

Bearing Witness: Contemporary Slave Narratives and the Global Antislavery Movement. ANDREA NICHOLSON. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2022. xix, 233pp. £75. ISBN 9781316510803.

There has been a growing international interest in the topic of ‘modern slavery’ amongst academics, practitioners and policy makers over the past ten years. Despite this, understandings and responses to the issue within the international anti-slavery movement have predominantly been developed without the input of those with lived experience. In *Bearing Witness*, Andrea Nicholson hones in on this fundamental flaw in practice to incorporate a reading and analysis of over 200 contemporary slave narratives.

The book is well-organised, working through a number of key and significant findings developed through the analysis of these narratives, which include five narratives collected directly by Nicholson. First, the book grapples with the definitional boundaries at play in any work relating to ‘modern slavery’ as a term with no legal or universally accepted definition. With a note that ‘most narratives do not provide sufficient detail to make a judgement as to whether survivors have been enslaved, whichever definition we might seek to apply’ (p. xv), cynicism may creep in to question how justifications were made as to the choice of narratives when there is no comprehensive line at which it can be concluded that the subject of the narrative was, or was not, a victim of modern slavery. However, validation is provided in the positing that analyses were undertaken only of narratives which demonstrate an extreme form of human exploitation; a justifiable approach which allows for progress in a field which is forever chasing its tail for seemingly unattainable definitional certainty. This approach also helps to overcome the well-versed issue of victim/survivors not identifying as such.

The first chapter investigates the genre of the slave narrative, giving consideration to the collection, purpose and use of both historical and contemporary narratives. Nicholson contemplates the agendas behind the writing of accounts, where ‘historic narratives were employed to convince the

global community of the wrong of slavery' (p. 26) while contemporary narratives are 'particularly concerned with exposing and persuading the audience of the continued existence of slavery' (p.26). Emphasised here is the importance of listening to the experiences of those sharing their stories while accepting that many may be heavily edited to suit an agenda such as activism or fundraising.

Chapter Two is perhaps the most conceptually insightful chapter which argues that there is no clear binary between 'free' and 'unfree'. 'The view that slavery and freedom are absolute rather than relative concepts is therefore illusory, as across these works survivors stress that these are states of existence that bleed together.' (p. 70). Throughout the narratives, survivors share instances of freedoms they experienced within their situations of modern slavery. For some this included maintaining relationships or being able to go out un-chaperoned. For others freedom was found in being able to use their own bodies as tools for resistance. Equally, once they are free of their exploiters, many who have suffered modern slavery do not experience freedom to the same extent as those who have never been enslaved, often remaining 'psychologically bound by their enslavement' (p. 64) with their freedom equating simply to a change in the nature of their suffering.

Chapter Three considers the changing nature of survivors' identities and how their own understanding of self is repeatedly reconstructed with changes in their experiences. Here, Nicholson pushes the importance of narratives as providing the space for survivors to make sense of their multiple and changing identities and which also enables them to connect their understandings of themselves with the world around them. This is reemphasised in Chapter Four which brings together extant literature on trauma to argue that bearing witness is 'crucial to meaningful survival.' (p. 95) Here the argument is made that recounting one's experience allows the storyteller to actively engage with their own experiences and address the accompanying grief, but this is insightfully counterbalanced with the recognition that trauma can exist to such an extent that it actually prevents survivors from being *able* to address, acknowledge, or share their experiences.

The final two chapters build upon the blurred lines between free and unfree, and address the idea that survival often leads to a feeling of responsibility amongst victims. Together, these chapters highlight how support for survivors is lacking from the immediate short-term, right through to the long-term. Within this presentation of the flaws in support is a repeated assertion of the importance of incorporating survivor voice into the development of policies and practice on the ground.

Meaningful change which can lead to effective support is not possible without first truly understanding the needs and priorities of those who have lived through experiences of modern slavery. Yet, at the crux of *Bearing Witness*, Nicholson drives home the fact that those with lived experience continue to be excluded from participating in the conversations that are needed to drive necessary change.

*Bearing Witness* is an important contribution to the anti-slavery field and offers the most comprehensive analysis of contemporary slave narratives, generating an overview of the key areas that those with lived experience self-identify as the most fundamental in understanding and effectively responding to experiences of modern slavery. It can be read as a call to action for those responsible for developing laws and policies to include the voices of those with lived experience in order to give proper weight to the complexities and nuances of the realities behind modern slavery.

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