and agency, including analyses of gender and the terminology of "modern slavery" (Doezema, 2010; O'Connell Davidson, 2016), but trafficking scholars have largely left pity unexplored as a discursive mechanism for eliciting emotion (for exceptions see Aradau, 2004; Arthurs, 2012). As a result, these studies do not engage in critiques of anti-trafficking interventions to map the assumptions that underpin prevailing trafficking discourses and victim hierarchies which, in turn, serve as audiences' moral education. This type of analysis is present in critical media scholarship on gender and humanitarian communication (e.g., Arthurs, 2012; Squire, 2015). In this study, media and gender theory are combined with the thematic and theoretical strands of the study of human trafficking.

The central ideological, political, legal, and discursive debate in trafficking studies centers around the notion that certain experiences and subjectivities are marginalized while others are pervasive both in media and in policies. This specifically refers to the aforementioned conflicting views of trafficking exploitation: The dominant trafficking discourse, associated with a neo-abolitionist approach whereby sex work is equated with "sex trafficking" and "modern slavery," and a marginalized view, underpinned by the decriminalization stance whereby (migrant) sex work is separated from trafficking and sexual exploitation (Kempadoo, 2015). This rift in feminists' attitudes toward sex work directly impacts approaches to trafficking. The neo-abolitionist framework generally construes trafficked women as ideal victims, while sex work advocates argue for decriminalization and see trafficked women as agents negotiating complex socioeconomic circumstances and oppressions. Accordingly, not all trafficked women are constructed in the media as equally deserving of public care. It is, I argue, the various proposals for meaning related to gender difference and victimhood that produce audiences' distance from the ideal trafficking victim and, in turn, place her experiences and subjectivity higher or lower on the victim hierarchy. The goal of this study is to problematize the discourses used to construct trafficked women as subjects of public care. This matters for three reasons: First, trafficked women are constructed as silent victims without agency; second, the media set narrow frames for imagining marginalized groups and actions; and third, this representational politics reproduces wider frames of visibility that contain agency and solidarity within narrowly framed mediated recognition.

Methodology and Data Collection

Analytics of mediation is an approach to textual analysis conceptualized by Chouliaraki (2008) that adapts tools from multimodal analysis and critical discourse analysis. It addresses power as Foucault's "double economy of freedom and subjectification" to analyze power relations played out at the level of the text and is attuned to the "semiotic mode of the image" as a site of meaning-making (Chouliaraki, 2008, p. 689). This type of analysis provides the tools for analyzing how the visual and linguistic choices in media texts represent reality, and how they orientate viewers toward the world (Iedema, 2001). The approach is well suited to combining with feminist theory since they are both politically attuned and organized around the analysis of social practices (Lazar, 2005). Namely, they share an analytical and normative interest firstly in situating gender in institutional contexts and examining how gender as a category creates hierarchical differences among people, and secondly in contributing to these social struggles by identifying the potential of these categories to create dialogue (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999).

A case-study approach to data collection was employed since it facilitates a context-dependent study of persons and events in their complexity and richness rather than seeking generalization, which is compatible with discourse-based methods (Stake, 1995). One data-selection strategy for a case study is selecting paradigmatic cases rather than aiming for replicability since these are exemplars that highlight the general characteristics of the matter under analysis, and validity claims can be made by placing a case study "in dialogue with other validity claims in the discourse to which the study is a contribution" (Flyvbjerg, 2006, pp. 232–233). In this case, this entails comparing the results of this study with the literature review and the accounts provided in critical migration literature. To ensure that collected data corresponded to the subjects of the study—trafficked women—I operationalized the terms that, according to the literature review, are most commonly used in media representations: "sex trafficking" and "modern slavery" combined

with "victim" and "survivor." To maximize richness, only media texts containing descriptions or visualizations of trafficked women's bodies and/or identities were selected. The sample included 25 articles in the reportage and opinion sections where women trafficked to Europe spoke on their own behalf or where trafficking experiences were explained. These paradigmatic cases allow me to address my research goals of problematizing dominant discourses though the sample is not exhaustive of all discourses that construct trafficked women in the media. The sampling date range was January 1, 2018 to December 31, 2018, and the newspapers included in the analysis were daily newspapers with the highest circulation in the United States and the United Kingdom: *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The Telegraph*, *The Sun* (all in the United Kingdom); and *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today* (all in the United States).

Trafficked Women as Subjects in Press Journalism

The data analysis yielded six categories, which fall into two themes. Given the nature of press journalism as a genre, the analytical categories contain overlapping, contradictory, and shifting discourses, which are neither mutually exclusive nor definitively divisible into separate categories. They are separated for analytical purposes, but the stories from which the categories emerge represent complex discursive objects that rely on a variety of socioeconomic and historical conditions to construct trafficked women as subjects. The six categories of representation are divided into two themes: *Agency of trafficked women*, which describes how trafficked women's agency is constructed, and *visibility of trafficked women*, which points to how they emerge as subjects in media texts.

Agency of Trafficked Women

The first category of representation within this theme is that of *deceased trafficked women*, which contains descriptions of women who have died as a result of trafficking exploitation, unsafe working conditions, and violence perpetrated by traffickers and clients. Although their deaths render them unable to explain their own aims, desires, or subjectivities, death is the condition under which they appear to audiences, and in media discourse it constitutes the proposal for emotional and moral engagement. One example is the story of a woman whose body was found in a river in France but whose status as trafficked is questioned (Bindel, 2018). "If she does not think she is a victim, why should we?" (Bindel, 2018, para. 23), a police officer is quoted, echoing patterns in journalistic reporting of sexual violence against women that maintain stereotypes of "appropriate" femininity by dichotomizing "victims" and "prostitutes" (Greer, 2007). Moreover, the article's author, Julie Bindel, is a neo-abolitionist activist, so the woman's status as a deserving victim is both asserted through vulnerability and undermined by noting that she was a migrant sex worker. As Gregoriou (2012) argues, in death, sex workers are less deserving of victim status, especially if they are identified through a "type" (sex worker) rather than through an identity. Another article documents the experience of a Nigerian migrant "anti-slavery campaigner" who describes how she "saw her best friend die of thirst in the Sahara" during their involuntary migration (Harvey, 2018, para. 25). Instances of victimization in these descriptions of migration, where "the only water to drink was from an oasis with a body floating in it" (Harvey, 2018, para. 20), as the woman recounts, not only illustrate the dehumanization and suffering of irregular migrants to Europe but also implicate women in their own victimization due to their involvement with traffickers. The shocking nature of these crimes is thus the condition of these women's visibility, but as subjects of care, their simultaneous dehumanization and construction as migrant others muddle the practices of securitization and humanitarian intervention (Squire, 2015). This simplified vulnerability generalizes women as victims, so "how these women

wished to live," Ahiska (2016) argues, "what kind of pleasures they sought in their lives, not only becomes impermissible but also unthinkable" (p. 224). Put differently, the focus away from their desires and ambitions effaces women's subjectivities and does not name or challenge social and other inequalities they may have encountered and sought to overcome (Easteal, Holland, & Judd, 2015). By drawing attention toward shock value and away from their agency as migrants, sex workers, mothers, or trafficked women, these representations stop short of solidarity and give way to depoliticized ambivalence.

In the second category of representation, that of *controlled trafficked women*, subjects lose control over how their bodies are used, yet reclaim a degree of agency through limited acts. Women in this category describe the objectification, abuse, and exploitation of their bodies resulting from manipulation and deceit exerted by one of two parties: On the one hand, the state apparatus exercises *institutional control* through biopolitical management while, on the other hand, madams, pimps, traffickers, and "foreign men" exercise *individual control* through coercion and violence. In the *institutional control* cluster women are the vehicles for securing funding for migration reception camps, collateral damage of funding cuts, and subjects of exploitation, deportation, or imprisonment. Though they are occasionally shown as speaking up against such treatment, women suffer physically and mentally as a result of imprisonment, deportation, insufficient care, or funding cuts as their complex long-term needs are left unaddressed. One such article describes how Joy, a Nigerian migrant, "fell into the trap set by traffickers who lure women into slavery and prostitution" (Nadeau, 2018, para. 5). Other stories are accompanied by images of women in social care, seen sitting, standing, or reclining in modest rooms. The shots are tight, their faces sullen or covered, and their clothing plain. The articles describe the hopelessness and desolation women experience as their basic bodily needs are safeguarded while their political presence is overlooked. A key feature of this form of embodiment is a "politics of containment" (Agier, 2010, p. 30) or the insertion of trafficked women into the faceless bureaucratic machine of humanitarian aid and government securitization, which does not distinguish their individual needs, legal status, or victimhood, and instead treats them as bodies to be managed. *Institutional control* thus excludes by exercising power over its subjects using structural boundaries while maintaining an appearance of care (Fassin, 2012), resulting in the ambivalence of the figure of the migrant/trafficked other.

Meanwhile, *individual control* is present in articles about women who were groomed and trafficked by "foreign men," stories of Nigerian women bound to their madams by juju rituals, or of a domestic laborer sold by her family and forced to have children with her captor. Two features of individual control are significant: First, women are separated from audiences, symbolically (by juju rituals), and physically (in brothels). These stories evoke objectification, both because of the violence performed through control and separation, and because of the passivity, naivety, and controlled sexuality presupposed in women, reflecting dominant trafficking discourses of ideal victimhood. Second, the descriptions of non-European women being subjected to incest and juju rituals constructs them as sexualized and bizarre. This discourse originated in racist 19th-century colonial associations of Black bodies with primitiveness and continues with the contemporary hyper-sexualization of Black women (Ahmed, 2002). Finally, as with the category of death, by constructing women purely in relation to their bodily experiences, articles in this cluster obscure women's subjectivities. A deep-seated internal discursive tension, then, characterizes the *controlled trafficked women* category. On the one hand, trafficked women's limited amount of agency through speaking and migration engenders ambivalence, and on the other hand, the heart-breaking accounts of suffering and vulnerability bring them into the remit of public affection.

The third category of reporting construes subjects as *injured trafficked women.* These are former sufferers of violence, who are now speaking agents exposing their injury in public. In these narratives, women lay bare the bodily and psychological injury they endured, and demand rights and provisions for themselves and for others. They speak and appear as incarcerated inmates at risk of re-trafficking because of their vulnerability in prison, recount the attacks they have survived because of their activism, speak of suffering from hearing loss, and broken teeth and bones from beatings. The profound damage of the uncommonly cruel violence visited upon these women, and an emphasis on the permanence of injuries is a key element of this category, where the publics are faced with accounts of bodies that bear enduring physical and psychological marks of trauma. So, while violence is emphasized as the reason these women deserve public attention, their agency stems from speaking. This is in line with the notion of vulnerability as the exposure of injury, which carries the possibility of illustrating one's marginalized position and asserting one's right to a voice (Butler, Gambetti, & Sabsay, 2016). The articulation of vulnerability thus arises from the mobilization of injury as an embodied resource and a response to trafficking (Page, 2018). At the same time, the articles point to trafficked women's resilience. One woman speaks of being "hardened" in her resolve to help others (Schultz, 2018, para. 10), while another remarks that her injury is permanent but her will to recover is strong. Thus, women assert their ideal-victim status and demonstrate resilience by exposing injury, which supports their plight but does not highlight the specifically gendered aspect of injury because it does not turn a critical eye toward the perpetrators or the institutional and cultural conditions that contribute to their victimization. Ultimately, therefore, this category carries little political potential. As Butler (1997) argues, calling attention to the instruments of power through bodily and agentive performance is an essential element of making encounters transformative because it "open[s] up the possibility of agency" (p. 15). This encounter with the suffering body is empty of political potential because it exposes injury without making a coherent demand for social and cultural change.

Visibility of Trafficked Women

In the first category of this theme—*trafficked women as strangers*—women are shown as *migrants* and as *racialized others* traveling to Europe, knowingly or unknowingly, willingly or unwillingly, as irregular migrants. These are stories of Nigerian women undertaking dangerous journeys facilitated by smugglers and traffickers; frightened into obedience through voodoo rituals; tricked into thinking they will be working in hospitality or domestic care; and confined to camps or deported to their home countries, where poverty, debt, and re-trafficking await. On the one hand, women are here constructed as *migrants*, that is, as victimized others whose identities are marked by difference from their host societies, and who exhibit a threatening form of agency by seeking better lives in Europe. Such is the story of trafficked women whose presence at a migrant reception center in Italy is recorded for funding purposes, but whose gradual disappearances from the camp are ignored. Whether by being "lure[d] . . . out of the center on the pretext of shopping trips or other excursions, and deliver[ed] . . . to the Nigerian women who control forced prostitution rings" (Nadeau, 2018, para. 10) or by being instructed to apply for asylum under fake names, women are subjects of trickery and exploitation. They are construed as simultaneously culpable and victimized, the severity of their victimization being diminished by their complicity in smuggling. Whether because of corruption, cultural differences, or legal processes, the characteristics of trafficked women's individual identities are here intertwined with those of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Thus, at the

same time as the severity of their victimization invokes a sensibility of care and responsibility, their agency raises anxieties about their arrival, so trafficked women become subjects of ambivalent public care.

On the other hand, through exoticization and sexualization, women of color are constructed as *racialized others*—representations that originate in colonial constructions of Black populations, which are perpetuated in contemporary film and music (Collins, 2006). The *sexualization* of Black women is present in numerous references to "sex slavery," and in one article's story of a woman who was trafficked after she ran away from home to escape sexual abuse perpetrated by her father. Sexualization is also present in an image where four Nigerian women stand on a street corner at night soliciting customers, wearing pink makeup, revealing tops, and mini shorts (see Nadeau, 2018). These depictions visually hyper-sexualize trafficked women even as the article conveys their vulnerability to exploitation. Similarly, *exoticization* is present in an article about a woman who was "bathed in goat's blood, and [. . .] warned that if she ever spoke of the ritual, a thunderbolt would strike her dead" while a U.K. politician has "made fighting trans-national sex slavery her personal crusade" (Freeman, 2018, para. 9). So, not only is the Black female body marked by voodoo and racial difference but the White Western politician is positioned as her savior as well. Black women's difference from other victims of trafficking thus "becomes the point from which other groups define their normality," as in the discourse of the White savior represented by the politician (Collins, 2000). The association of trafficked women with migrants and racialized others echoes the press coverage of the European migration "crisis," which was accompanied both by humanitarian and securitization discourses toward the arrival of refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers to Europe (Georgiou & Zaborowski, 2017). The merging of the desire to help suffering others with fears about the "influx" of migrants gave rise to the idea of the humanitarian border, or of a simultaneous concern for migrants' well-being and anxieties over border protection (Vaughan-Williams, 2015). This form of engagement with migrants in border zones, according to Squire (2015), "implies an engagement of 'the human' as a political stake, and emphasizes the ambiguities that emerge from the tensions between inequality and solidarity" (p. 98). Thus, even as stories of migration carry the potential for empathy in the public imagination, racial difference creates hierarchical structures of victimhood that intersect with gender and class oppression, framing Black female subjects as different from European populations, as both more culpable and more naïve than other trafficked women, and accordingly as less deserving of public care.

In the visibility of *trafficked women as victims* other actors speak about the severity of trauma that women endure and about their own reactions to trafficking stories, thus demonstrating to audiences the correct feelings toward trafficked women. These include stories about politicians' determination to help trafficked women, and a story by an anti-trafficking activist who has seen "women who have been sexually assaulted with crowbars, had their eye-sockets broken and been beaten unconscious. This year alone she has lost seven young women to this life" (Bell & Hatcher, 2018, para. 15). Another article tells of a U.K. Member of Parliament's determination to address the "awful cases of gangs of Asian men preying on vulnerable young white girls" (Driscoll, 2018, para. 10). The emphasis on the race and gender of the perpetrators and victims conjures discourses of "White slavery," or the phenomenon of virginal White women being exploited by traffickers, which is a racialized discourse criticized by migration scholars (Kempadoo, 2015). These accounts bring trafficked women into visibility through a focus on trauma and the use of ideal-victim discourses, so trafficked women emerge as deserving of empathy but there is no mention of the sociopolitical conditions, subjectivities, or identity categories that these women embody. Additionally, the emphasis is on the speakers'/actors' emotional reactions to hearing trafficked women's stories. This is

different from the discursive constructions of *injured trafficked women*, where women expose their own injury to make demands on the public. Indeed, a key characteristic of victimhood as visibility is that it mobilizes an "ethics of care," which helps audiences to recognize and understand the plight of distant others (Cottle, 2009). In this case, proposals for responsibility for the condition of the other do not result from the appeals of women themselves but from the actions of benevolent actors who perform a moral education for audiences on how to feel and act in relation to trafficked women's suffering (Silverstone, 2007).

In the final discursive category, *trafficked women as survivors*, women are constructed as empowered subjects. Survival is here described as a trait of ideal victimhood, and focus is on the content of women's demands and on their self-responsible recovery. In these texts, the empowered survivors are celebrated for bravery and resilience and recognized as examples of overcoming victimhood. The survivors represent ideal victims; women who "bravely broke free" from traffickers and were "housed in shelters and rehabilitated" (Rose, 2018, para. 6), who helped police with prosecutions, acted as consultants on film sets, and actively fight for the rights of other survivors and against the stigma of victimization. These women are framed as responsible for their own recovery and as using their experiences to advocate for the rights of other vulnerable women. Such a selfless form of survival is presented in an article about an Indian woman who runs a nongovernmental organization for trafficked women, who had been assaulted for her activism but whose recovery was "self-determined" (Schultz, 2018). She was "awarded one of India's highest civilian honors, brushed aside a fatwa issued against her and [. . .] travelled extensively despite threats to her safety" (Schultz, 2018, para. 1), which highlights her active role in her own recovery and professional trajectory, as well as her status as an entrepreneurial, selfless survivor. What distinguishes the survivor category from others is the performative aspect of survival that hinges on resilient individualism. With regard to migrants, Georgiou (2019) argues that optimism and a performance of resilience are important features of survivorship that signal integration into host societies. However, it is a conditional form of recognition where migrants need to prove their worthiness by performing empowerment and resilient survivorship. This active yet nonthreatening existence is what characterizes survivor discourse, framing survivors within a positive orientation toward public good as they take responsibility for themselves and for others. However, as Orgad (2009) points out, nonthreatening agency does not necessarily engender social transformation. The individual actions of survivors in facilitating their recovery and helping others do not necessarily result in politicizing the gendered aspects of women's oppression and trafficking exploitation. Specifically, this form of survivorship focuses only on those women who embody ideal victimhood. The survivors who are invisible are those (migrant) women whose survivorship depends on an unacceptable form of agency, that is, one that accepts sex work as a form of labor within complex social and cultural circumstances.

Referring not only to their experiences of trauma and injury but also to recovery, this collection of depictions in the press brings about the potential for trafficked women to reclaim their bodies, voices, and sense of self. Although their framing creates difference through death, objectification, or racialization, this does not mean that trafficked women have no agentive potential. Ambivalence imbues their identities with complexity and gives their experiences and subjectivities a multitude of meanings. So, although trauma is presented as having a profound effect on their subjectivities, trafficked women nonetheless show agency in negotiating their circumstances. This has implications for how the political potential of ambivalence can be applied to women as gendered subjects.

Discussion and Concluding Thoughts

The media, according to Bourdieu (1991), is a collection of institutionalized practices of symbolic power that lead to a "consensus on meaning of the social world" (p. 166). The media construct, reflect, and perpetuate a particular social order, framing and orienting public imagination around specific representations while marginalizing others, and audiences have an active part in this process. It is this contestation of meaning and politicization of trafficked women's subjectivities that is the subject of this study, and two forms of politics can be distinguished in this dynamic: A *politics of representation*, which has to do with the debate on whether sex work should be criminalized or decriminalized, and a *politics of pity*, which helps us to analyze these representations by revealing how pity operates to mobilize audiences' emotions on behalf of trafficked women. The present analysis of this latter politics reveals that a debate on the former is precluded because the dominant ways in which trafficked women appear in public are pre-settled through the widespread use of neo-abolitionist discourses. As a result, the prevailing politics of representation prevents pity from mobilizing tender-hearted feelings toward the full spectrum of trafficked women.

A Critique of Trafficked Women in Press Journalism

The analysis of press journalism as a genre with a wide array of possible viewpoints and meanings engages the constant tension within media discourses and reveals how this dynamic of politics takes place. Through the use of overlapping discourses, including *death*, *control*, and *injury* and constructions of trafficked women as *strangers*, *victims*, and *survivors*, this genre reveals complex and competing discourses. It exposes a high degree of ambivalence in representations of trafficked women, but nonetheless, the decriminalization of sex work is largely absent from texts, and it is abolitionist discourses that prevail. The direct relationship between ambivalence and the neo-abolitionist politics of representation can be observed in the open-endedness of the six categories yielded by the analysis, which coexist within media texts to different degrees and in different combinations. The interrelationship between these tensions, in turn, has an impact on how trafficked women emerge as subjects. What determines their proximity to good victimhood is the degree to which these women can be associated with vulnerability, resilience, or empowerment, while proximity to undeserving victimhood is associated with racialization and difference. And while some women emerge as ideal victims, such as the subjects in the categories of *injury*, *individual control*, and *survivorship*, others emerge as ambivalent, such as those depicted through *death, institutional control*, and *strangeness*.

On the one hand, women whose experiences are characterized either by vulnerability, which "excuses" certain agentive moves, or by empowerment, which marks them as resilient actors, are brought closer to ideal victimhood and made recognizable as deserving of public care. These are subjects belonging to categories of *injury*, *victimhood*, or *survival*. Their willing exposure of vulnerability, as feminist scholars argue, carries the possibility of developing collectivity and of bringing people from the margins to the center and into the realm of public care (Athanasiou, 2016). The focus on injury, coupled with the presence of actors who exemplify caring feelings toward trafficked women, further signals these subjects' belonging to the remit of care. Agency here takes on a positive form whereby trafficked women speak on their own behalf and express their resilience and selflessness. Through this moral imperative, trafficked women not only expose their suffering but also instruct audiences on the correct way of feeling toward them. On the other hand, those women whose racialization implies independence and sexual agency, who exist outside the main ideological frames, or whose difference is associated with discourses of securitization and border

protection, are marked by their strangeness and therefore sink lower in the victim hierarchy. This reliance on securitization discourses proposes feelings of anxiety due to the presence of migrants at state borders or helplessness in the face of trafficked women's overwhelming trauma. In these categories, women are described through discourses of *death*, *control*, and *strangeness*. Securitization and border protection discourses that their presence then evokes, coupled with racialized visualities, threatens their positioning as subjects deserving of public care. However, even in this category, the women's plight is perceptible through their naivety, through rescue discourses or through their status as strangers associated with migrants and racialized others, and thus they remain loosely within an ambivalent remit of care. Some are positioned closer to deserving victimhood, such as racialized subjects, while those described as migrants are closer to undeserving victimhood.

The Political Potential of Ambivalence

In line with feminist and critical migration scholars' critiques of dominant trafficking discourses, it is ideal victims who are fully constructed as deserving of care, while women carrying other identities and experiences are placed in ambivalent positions. Ambivalence thus becomes a key concept that, in analytical terms, captures a level of complexity signaled by the absence of solutions for nonideal victims' circumstances within the prevailing politics of representation. Ambivalence is an affective register theorized as an experience of "opposing affective orientations toward the same person, object, or symbol" that represents an unstable constellation of feelings (Smelser, 1998, p. 5). According to feminist scholars, ambivalence describes the fragmented and contradictory discourses (Banet-Weiser, 2018; Oliviero, 2016) that underpin media constructions of trafficked women, complicating the victim hierarchy. These scholars have persistently challenged the social categories of gender (Butler, 1999), maintaining that singular identity categories cannot account for people's full subjective experiences in the social world. The descriptive categories used to construct trafficked women, accordingly, cannot account for the full range of their subjectivities and experiences.

Combining this perspective with media ethics, it becomes essential to develop what Silverstone (2007) calls "proper distance," or the willingness to "recognise the other in her sameness and difference" (p. 119). This ethical stance is reflected in feminist critiques that stress the importance of contextualizing experiences of oppression by inviting marginalized others to speak on their own terms (hooks, 2014). In the context of gender and race, hooks asserts that when speaking from the margins, ambivalence needs to be contextualized in ways that normalized meanings do not because marginalized voices need to be afforded space and time to achieve historical, social, and political contextualization (hooks, 2014). I, therefore, argue that press journalism, due to its inherent trait of allowing multiple voices to co-create discourse through tensions, offers the space for contextualizing the oppressive circumstances and limited choices available to trafficked women whose complicity in migration and sex work appears in media texts in the context of, for instance, the European migration "crisis" and public moralities around sex work. So, taking a step away from ambivalence as a feeling that describes those who, in Bauman's (1990) terms, may be nothing or may be all, it is possible to imagine these as performative acts that foster collectivity and recognition, predicated on the presence of receptive audiences. Naming these marginalized positions and the power relations that underlie them in media representations makes it possible to rethink and resist gender and other hierarchies that underlie the discursive normativity that establishes victim hierarchies. It is ambivalent subjects—those who are othered and whose stories deviate from the dominant narratives of victimhood—who pave the way for understanding media depictions of trafficking as embedded in historical power relations and as political from the outset. Such performed victimhood, which is both political and

embedded in gendered logics of visibility, can coexist with agency and ensure that trafficked women's subjectivity is conveyed in media discourse. The *injured trafficked women* category comes close to this configuration by exposing injury and highlighting resilience, thereby asserting a trafficked woman's right to voice and subjectivity. Yet it represents a missed opportunity for fully politicizing women's suffering because it emphasizes the trauma of bodily violence while obscuring its specifically gendered aspect.

Conclusion

It is the inability to resolve the situations of some trafficked women that reveals the limits of the abolitionist politics of representation. It also reveals how the politics of pity is pre-settled in dominant media depictions, foreclosing the opportunity to politicize the plight of those trafficked women whose experiences and subjectivities are afforded neither visibility nor political voice. To find media texts that problematize the narratives and subjectivities of those women who are constructed through ambivalence and marginalized in dominant anti-trafficking discourse, it is pertinent to explore the critiques of the dominant politics of representation. Such narratives can be found in media content produced by sex workers, scholars, filmmakers, artists, and others who fall loosely under the umbrella of critical migration studies and support the decriminalization of sex work (for instance, Mai, 2018; Plambech, 2016). By placing marginalized voices into the center of political context and revealing the oppressive conditions that guide people's decisions, counternarratives seek to embed these conditions into gender hierarchies and power relations. In doing so, they carry the necessary political potential to reveal the negotiations of agency and victimhood and to render legitimate the experiences of trafficked women who are positioned lower on the victim hierarchy.

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