Introduction
Rethinking the Field from Anti-Racist and Decolonial Perspectives

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Global efforts to combat human trafficking are ubiquitous and reference particular ideas about unfreedom and abject suffering in ways that have justified rescue for decades. The discourse has a distinct racialized legacy that includes a history of fears about “white slavery,” sex work and commercial intimacy, migration from non-western countries, Blackness, and Indigeneity. This collection centers the legacies of white supremacy, colonialism, and racism in contemporary anti-trafficking work and pays particular attention to how they manifest uniquely in different global contexts. The scholars and activists in this collection challenge the racism and coloniality apparent in anti-trafficking from various social, political and geographical locations, calling for a re-envisioning of the global anti-trafficking paradigm.

Evident from much of the work for this book and in numerous other studies, is that anti-trafficking has racialized effects and enables or supports racial and ethnic profiling, racial discrimination, and racial or ethnic othering. This is part of the “collateral damage” that has been so powerfully described and analyzed for nearly two decades. In the following chapters we learn of new and enduring racialized subjectivities that are mobilized in the name of combating trafficking. We see Romanian men in Demark profiled by police as deviant, vagrant, and criminal; Asian and Indigenous women in Canada perceived by NGOs and the police as in need of raid and rescue; Black men and Black lesbians identified as traffickers and Black women as their victims under the US prison industrial complex; Nigerian women defined as simultaneously vulnerable and threatening in Hong Kong and Ghana; Asian women in New Zealand depicted as either depraved or incapable of self-representation; Brazilian women as “whored” against their will across international borders; and global South migrants in the US codified as “illegals” and criminalized for their migration status. In such instances, ethnic or national difference – shaped by gender, labor, and sexuality – is equated with criminality and innocence, repeating long-standing tropes of the racial or ethnic Other. As the studies here show,
anti-trafficking has heightened and justified the discrimination and profiling of non-white people throughout the world.

A number of studies included here point to another effect of anti-trafficking, namely the harm it causes through restricting or deterring mobility. Anti-trafficking laws around the world have carved out newly “exceptional” categories of citizenship, narrowly legislating trafficking victims deserving of citizenship, while excluding the vast majority of irregular migrants today. This harm follows a racial/ethnic logic, and in the following chapters we see multiple dimensions of how governments and the rescue industry alike have relied on the cause of trafficking to secure borders, and criminalize irregular migration. Samuel Okyere and Peter Olayiwola analyze how migration deterrence practices instigated by Western European states through anti-trafficking policies prevent Black/African women’s mobility. Despite their “humanitarian” claims, these policies force women to stay in conditions that they sought to move away from, in their desire to access opportunities for livelihood. Anti-trafficking programs in Africa, the authors point out, are backed by substantial funding in Western Europe, the majority of which is spent on deterrence of migration. The international mobility of the Brazilian woman is also under close scrutiny and surveillance, Thaddeus Blanchette and Ana Paula da Silva explain in their chapter, whereby the historically imagined figure of “the racially mixed, sexually exuberant, naive mulatta” positions her as a suspected victim of sex trafficking. She is thus repeatedly interrogated at borders or hindered when travelling internationally – in the eyes of the state, the Brown and Black Brazilian woman should “stay at home.” A corollary to migration deterrence is deportation, discussed here in the cases of Nigerian, Filipina, and Indonesian women in Hong Kong and for Asian women in Canada but also established more broadly, where anti-trafficking is a tool for securing national borders and regulating transnational flows of goods, labor, and “illegal” immigration. The deportation of migrants – irregular or not - fails to address abusive working conditions or deceptions that migrants might face as low-wage, domestic or sex workers in the receiving countries but, as importantly, fails to take into account conditions they left in their home communities.

In cases of migration deterrence and deportation, the “stay at home” message embedded in anti-trafficking programs conveys a distinction between, on the one hand, Black and other racialized populations of the world who are to remain immobile and in place, and on the other, those migrants who are welcomed around the world as “nomads,” backpackers, transnational corporate executives, “expats,” or international aid and humanitarian workers, who are predominantly white and western. Such directives serve to limit access to the “development” of the global North/the west and to the benefits of globalization, which rely on the plunder and extraction of human and natural resources in the global South.
“Stay at home” messages and policies are not simply a migration management issue or a matter of security or economics, but also, as Okyere and Olayiwola note, a reflection of deep-seated and age-old antiblack racist fears in Europe. Similar racist fears are articulated on the other side of the Atlantic in the travel bans in the US against Muslims and Africans, and the type of sentiments expressed by the Trump administration and white nationalist agendas that maintained that immigrants from Haiti and parts of Africa should “go back where they come from” and remain in their “shit-hole” countries. Anti-trafficking through the mobilization of migration deterrence and deportation policies, whether from Europe, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Brazil or North America, helps to cement racial logics and (antiblack) racism worldwide.

Anti-trafficking also often ignores the violence that citizen and migrant sex workers face, as various chapters herein address. Elene Lam, Jaden Hsin-Yun Peng and Coly Chau, drawing from first-hand organizing with Asian massage workers in Canada through the work of Butterfly in Toronto, demonstrate that anti-trafficking campaigns have endorsed the heightened policing, and criminalization of migrant massage workers. In Jamaica, Julia O’Connell Davidson and Jacqueline Sanchez Taylor discuss the “extraordinary high level” of violence that sex workers, especially trans sex workers, experience from the public, customers, some intimate partners, and the police. Critically, they remind us that this violence is a consequence of the precarious social and legal position that sex workers occupy, and not from the compulsion to take up sex work in the first place, as many anti-sex trafficking advocates often claim. Menaka Raguparan’s chapter examines police responses to harm and violence experienced by sex workers of color in Canada. Her data reveals how the women often come to be deemed by the police as unworthy of state protection after surviving situations that, if read through Canadian law, would be classified as human trafficking. From New Zealand, Nada DeCat writes about the racism that inheres in not only anti-sex work trafficking discourse but, as importantly, in pro-sex work initiatives. She points out that the call for decriminalization of sex work advocated by many sex worker organizations, seeks to assimilate sex workers into neoliberal racial capitalism and does little to contest the criminalization of cross-border movement or to abolish the prison industrial complex, both of which target racialized bodies. In all these instances, sex workers are perceived by the state and the public alike, as “bad,” “nasty,” “loose,” or “illegal” women. They do not neatly fit the anti-trafficking rhetoric of helpless innocent victims in need of rescue from violence and abuse. The harm described in these studies points squarely to state structured violence against Black, Asian, and other women of color in sex work, which anti-trafficking either fails to address or is complicit with.

Anti-trafficking is shown in this collection to distort or ignore conditions of forced or hyper-exploited labor of racialized communities to the point...
that they may be excluded from or denied assistance under anti-trafficking programs. In a chapter on India, Mishal Khan argues that the conflation of people of African descent with slavery ignores the long and varied history of the migration and settlement of Africans in South Asia and locates human trafficking as irrelevant to the condition of this community, known as *shidis* (Indians and Pakistanis of African descent, also identified as *siddis*). Non-Black Indians and Pakistanis, on the other hand, might be read as servants, trafficked persons, or dependents, but always defined as free subjects. Khan points out that this antiblack, racialized history of legibility by the state continues to inform ideas about who is considered in need of rescue from slavery and human trafficking, while underpinning processes of exclusion from the nation-state and of *shidi* identity formation. For Denmark, Marlene Spanger discusses the racialization of the migrants from central and eastern Europe through the figure of “the gypsy” – a figure that is historically seen as a non-white, non-citizen in western Europe. This racialization, she argues, serves to further the exploitation and vulnerability of Central Eastern European migrant working men in Denmark, and removes them from considerations of being victimized. Julie Ham, Iulia Gheorghiu, and Eni Lestari describe how, in Hong Kong, Filipino migrant domestic workers are racialized as suitable for domestic work, characterized as docile, obedient, and nurturing, while asylum seekers from Africa are constructed as dangerous, and social and security threats. Based on extensive participatory action research with domestic workers, the authors document that while there is evidence of abuse, deception, and fraud in the working conditions of asylum seekers, the Hong Kong state does not recognize them as human trafficking victims. Instead, the state relies on immigration laws and policing efforts that target the women migrants rather than those perpetrating the harms. In Denmark, India, and Hong Kong then, as in the case presented by Menaka Raguparan for sex workers of color in Canada, stereotypes about specific racialized groups remove them from consideration as “trafficked victims” and undermine support these communities might gain from being designated a victim of human trafficking. Racialized categories such as *shidis*, Romanians, migrant (sex) workers, and even asylum seekers in these studies of anti-trafficking regimes are systematically deemed unworthy of “rescue” from harms and abuse.

The authors of the following chapters, whether analyzing anti-trafficking for mobility restrictions, stereotyping of specific groups, or state violence, demonstrate how this harm sustains racialization and does little to address the conditions of existence of the subaltern, the marginalized, and the oppressed in our contemporary world. We thus witness in this collection how anti-trafficking regimes fortify structures of state sanctioned racialized inequality through overlooking the violence and abuse that migrant (sex)
workers, Brown and Black women, and Indigenous, and Muslim communities endure around the world.

To better understand such effects and impacts, we need to examine how anti-trafficking imperatives stem from colonial investments and uphold global white supremacy. Describing human trafficking, Pardis Mahdavi likens the concept to a rubber band, so “conceptually and juristically obtuse” that it can expand to include so much of the popular imagination around trafficking, while reinforcing punitive measures. It is this malleability that draws several authors to reflect on how racism is not simply an effect, or an unintended outcome of anti-trafficking policies and interventions, but is instead central to the formulation of the very idea of “human trafficking.” This collection makes the case that the discourse of human trafficking is ontologically located within western knowledge systems and epistemologies, which themselves are shaped by notions of “race” (Robinson 1983; Mills 1997; Wynter 2003), and this is easily traced from its inception as a discourse about white slavery to its present-day formulations. The very idea of human trafficking emerged from within Western Europe and North America in the 19th and early 20th centuries, produced within colonial and imperial relations of power around a concern about the safety and sexual morality of white European women migrants. Anti-trafficking has, from its inception, been advocated by radical western feminists in order to save their “fallen” sisters and has been expanded by western(ized) states seeking to curb the migration of racial and ethnic Others. Allying a diverse set of stakeholders, anti-trafficking has also gained the vociferous support of evangelical Christian neoliberal as well as white leftist anti-slavery crusaders who are eager to rid the world of what is increasingly referred to as a “modern day slavery” problem. Not only has human trafficking been conceptualized within an imperial racialized episteme, but those who adhere to combating it claim it to be a universal reality, a universal “truth,” a Fact. This white westernized/global North discourse has circulated globally and is at times mobilized by local actors, thus masking its geo-political epistemic location.

Human trafficking and all the solutions that have been envisaged to stop it, are strapped tightly to the political and economic hegemony of western Europe and the United States, to western liberal notions of modernity, democracy and (un)freedom, and to “philanthrocapitalism,” venture capitalism and market-based solutions (Shih and Chuang 2021; Dotteridge 2021). The human trafficking discourse and its associated values have colonized a great part of the world, especially since the establishment of the UN Protocol on Trafficking and the US Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) in 2000, carrying with them a racial logic and order. Many years ago, legal scholar Janie Chuang pointed to the US response to human...
trafficking as one that embodies a “global sheriff” character (Chuang 2006). The US State Department’s Trafficking in Person’s report along with other global North ranking mechanisms have emerged, seeking to measure human trafficking according to global North paradigms. This book extends the global sheriff metaphor to understand how white supremacy, racism, and coloniality fortify US and global North empire.

White supremacy offers a toolkit to show how nation states, international organizations, religion, the police, border control, extra-legal law enforcement bodies, and, most importantly, anti-trafficking NGOs, are deeply embedded within racial and racist logics, without needing to point to the presence or absence of white persons doing its bidding (see also, Gabay 2018). We find over and over again the threatening banality of whiteness that seems to confer expertise and funding to anti-trafficking causes—often at the exclusion of migrant, gender, and racial justice. Angela Bruce-Raeburn, in explaining how racism shows up in the development aid sector, writes

the “helpers” and “do-gooders” arrive in places such as Sierra Leone oozing natural confidence and bravado buttressed by their titles as expatriates, holding advanced degrees from elite schools in Europe and the United States and earning significantly higher salaries than their local counterparts

(Bruce-Raeburn 2019; see also Ali 2019)

Additionally, understood as part of a global white savior industrial complex (Cole 2012), the uncontested authority of whiteness has enabled the proliferation of new forms of racial vigilantism (Hing 2001; Shih 2016) masked as anti-trafficking rescue.

In this collection, Lyndsey Beutin, Arifa Raza, Gregory Mitchell, Pardis Mahdavi, Marlene Spanger, Elya M. Durisin, and Nada DeCat explicitly locate white supremacy as generative of the dominant discourses of human trafficking. Durisin pays particular attention to white women’s engagement and the ways that the “rescue” of “not-quite-white,” Black, and Brown women’s bodies through anti-slavery and anti-trafficking movements co-constitutes white women’s subjectivity and identity, and points to the deep entanglement of white feminism with carceral politics. Adding to this analysis of the intersectionality of white supremacy with anti-trafficking, Mitchell argues that the idea of noblesse oblige underpins contemporary anti-trafficking “voluntourism”—adventure travel with the aim of helping/“uplifting” local communities. From 19th century anti-white slavery crusades, to Christian missionizing projects, to university study-abroad programs, Mitchell illustrates how the savior-based model of anti-trafficking, rooted in whiteness and white supremacy, is attached to a carceral politics and feelings of self-righteousness, thus recreating the
colonial encounter. Raza examines the founding connection between the key US anti-trafficking law – the TVPA – with a racialized regime of immigration, starting in the mid-1990s. She demonstrates, through a close reading of government debates, reports, and legal hearings around the creation of a special visa for trafficking victims – the T-visa – that distinctions were made between European women and children as victims of human rights violations and deserving of protection, and global South migrants as illegals, criminals, and traffickers worthy of prosecution and punishment. This distinction, she argues, reveals the racialized intent of anti-trafficking legislation, and upholds a long-standing racist immigration system in the US.

Drawing on experiences as a prison abolitionist organizer with the Southerners On New Ground (SONG) Black Mama Bailout Action in the US, Beutin takes a close look at *The Trap*, a documentary film that claims to link human trafficking to US prisons. Beutin argues that the film’s claims obfuscate structural inequalities of the current justice and incarceration system and not only reproduces racialized and gendered tropes of traffickers and victims but serves to undermine racial justice organizing that especially seeks to support some of the most marginalized in the criminal justice system. Beutin observes that the film calls for tighter control and regulation of prisoners such as further limiting conditions for inside-outside communications, support, bail, and freedom from prison, all of which severely impact Black women prisoners’ lives. Thus, she concludes, rather than providing a critical analysis of structural racial injustice, corrupt bail systems, and mass incarceration, *The Trap* is yet another example of white supremacy enacted through discourses of anti-trafficking and modern-day slavery. Mahdavi expands this picture by detailing the suturing of the “war on terror” and the “war on trafficking” in the US, which reflects an intertwining of Islamophobia and white, western supremacy, and the racialization and sexualization of Muslims. Her chapter details how the dual discourses co-constitute a new raced, gendered, and sexualized paradigm that furthers Islamophobia and results in militarized responses that harm specific populations globally.

Perhaps the most extreme example of the entanglement of white supremacy and anti-trafficking rhetoric can be found in the way in which QAnon – the alt-right conspiracy theory – organized its “Save the Children” campaign in the US in response to what was seen as an elite child sex trafficking ring comprised of Democratic politicians and celebrities, who among other things they believed ran the “deep state” and wanted to “mongrelize the white race.” Primarily concerned with saving children from a “satan-worshiping cabal” that “kidnaps white children, keeps them in secret prisons run by pedophiles, slaughter, and eats them to gain power from the essence in their blood,” the QAnon phenomenon revealed how easy it was for a white power movement to claim the discourse of human trafficking to aid its cause. Such manifestations of anti-trafficking expose
the very foundations of the discourse as simplistic fabrications about very complex realities of (sex) working, Indigenous, and migrant peoples’ lives that feed a white supremacist agenda and racialized relations of power.

However, white supremacy and racism do not stand alone, and in this collection we see additional intersections with coloniality, which we refer to as “long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production” (Maldonado-Torres 2007). One of the major empirical effects of this power was “the rise of Europe and its construction of the ‘world civilization’ on the one hand, and, on the other, African enslavement, Latin American conquest, and Asian subjugation.” (Wynter 2003, 263). Yet, coloniality endures beyond colonial administrations and colonialism, and is “maintained alive in books, in the criteria for academic performance, in cultural patterns, in common sense, in the self-image of peoples, in aspirations of self, and so many other aspects of our modern experience” (Maldonado-Torres 2007). It infuses modernity, liberalism, and global capitalism, and holds in place a global power structure – with race as one of its cornerstones of power (Quijano 2007). Through its permeation of all aspects of social life, Maria Lugones (2008) reminds us that coloniality not only produces new social, cultural, and racial identities, but within those, gendered identities. And coloniality’s development imperatives have underscored the need for a variety of missions which, since the latter half of the 20th century, have included (sexual) humanitarianism (see, e.g. Kotiswaran 2014; Kempadoo 2015; Maldonado-Torres 2017; Mai 2018). In short, “as modern subjects we breath coloniality all the time and everyday” (Maldonado-Torres 2017; see also Kamugisha 2019).

Here then, we widen our gaze from a focus on white supremacy to include the coloniality of anti-trafficking and take into account some of the logics of coloniality in specific nation states. The studies included here, about the treatment of migrant domestic and sex workers in Hong Kong, Ghana, and New Zealand, Indigenous women in Canada, the US, and Brazil, sex workers in Jamaica, and shidis in India, provide us with important insights into the operations of coloniality through anti-trafficking policies and interventions. The chapter by José Miguel Nieto Olivar and Flávia Melo, for example, powerfully demonstrates how anti-trafficking becomes a neocolonial tool of governance that instills fear in, and immobilizes, the Amazonian population in Brazil. Through a colonizing, paternalistic, and racializing focus on local culture, gender, and ethnicity, women of this “vulnerable” region are targeted as particularly helpless victims and as most likely to be trafficked or to end up in “the cage.” Julie Kaye, through an examination of the inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, Trans and Two-spirit persons in Canada, traces how the emphasis on increased police interventions, including ramped-up anti-trafficking policies, which were aimed to “protect,” not only failed to recognize and
address the colonial and gendered state violence that Indigenous people face, but reproduced that violence though such campaigns as Operation Northern Spotlight. April Petillo’s essay mandates that readers contend with the setter colonial undercurrents of anti-trafficking legislation in the US. Her essay argues that anti-sex trafficking laws and interventions must be understood as a form of colonial violence, particularly because they legislate Native dependency on the US government.

The coloniality question also demands that we reflect upon prevailing research methodologies of studying human trafficking and its responses. Since many of the contributions to this book place the anti-trafficking regime within existing paradigms of policing, surveillance, exclusion, and exceptionalism, they urge us to be attentive to not only the repetitions and creative adjustments of coloniality and racism that are made through modern “development,” humanitarian, and philanthropic projects, but also to the epistemic location of the researcher. Through whose eyes, perspectives or lenses, and from which political legacy is research and theorizing being done? Which intellectual traditions are we drawing from to counter the racism and coloniality of anti-trafficking and to produce critical thought about anti-trafficking? And what implications does that hold for the decolonization of knowledge about human trafficking?

This collection is then, not just about including the voices of the marginalized – this has been repeatedly done, even within critical anti-trafficking work – but to position those voices as authorities and knowledge-bearers in global debates around trafficking. As Ramon Grosfoguel notes, a decolonization of knowledge “would require to take seriously the epistemic perspective/cosmologies/insights of critical thinkers from the global South thinking from and with subalternized racial/ethnic/sexual spaces and bodies” (2007, 212). Moreover, “a decolonial epistemic perspective requires a broader canon of thought than simply the Western canon (including the Left Western canon)” (ibid.). From this point of view, diversity, inclusion, and development – for instance, the anti-trafficking movement’s recent celebratory tokenization of successful “survivor voices” – which often inform anti-trafficking initiatives, are forms of coloniality that need to be distinguished from anti-racist praxis (see also Bruce-Raeburn 2021; Shih 2023).

This collection grows from a commitment to scholarly organizing. As co-editors, our personal orientations towards anti-trafficking work are grounded in our organizing with sex worker, migrant worker, and racial justice organizations. This orientation has revealed to us one more reason why anti-trafficking “interventions” are futile: because they seek to reinvent the wheel, proposing brazen new fundraising pitches for projects that center rescue, raids, and rehabilitation. The audacity of anti-trafficking interventions causes them to overshadow the longstanding, grueling, mundane, day-to-day work and strategies of the workers, activists, and organizers who are fighting for justice, including, against anti-trafficking
regimes, globally. Featured in this volume is the resistance of the grassroots organization *Butterfly* – located in Toronto, Canada – that works closely with a sister organization, *Red Canary Song* in New York, both of which are developing tools of migrant and sex worker centered expertise in order to speak back to the negative impacts of anti-trafficking projects. Likewise, the chapter from Hong Kong is rooted in work conducted with International Migrants Alliance, a domestic worker-led organization whose worker organizer, Eni Lestari, is a co-author. Several other authors in this book are closely affiliated with similar organizations, through which they are engaged critically with debates about anti-trafficking.

We have deliberately privileged the research and work of such sex workers’ rights, migrant rights, domestic worker, and anti-racist scholars and activists, in an effort to contest existing relations of power in the production of knowledge. In so doing, this book takes a small step towards flipping the paradigm and offering a counter-point to the global North, often white dominated, research on anti-trafficking. While the “white savior complex” in anti-trafficking interventions is apparent to many critical scholars, what is also troubling is that too often the funds for such academic scholarship, the publications, the expertise, and academic knowledge is secured, produced, and held by white, western, global North scholars, who take for granted their own positionality within the knowledge production enterprise. As DeCat notes in her chapter here, many academic projects are complicit in this racism and colonialism in that they are more likely than not undertaken by white researchers who mine migrant and racialized sex workers’ experiences and position themselves as migrant sex worker representatives and authorities. The bulk of the intellectual and material resources for critical anti-trafficking studies remain then, in the possession of white, western scholars, and this extractive process enables the construction of academic success and reputation.

Racism and coloniality are obscured in much of the critical anti-trafficking research being undertaken around the world, for while it depends on abstractions and extractions from the experiences and perceptions of racialized and sexualized workers, Indigenous people, and global South migrants, there remains an overvaluing of activities, intellectual production, and discourses from the western/colonial world. This book then, is an effort to make space for anti-racist and decolonial knowledges about anti-trafficking, as produced by and through racialized, colonized, and marginalized subjects. The majority of the scholars and activists in this collection not only challenge the racisms and coloniality apparent in anti-trafficking from various geographical locations, but in realizing the deep entanglements with state violence and westernized development, add their weight to the wider call for a re-envisioning of the anti-trafficking paradigm. It is a first collection of its kind to bring together such scholarship.
recognition of its inevitable gaps, we hope readers welcome these chapters as a first step, and not the last.

We wrapped up this edited volume at the height of a global pandemic, which has laid bare how life and death are negotiated around the axes of race, ethnicity, gender, labor, and sexuality. The pandemic has also brought to light how an ethic of community care is vital to the sustenance of migrant, sex worker, and racial justice organizing. Throughout the pandemic, calls for racial justice have reached a fever pitch. Mainstream anti-trafficking organizations are beginning to rehearse the language of “racial justice” in their own marketing materials. We are being warned that the way anti-trafficking organizations have espoused the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag reveals a gross appropriation (e.g. Beutin 2023). So, this introduction ends with a warning that many of the inequalities exposed in these chapters cannot be solved by anti-trafficking organizations themselves. This volume is not a call for anti-trafficking organizations to engage in a cursory diversity, equity, and inclusion makeover. Rather, any reflection that should come from this book should consider how to turn over the reins and upend their power of anti-trafficking in a meaningful way.

Notes

1 See for example GAATW’s 2007 publication *Collateral Damage: The Impact of Anti-Trafficking Measures on Human Rights around the World*, as well as the 2005 collection *Trafficking and Prostitution Reconsidered* edited by Kempadoo, Sanghera, and Pattanaik).

2 See also the 2020 OpenDemocracy publication, “How Europe works to keep Africans in Africa” which notes, “the European Union (EU) and individual EU member states have devoted large amounts of resources to trying to keep people in Africa.”

3 Here, “the west” and “global North” are taken as a project, not a place (see for example, Glissant, in Kamugisha 2019, 178), that is, “western” and “northern” signify a colonial impetus not a geo-political space. Or as Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) notes, “The global South is not a geographical concept, even though the great majority of its populations live in countries of the Southern hemisphere. The South is rather a metaphor for the human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism on the global level, as well as for the resistance to overcoming or minimising such suffering.”

4 Scholars such as Andre Gunder Frank and Walter Rodney have since the mid-1960s captured this global dynamic as resulting in the underdevelopment of respectively Latin America and Africa, a dynamic that has not been reversed, even while areas of the global South have since become more integrated into global capitalism.
Bernstein 2007; for an in-depth discussion of the anti-Black undercurrents of “Modern Day Slavery” discourse, see, for example, Beutin 2017.

Such a critique of voluntourism is not isolated, nor reducible to anti-trafficking work. For example, a young woman who had experience as a volunteer for the Canadian charity “WE” (formerly Free the Children) as part of her undergraduate study in International Development, describes a reality of white saviorism as an extension of white privilege and primarily beneficial to white subjectivity (Klaassen, 2020).

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