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Museum of Modern-Day Slavery: A Photo Essay

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Museum of Modern-Day Slavery: A Photo Essay

Abstract

A photo essay from the Museum of Modern-Day Slavery in Houston, Texas, with photographs of rooms, entrances, and storage spaces in brothels following raids, including artifacts of the trade found at the scenes are documented. Photographs include brothels, bars, and strip clubs where Korean women and Mexican women were exploited. Photographs from the Mexican-American border document the violence the victims are subjected to during their journey.

Keywords

modern-day slavery, sex trafficking, prostitution, Houston, Texas, Korean, "rape trees," brothel, strip club, cantina, Asian, Latina

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MUSEUM OF MODERN-DAY SLAVERY: A PHOTO ESSAY

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Museum of Modern-Day Slavery

Elijah Rising

ABSTRACT

A photo essay from the Museum of Modern-Day Slavery in Houston, Texas, with photographs of rooms, entrances, and storage spaces in brothels following raids, including artifacts of the trade found at the scenes are documented. Photographs include brothels, bars, and strip clubs where Korean women and Mexican women were exploited. Photographs from the Mexican-American border document the violence the victims are subjected to during their journey.

KEYWORDS

Houston, Texas, Mexico, Latina, Asian, Korean, prostitution, slavery, sex trafficking, museum, artifacts, brothel, strip club, cantina, border, “rape tree”

“The fact that an evil exists and has always existed has never been held by society to be a good reason for not combatting it.” - Josephine Butler, 1875

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN-DAY SLAVERY was launched by a Houston-based anti-trafficking organization named Elijah Rising. It is housed in a former Thai brothel. Although it is small, it has an impactful series of exhibits designed to take a visitor through a history of sex trafficking to the present-day reality.

After only a few short years of working in the anti-trafficking field, the staff and volunteers at Elijah Rising found ourselves actively closing brothels and ending up with the tragic bounty of paraphernalia from such illicit places. Having access to brothels in the aftermath of raids and evictions spurred us to convert the horror of our findings to public awareness about modern-day slavery.

Few things are more powerful than immersion into another’s suffering. Such an experience does something more deeply to the human heart than simply hearing or reading about an injustice. Greater sympathies are aroused when people can experience another’s pain; sympathies which may have laid dormant without the exposure to the everyday existence of victims. Trafficking becomes no longer theoretical but a very disturbing issue that affects every person.

This photo essay presents photographs of rooms, entrances, and storage spaces in brothels, following raids. The artifacts of the trade found at the scenes are

documented. There are photographs of the restraints used on victims, reminiscent of the shackles of slavery from the 18th and 19th century, and of women's undergarments hung as trophies of violent victimization. These scenes, artifacts, and photographs are on display in the Museum of Modern-Day Slavery. They are reproduced in this photo essay in order to share them more widely.

As you view these photographs from the Museum of Modern-Day Slavery, please recall the words of the abolitionist William Wilberforce (1791): "You may choose to look the other way but you can never say again that you did not know."

The Asian Commercial Sex Trade

Houston is a destination city for Chinese, Thai, Korean, Filipino and Vietnamese women used in commercial sexual exploitation. The factors that push them into the trade and the backgrounds from which they come are as varied as the women themselves. Some are lured by the promise of legitimate jobs, while others have been exploited for sex since they were children. Their experience upon arrival is surprisingly consistent. When they arrive, they are subjected to the fraudulent and coercive methods of traffickers: debt bondage, document servitude, and threats of harm.



Photograph 1: Inside a Massage Parlor Brothel

Photo courtesy of Sam Hernandez

This photo is of the interior of a brothel where traffickers sold young Asian women. It was taken hours after the traffickers were evicted. This room was inside the strip center building. The women lived here and serviced customers at all hours of the day and night.



Photograph 2: The Breaking Room

Photo courtesy of Sam Hernandez

This photograph is from a room in a former Asian brothel on the north side of Houston. It is a “breaking room,” which is a room, apartment, hotel room, car or any location where the “seasoning process” is carried out. The seasoning or breaking process is the systematic stripping away of the vestiges of humanity in order to make the girl compliant. Violent acts include beatings, drugging, repeated rape, and torture. Under economic analysis, this process is shrewdly designed to minimize risk and maximize profit.

Here at the Museum of Modern-Day Slavery, which is constructed inside a former brothel, the breaking process was conducted in one of the rooms down the office hallway (Swartz, 2010). The first-hand testimony from a survivor who was trafficked in this building for 5 years is available at this link: <http://www.texasmonthly.com/articles/the-lost-girls>.



Photograph 3: GinZa, Palm Tree Spa

Photo courtesy of Spike Johnson

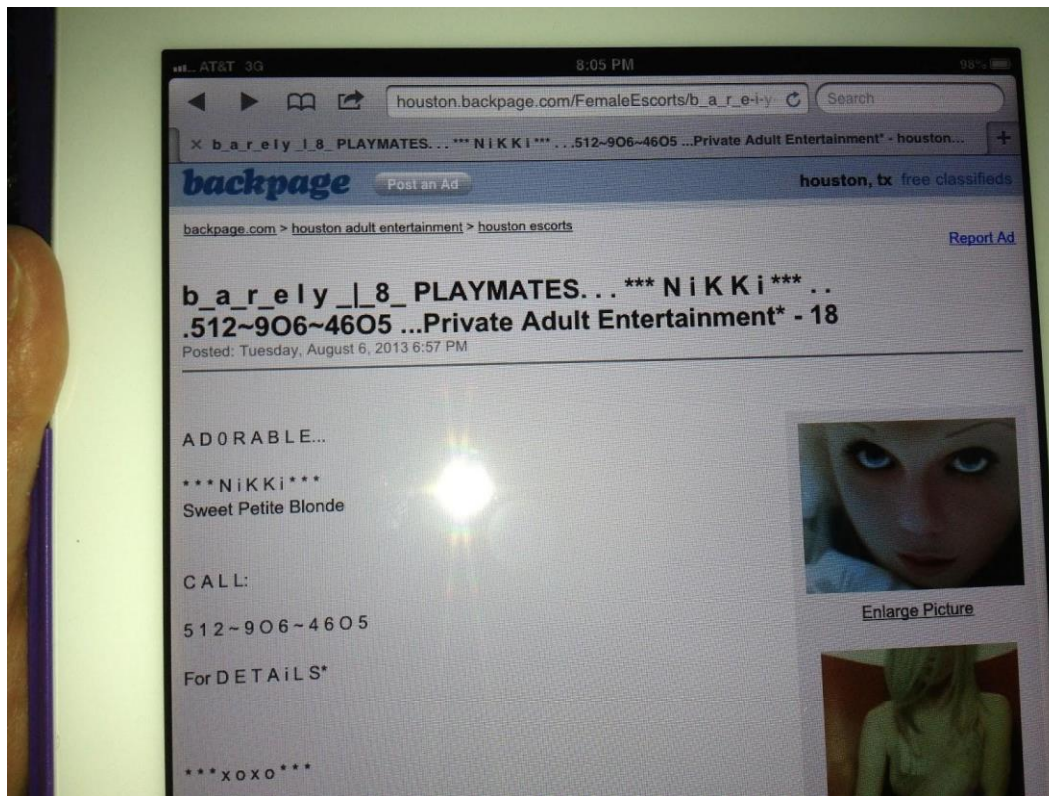
This Asian brothel held trafficked Korean women. The traffickers charged \$160/hour for services. Once the spa was busted, our team went inside and found horrific living conditions. The women were kept in the warehouse space behind the 9-room brothel. No mattresses or working bathrooms were found in the warehouse. Bare slatted plywood frames were used as beds for six women in a room (Wiley, 2014).

The Street and Online Trade

“The rich man pays for his pleasure, and holds himself absolved. Money is all it has cost him - the base money which is the price of blood and the price of a soul.” - Josephine Butler, 1870.

The majority of domestic minor sex trafficking occurs on the internet. But, according to the Advanced Interactive Media (AIM) Group, when Craigslist shuttered its prostitution advertisements in 2010 because of public pressure, Backpage quickly emerged as the market leader (Zollman, 2017).

A study by Arizona State University indicated that ten percent of online prostitution advertisements were for minors (Roe-Sepowitz et al. 2013). Backpage represents an estimated seventy percent of the market for prostitution advertisements and reaps eighty percent of the \$45 million dollar a year market for all commercial sexual advertising, making it the kingpin of internet prostitution.



Photograph 4: Houston's Online Ads for Prostitution

Photo courtesy of Cat French

In the advertisements, pimps post listings of their women under the guise of “entertainers,” “with thinly veiled disclaimers that “donations” were for “companionship only.” Prospective customers contact the person answering the advertisement to schedule a meeting for a time and location nearby, often in a local hotel. Doing interventions in every quadrant of the city, we realized that no hotel or motel - from the ritzy to the cheap - lies untouched by the blight of online prostitution.

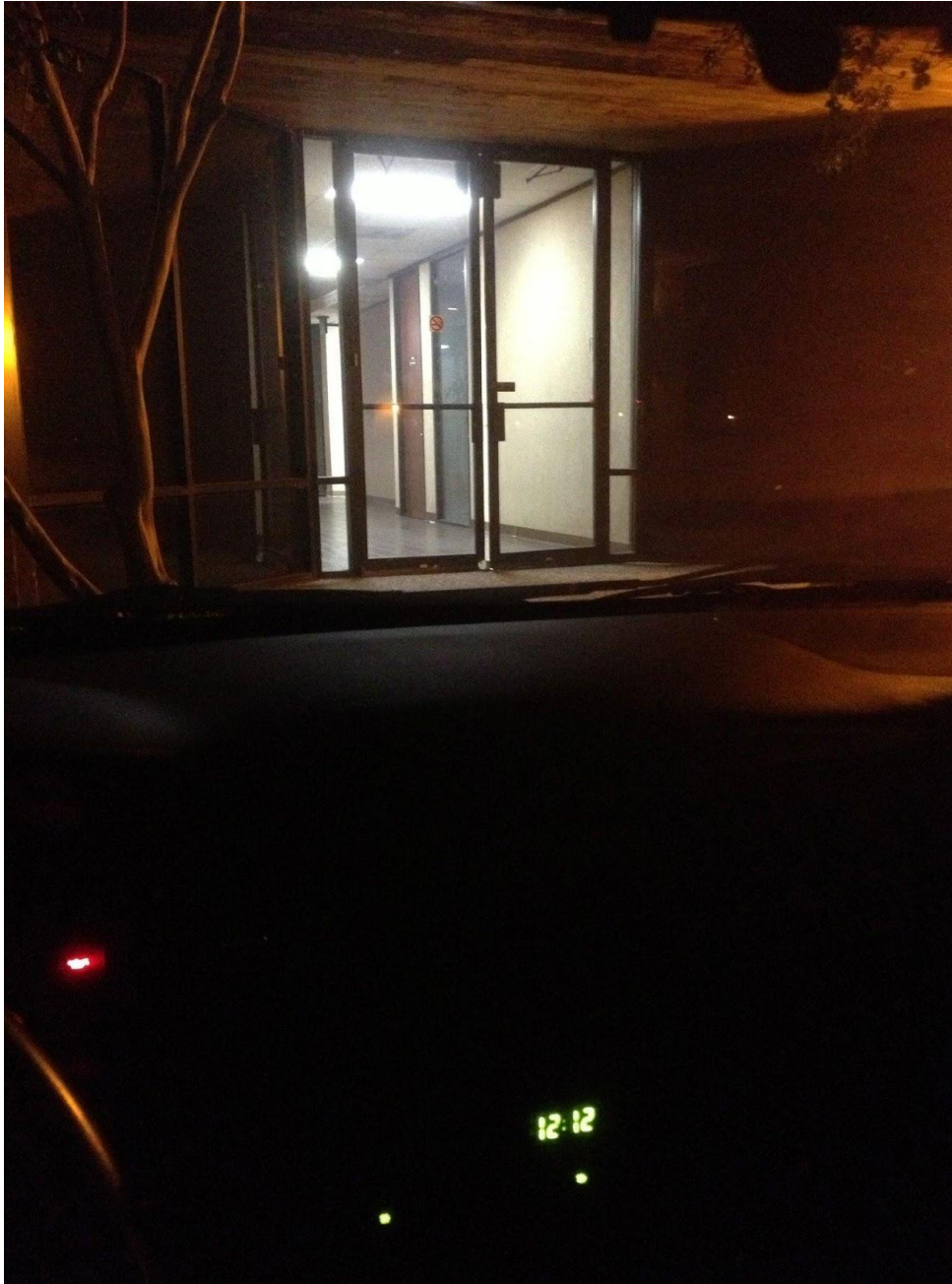
Free the Captives recently conducted a study on Houston’s online prostitution market (Walters, Best, & Bach 2014). They found that Houston averages almost 300 prostitution advertisements per day. They compared this number to other cities, such as North Jersey/Manhattan, and found that on a slow day Houston boasts double their combined average of 117 advertisements. Houston is an oil industry city with companies which employ many male workers. On a busy day, with a lot of men in town, our Backpage ads skyrocket up to five times the daily average.

“Never forget that if we allow persons belonging to any class of the citizen to be enslaved-however obscure, despised or degraded that class may be-these will not long continue to be the only slaves. The principle of individual liberty, once infringed, will be gradually lost.” - Josephine Butler (As cited in *The Spectator*, 1936).

Trafficking In A Local Office Complex

Backpage.com, among other sites where prostitution is advertised, have helped to normalize the purchase of women for sex and its influence is deeply felt in the

fabric of society. Here in this darkened photo we see a seemingly innocuous office building door cracked open late at night. However, upon further investigation, our team discovered that the door stayed propped open to allow sex-buyers to enter unnoticed as the rest of the office building's tenants were gone for the night. Pimps were savvy enough to rent an office space for use only during late evening hours for selling women.



Photograph 5: Door to Office Building Propped Open So Sex Buyers Could Enter Late at Night

Photo courtesy of Cat French

The Latin American Cantina Trade

Within the last few years the tide of immigration has shifted from the typical “day-laborer” to women, children, and high value criminal targets. In fact, according to private security detail troops at the border, 72% of people coming undetected

through the checkpoints are “OTMs” (“Other Than Mexican”). Elijah Rising staff has reports of Chinese females, Syrian refugees, drug cartel members and other criminals from our involvement with border rescue operations.

Believing that they will be simply smuggled into the U.S., many of these women and children find themselves caught in a web of organized crime forcing them into a life of prostitution. These women quickly end up in cantinas, spas, and neighborhood brothels in the Houston and San Antonio area.



Photograph 6: One of 17 Sex Rooms in a Cantina Brothel Photo courtesy of Sam Hernandez

Photograph 6 is of a room at The New Back Door Club, also known as “Las Palmas” in Houston. This club was raided in October, 2013 by multiple law enforcement agencies. This particular club boasted 17 sex rooms upstairs and were trafficking adults as well as minors (Glenn & Carroll, 2013).

The cantina sex trade is one of the major prostitution venues that puts Houston on the map for sex trafficking. A “pony bar” refers to the cantina business model that uses women to help sell beer to male clientele. Customers can purchase a beer for a regular price, or they can purchase a beer that comes with the waitress that serves it. The waitress’ job is to keep male clients drinking by drinking with them. These interactions frequently culminate with sex in a secret room within the cantina, all of which increases profits for the cantina. These exhibits in the museum expose the trade of Latin American females that is taking place in cantinas all over the Houston area.



Photograph 7: Heels Found at a Houston Cantina Brothel

Photo Courtesy of Spike Johnson

The shackles of the modern-day slave trade are the shoes, often stilettos, which the girls are required to wear during work hours. Several underage Latin-American girls were found held at this particular cantina and according to a victim interviewed by KPRC-TV, minors were being sold there for over \$500 (Salinger, 2016).



Photograph 8: Lock and Chain Found in a Cantina Photo

Courtesy of Spike Johnson

While this lock may not have been used to physically restrain the women, it is symbolic of the physical, emotional, and psychological bondage they face daily. This particular lock came from a brothel that was one of the largest trafficking operations in the Houston area (U.S. Attorney's Office, Southern District of Texas, 2011).



Photograph 9: Extra Mattress Found in an Attic After a Raid Photo courtesy of Spike Johnson

These mattresses were found after a raid at the New Back Door Club. Sex rooms consisted of a plywood compartment with a locked door and a twin mattress on the floor. One sex room was simply a chair in a closet with a sheet as a means of privacy.

“A brothel keeper by my late thirties, I had been introduced by my mother to a life of sexual promiscuity before I was thirteen years old. By the time I stumbled into a Salvation Army meeting I was ‘too old to be reclaimed’, besides, I was almost dying with the drink. Every doctor I went to said, ‘You must give up your drink!’ How could I? It made me have a bit of life...it was drinking to deaden my feeling, to meet the men. If you were not bright they would not come again. They paid your rent and supported you. No, you must drink, if it finished you up.” - Rebecca Jarrett, Ex-Procuress (former trafficker) saved by The Salvation Army circa 1880 (As cited in Fairbank, 2007).



Photograph 10: Message in a Cantina Left by Trafficker

Photo Courtesy of Spike Johnson

After the 2013 raid, Elijah Rising staff visited the New Back Door Club cantina to pray over the site and ask the Lord to keep it closed. On our first visit this spray-painted message was not there. A few weeks later, we made another visit to the site and found this message: "You got my girls but not me." Clearly, the writer of the message considered the girls inside to be his property. Alfonzo Diaz-Juarez is the only alleged member of The New Back Door operation who has so far eluded arrest ("50k reward offered," 2015; FBI, n.d.).



Photograph 11: Cantina Girl With Man

Photo Courtesy of Spike Johnson

In Houston, Cantina girls are coerced into the sex trade through abduction, fraud, or being sold outright by their parents. The average age of entry into prostitution for these girls is around thirteen years old. From the very beginning they are trained to sell men beer and sexual services. The more alcohol the customer consumes, the more likely they will be to purchase her for sex. In a typical night woman may have to consume thirty beers (Villatoro 2012).

Unsurprisingly, the average lifespan of women in the cantina trade is less than a decade.

Exploitation of Women at the Border: A Five Hour Drive from Houston

Activities at the U.S. - Mexico border are politically charged issues. Whether you consider the immigrants to be “illegal aliens” or “undocumented newcomers,” the fact remains that the most exploited people are the women border crossers on their way to work off smuggling debts and pay second ransoms in cantinas all over Houston. In the Museum of Modern-Day Slavery we have an exhibit which depicts a first hand experience on the border, where we found evidence of a “rape tree” and sophisticated smuggling routes where girls are moved on moonless nights across vast acres of Texas brush land.

“Rape trees” are trees where coyotes repeatedly sexually terrorize their victims to send the message that they are under the control of the smugglers and other coyotes they may encounter on the route.



Photograph 12: Rape Tree on U.S. Mexican Border

Photo Courtesy of Micah Gamboa

A sheriff testified before the U.S. House of Representatives about the “rape trees” found along the Mexican border. Women’s underwear hung on trees bear witness to the sexual violence against women and girls and serve as a warning to other to obey the coyotes.

“..there would be a tree or bush or something that was decorated with women’s underwear. And, we began to ask, ‘What does this mean?’ We discovered those are rape trees. A monument [created by the smugglers]. A signal to everyone along the line about what the consequences will be for failing to cooperate with the Coyote.” - Sheriff Larry Dever, Cochise County Sworn Testimony before members of the U.S. House of Representatives joint hearing before the subcommittee on immigration, border security, and claims and the subcommittee on crime, terrorism, and homeland security or the committee of the judiciary house of representatives (“Outgunned and outmanned” 2006).



Photograph 13: The Hanging Tree

Photo Courtesy of Micah Gamboa

The branch of this tree is where a dog leash was found. Girls are strung up here to be raped or “tested” before being purchased by customers--or simply for the Coyote’s amusement.



Photograph 14: Handcuff Tree

Photo Courtesy of Micah Gamboa

Tree where a pair of handcuffs were wired to the base. We have reason to believe that this area is a staging place for the buying and selling of girls at the border as cell phone service is robust in this small area and multiple restraints were found within a few yards.

Conclusion

While the horror of sexual slavery is real and striking we understand there is, in fact, a solution. Humanity has repeatedly overthrown unjust forces time and time again and will continue to do so. The scourge of trafficking in persons is a temporary one and it is the obligation of a just and honorable society to lift up their voices, and as one, to cry out for the exposure and overthrow of oppressive, deviant, and evil acts.

“Immense is the task before us, nothing shall ever shatter our faith. The justice of our cause is our surety of success.” - Josephine Butler, 1875b

“Human nature is so constituted that it will forevermore protest against injustice, confront tyranny, and refuse to bear any kind of slavery with patience.” - Josephine Butler, 1875c

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Micah Gamboa is the executive director of Elijah Rising and Kendleton Farms in Houston, Texas. Ms. Gamboa is the curator of Museum of Modern-Day Slavery. She leads a team of passionate justice-focused professionals in the anti-trafficking movement. Since 2012 she has overseen the organization and development of Elijah Rising from a small, locally focused mission to a multi-programed, nationally recognized entity while maintaining fidelity to the original vision and mission. She directs the only anti-trafficking museum in the United States, and collects abolitionist literature.

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