

Book Review

Rewriting the Victim: Dramatization as Research in Thailand's Anti-Trafficking Movement

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When we—members of the privileged West—see her picture, we pity her. We can't help it. Her dark skin, her obvious youth, her fragile frame... Rather than hearing her voice, we focus on her image, static and subdued. Rather than listening to her story, we imagine the worst.

So begin the opening lines of the prologue to Erin M. Kamler's riveting book on the ways the anti-trafficking movement 'flattens' (Parreñas, 2011: 6) the complex realities of migrant sex workers from Burma in northern Thailand. Kamler, an Assistant Professor of Arts and Humanities at Minerva Schools at KGI, has divided her time between South East Asia and the USA for most of the past decade. She first encountered Thailand as a high school exchange student in the early 1990s before human trafficking became an issue of global concern. After an accomplished career as an award-winning musical composer and playwright, Kamler returned to graduate school to pursue research on Thailand that would harness her artistic talents with field-based research as a vehicle to communicate human rights concerns in the region. Her dissertation fieldwork has culminated in this uniquely feminist tome that blends international human rights research with the transformative power of the dramatic arts via a liberatory praxis that Kamler styles 'Dramatization as Research' or DAR (p. 3).

This book is a welcome addition to a growing number of critical texts examining the discursive constructions and corporeal effects the global anti-trafficking movement has on migrant sex workers. In particular, Kamler's book brings to mind two other excellent ethnographies of sex workers in South East Asia: *Sex, Love and Money in Cambodia: Professional girlfriends and transactional relationships* by Heidi Hoefinger and *Dealing in Desire: Asian ascendancy, western decline, and the hidden currencies of global sex work* about sex workers in Vietnam by Kimberly Kay Hoang. All three of these books have one thing in common: the use of empirical fieldwork evidence to dismantle the hackneyed tropes of the 'wounded third world prostitute' (Doezema, 2010) in need of intervention by what Kamler calls the 'US Abolitionist Project' (USAP).

Returning to the opening prologue passage, throughout the book Kamler unpacks the nuances behind what Wendy Hesford (2011) refers to as 'spectacular rhetorics' and what Carol S. Vance (2012) aptly terms 'melodramatic narratives' of sex trafficking which obfuscate complexity and effectively pull at the heart strings of uncritical media consumers (usually, but not always, westerners). Such fantasies of 'women in chains' in a dark room somewhere in Thailand have proliferated over the past two decades; collapsing illegal immigration into a nebulous notion of

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'trafficking', the United Nations 'Palermo Protocol' in 2000 put human trafficking—which it cast in a mostly gendered and criminal framework—on the 'global agenda,' unleashing waves of unprecedented funding, government infrastructure, media attention, and far-flung NGO projects to combat it (read: incarcerate bad men and unrepentant sex workers). Dividing her DAR praxis into three distinct phases, it is to these narratives and 'how they become produced and maintained, and frame lived experience' (p. 44) in Thailand and Burma that Kamler turns in part one of the book: The Field Research Phase.

Kamler opens with a lengthy discussion of her key concept: DAR, a new method for uniting arts-based interventions with social science by engaging in a reflective 'two-way praxis in which research and dramatic writing continually inform one another' (p. 134). She argues that DAR goes beyond the contributions of other methods such as Entertainment-Education (EE) and Theatre of the Oppressed (TO). DAR rigorously reframes the epistemological, methodological and ontological foundations of these other approaches with a preferential feminist emphasis on positionality, situated knowledge, and non-binary interactivity between researcher and subject (p. 20). She suggests that EE and TO, while useful close cousins of DAR, lack a feminist focus on the co-constitution of knowledge that DAR seeks to redress by centering the artist-researcher alongside (and not 'outside') the 'subject' (p. 23). DAR utilises 'qualitative field research to uncover the lived experience of the subject' (p. 118) which it then draws from to build the creative and cyclical (artist/researcher and subject in dialogue) dramatisation work that defines the core of DAR praxis. DAR is a collaborative effort, initiated in social science research, that can only come to fruition through dialogical creative practice.

The four chapters comprising part one of the book lay out the research scaffolding Kamler assembles as foundational to this rendition of DAR. Key to her thesis is that gender and the sex industry function 'as a site of national identity construction' in what Kamler describes as 'Thailand's National Identity Project' (TNIP, p. 47). This 'project' has decisively 'othered' ethnic minorities (many from Burma) to exclude them from a range of rights and protections by the Thai government (p. 45); concomitantly prostitution has seamlessly been 'sewn into the fabric of Thailand's development' (p. 55) largely due to what the author claims is a Thai Theravada Buddhist tradition that enables such cultural acceptance. This then, in turn, creates the perfect recipe for systematically exploiting minority labour, particularly women from Burma: 'Labor exploitation and trafficking not only support Thailand's National Identity project, they *constitute* it' (p. 65). In this way the sex industry underpins and maintains the 'traditional gender relations and power dynamics' (p. 66) at the core of TNIP.

In conversation with TNIP, Kamler expounds on the historical roots (the 'white slavery panic' of the early twentieth century) and the neoliberal orientation of USAP and its carceral imperatives emanating from the US government's anti-trafficking apparatus. USAP, in its current form, was envisioned and financially invigorated during the George W. Bush Administration during the early 2000s. Rather than question the neoliberal economic policies of maximum extraction and minimal regulation that create favourable conditions for exploitation (which sometimes leads to trafficking), USAP perpetuates a neoliberal ('reorient[ing] funding provided by the state into the hands of private industry', p. 62) and carceral approach (i.e., lock up more suspected traffickers and your country gets a better grade on the US 'Trafficking in Persons' annual report). One of the more controversial elements of USAP has been the adoption of so-called 'Smart Raids' on brothels in South East Asia which conflates consensual sex work with trafficking 'while reinforcing a victim-versus-criminal binary' (p. 71). Fundamentally, however, Kamler concludes that both USAP and TNIP are essentially 'two contradictory projects' (p. 67) as they are built on different cultural/moral logics: one pursues the elimination of prostitution while the other necessitates the simultaneous presence/othering of migrant sexual labor for its preservation. Fortunately, all is not lost as community-based organisations forging 'narratives of resistance' (Chapter 5) to these hegemonic powers do exist in Thailand and their voices are amplified throughout the book.

For DAR the 'production process itself' (p. 125) is transformative and critical to revealing what Donna Haraway has famously called 'subjugated knowledges'. Thus, in part two of the book ('The Creative Phase'), Kamler presents the nuts and bolts of how she came to dramatise her research findings in each of the main characters for the theatrical production of her research-based musical *Land of Smiles* (see: <http://www.landofsmilesmusical.net/>) which was staged in Los Angeles and later in Chiang Mai for relevant stakeholders. By theorising embodiment (Chapter 8) she focuses attention not just on the 'what' but the 'how' new knowledge is unearthed in DAR praxis ('the restoration of experience through the body, learning through liminality, and collaborative discovery', p. 149). Kamler develops six female characters but the focus of the musical is really on the two protagonists: Emma and Lipoh who embody the nuances and iconoclastic potential of encountering complexities that challenge absolutist certainties. Lipoh is a valiant migrant sex worker from Burma who has made difficult but agentive choices and refuses to be 'rescued' by Emma, the American NGO employee who comes to Thailand expecting to 'save the girls' (p. 123), but ends up having 'to face her preconceived notions of what it meant to intervene in the life of someone whom she barely understood' (p. 124).

Finally, in Part Three: The Production (or 'articulation') Phase, Kamler brings together the last component of DAR praxis: the collective process of teasing out the narrative import of the musical. She meticulously delineates

how the various narrative strands from NGO workers, migrant sex workers, and the theatrical artists themselves coalesced into a production of ‘rupture’ (a kind of ‘psychic death’ that complicates one’s perspective with that of another, p. 219) and ‘witness’ (‘a proactive, dialogical process of acknowledging more than the surface of one’s visibility’, p. 206) for all involved, particularly the artist-researchers. The liminality inherent to DAR allows for ‘ambiguity and uncertainty’ (p. 224) to be held in tension, interrogated, and then communally processed in group discussion sessions held immediately after each performance. At the same time, Kamler never suggests that DAR is a panacea and admits its limitations (limited reach, noncommerciality, access to adequate material resources, time, and energy, etc.).

While not explicitly a Thai Studies (nor Buddhist Studies) book, Kamler’s somewhat simplistic depiction of ‘Thai Theravada Buddhism’ as a cornerstone of ‘Thailand’s National Identity Project’ (Chapter 2) left me unconvinced. She fails to acknowledge class, regional, ethnic, and temporal variations of Buddhism in Thailand and relies heavily on Vietnamese scholar Thanh-Dam Truong’s 1990 book *Sex, Money, and Morality: Prostitution and tourism in Southeast Asia* (p. 45-46, 54, 66) to make her case. Kamler acknowledges diversity in women’s ‘experiences of migration, labor, and gendered identities’ (p. 73) but does not problematise or entertain diverse interpretations of Buddhism in pinpointing it as the root of why she believes prostitution ‘is a culturally acceptable act’ in Thailand. She writes ‘Buddhism further allows for polygamy on the part of males, while placing the idea of sexual impurity on women...’ (p. 54) and claims ‘that the acceptance of prostitution within Theravada Buddhism plays a key role in upholding this [Thai national identity] project’ (p. 66). Such an ‘essentialised reading of Thai Buddhist beliefs’ (Brody, 2006: 198) immediately reminded me of Nicola Tannenbaum’s cautionary piece ‘Buddhism, prostitution, and sex: Limits on the academic discourse on gender in Thailand’ (1999) in which she repines ‘I find it puzzling that most authors simply assume that Thailand is a Buddhist country and that therefore all aspects of Thai culture must necessarily be understood in Buddhist terms...there are other countries with state religions for which anthropologists and sociologists would not give religion such a focal explanatory role’ (p. 251). Thus, while I agree with Kamler that Buddhism is a critical component of Thai society, I do not see a need to isolate it and make generalised claims or to assume that the seeming normality of prostitution must somehow be attributed more significantly to ‘Theravada Buddhism’ than to a broader confluence of Thai cultural norms of which Buddhism is but a part. Thus, while not impinging on the overall argument of her book, I do wish Kamler would have engaged with a broader range of scholarship on Buddhism, Thailand, and prostitution for this section (such as Tannenbaum, Brody, Kabilsingh, etc.). Moreover, while Kamler does make a few passing references to ‘faith based’ or Christian organisations in her discussion of USAP—which she calls ‘a white, Western feminist agenda’ (p. 59)—she makes no sustained effort to underscore how this ‘project’ is also very much central to and monetarily fuelled by the American conservative Christian agenda, just as much, if not more, than ‘radical feminists.’ Here her discussion (and grounding of ‘Lewelyn Brand’, the Christian character in her musical) could have benefitted from the rich analysis of another book, *Other Dreams of Freedom: Religion, sex, and human trafficking* (2012) authored by Yvonne C. Zimmerman.

Lastly, although a rather minor point, in Chapter 2 Kamler, in contextualising USAP, exclusively describes ‘corporate greed’ as western (p. 64) when it’s clear in South East Asia that much of the corporate exploitation of workers is also non-western (Thai, Chinese, Taiwanese, Korean, Japanese, etc.), just as the *majority* of foreign men coming to Thailand looking for sex are Asian, not ‘Western men’ (p. 55). And to clarify one slight factual error: on page 65 Kamler writes that the US government’s Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report downgraded Thailand to ‘Tier 3’ (the worst ranking) in 2015 when this actually first happened in 2014 (in fact, just after the May 2014 military putsch in Thailand, which made it particularly sensitive; President Obama ultimately chose not to impose sanctions).

All in all, Kamler’s work deftly challenges ‘normative conceptions about victimization and rescue, the role of the West, and agency among sex workers’ in Thailand (p. 244-245). Her book exudes innovative interdisciplinarity, brilliantly deconstructing the chimerical binaries that engulf trafficking discourse while prodding policymakers to abandon ‘ideologically based policies’ (p. 99) in favour of holistic, evidence-based solutions. More importantly, however, the real gem of this book lies in the detailed roadmap Kamler provides for DAR praxis, a generative method that is more than just academic—‘it’s dynamic, active, and alive’ (p. 20). Grounded in liberation psychology and Boalian theatrical techniques, DAR bridges dramatisation and social science by foregrounding the ‘situated knowledge’ of migrant sex workers (p. 126-128; 193-194) as a decisively ‘feminist communication intervention...dedicated to the uncovering, recovering, and articulation of lived experience through the powerful medium of theatre’ (p. 236-237). DAR’s magic lies in its replicability beyond this project, its original technique for empowering marginalised communities and, one can also hope, the policymakers (p. 243-244) whose decisions affect all of our broken lives.

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