

Operation Underground Railroad: An Analysis

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Abstract

Operation Underground Railroad is a Utah-based anti-human trafficking nonprofit organization started in 2013 by Tim Ballard. Specifically, Operation Underground Railroad works to assist governments around the world in the rescue of human trafficking victims, with a special focus on children. Operation Underground Railroad aids with the capture and prosecution of human traffickers, while also partnering with other organizations to raise funds and awareness. Victims that are rescued are provided with aftercare services. Using the abolitionist approach and the human rights-based approach to human trafficking, this paper analyzes the work and methods of Operation Underground Railroad. This paper finds that while the work Operation Underground Railroad does is admirable in many respects, the theories and methods employed by the organization are problematic and contribute to a skewed perspective of what human trafficking is and how to best eradicate it.

Keywords: human trafficking, sex trafficking, nonprofits

Operation Underground Railroad: An Analysis

By 2013, United States Special Agent Tim Ballard had become frustrated with the lack of progress made by law enforcement officials in liberating trafficking victims. Ballard served 12 years as a United States Special Agent for the Department of Homeland Security, on the Internet Crimes against Children Task Force and the United States Child Sex Tourism Jump Team, helping to locate, infiltrate, and dismantle human trafficking organizations. Ballard realized that despite successfully tracking down dozens of traffickers and hundreds of victims, if their cases lacked ties to the United States, there was not much more that could be done other than to report these cases to host governments. It was in October 2013 that Ballard left the security of United States government employment and founded Operation Underground Railroad in Salt Lake City, Utah. Operation Underground Railroad now works to assist governments around the world in the rescue of human trafficking victims, with a special focus on children. Since 2013, Operation Underground Railroad reports rescuing 3,100 victims, assisting in the arrests of 1,700 traffickers, and boasts 10,000 volunteers worldwide (Operation Underground Railroad, 2019, "O.U.R. Progress Report: January-June 2019"). To accomplish this, Operation Underground Railroad aids with the capture and prosecution of human traffickers, while partnering with other organizations to raise funds and awareness. Victims that are rescued are also provided with aftercare services.

My interest in the organization was piqued one year ago upon running into a family friend, who also happens to be the director for the Wasatch-back volunteer team. Hearing of my upcoming plans to begin a graduate degree program in social work, she recommended I join Operation Underground Railroad. Two weeks and a one-hour training later, I attended my first team meeting. I was immediately enthralled to be part of an organization advocating for such a just cause. Yet, my passion was curtailed almost immediately when I learned that my

involvement would mostly center on fundraising and prevention campaigns. Do not get me wrong; every piece (even fundraising) is vitally important to the function of any nonprofit group. However, I was disappointed that as volunteers we were not going to be learning or doing anything more than handing out pamphlets and asking for donations. My training felt superficially inadequate, and there was much I did not understand about where and how the funds I was raising were being used. It was at this point that I signed up for a human trafficking course at the University of Utah. During my semester in Professor Annie Isabel Fukushima's class, I have learned far more than I ever expected. It has been this course that has caused me to think carefully about my involvement in Operation Underground Railroad. At many points during the semester, I have questioned the theories and methods the organization employs. At risk of sounding cliché, my eyes have been opened, the weight of my responsibility has been felt, and it would be a waste for me *not* to use the knowledge I have gained throughout the semester to analyze and offer policy recommendations to an organization I have spent countless hours volunteering for.

Literature Review

There are essentially two, diametrically opposed views to human trafficking: the abolitionist approach and the human rights-based approach. A term dating back in the United States to the 19th century, an “abolitionist, as the name implies, is a person who [seeks] to abolish slavery... [A]bolitionists [see] slavery as an abomination and an affliction” (History.com Editors, 2009). Modern-day abolitionists view “[h]uman trafficking [as] the business of stealing freedom for profit”, and as such, human trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery (Polaris, 2019). The 19th century version of abolitionism and the modern-day version mirror each other in other ways, as well. Most prominently, “[m]ost early abolitionists were white, religious

Americans”, and so too are human trafficking abolitionists of present-day (History.com Editors, 2009).

Though undoubtedly with the best of intentions, abolitionism underscores a *white savior complex*. In today’s terms, a white savior complex is “demonstrated when white people travel to developing countries to ‘save’ the people who live there” (Gould, 2019). Elena Shih further describes the problem with the modern-day evolution of this “white savior”, vigilante “rescue” mentality in her 2016 piece, *Not in My “Backyard Abolitionism”*:

“[R]escue and raid efforts to discover cases of [human] trafficking have existed for the greater part of the past two decades throughout the world... but the turn to ‘backyard abolition’ marked a dedicated strategy by... many American antitrafficking organizations to mobilize American civilians to identify victims of trafficking... Global initiatives that mark human trafficking as one of the most pressing concerns of the contemporary era have emboldened American citizens to seek meaningful experiences in direct rescue. While these different citizens groups lack formal authority and training to conduct such rescue and policing efforts, their strategies are justified through state, nonprofit, and mass-mediated claims... Rescue group efforts are also legitimized through their collaborations with local law enforcement, though... such relationships are not formally sanctioned by law enforcement and rarely yield arrests or prosecutions... While surveillance and policing efforts have typically been in the realm of formal law enforcement, these new forms of nonstate civilian and vigilante patrol suggest new modes of carceral activist engagement, where U.S. citizen and predominantly white middle-class abolitionists seek criminal justice protection and punishment rather than social welfare or social justice approaches to addressing human trafficking... [N]egative

consequences of rescue work are either deliberately ignored or erased as ‘unintended consequences’ of social action and are masked by the larger allegations of humanitarianism, morality, and rescue that belie contemporary antitrafficking sentiments” (Shih, 2016).

In contrast, the human rights based-approach sees trafficking as more than simply modern-day slavery. In this view, “human trafficking is a violation of an individual’s basic rights and personal freedom. [As such,] [s]uccessful approaches to address trafficking must protect all the rights of survivors and respect their individual agency. Focusing on the rights of each individual is the only path to restoring their dignity and giving them the opportunity they deserve to pursue a better life” (Freedom Network USA, 2019, p. 1). Freedom Network USA describes the core elements of the human rights approach as the “inclusion of survivor voice”, the acknowledgement that “there is no one face of human trafficking”; allowing “[e]very individual [to] define justice in their own way”; designing services that “prioritize the personal safety and well-being of each survivor while protecting their choice and autonomy”; and recognizing that “human trafficking is fueled by complex and interconnected factors including poverty and economic injustice, racism, discrimination, and weak worker protections” (Freedom Network USA, 2019, p. 1-2).

The main difference between the abolitionist approach and the human rights-based approach is the power which it gives to those who have or will be trafficked. It is the difference between labelling an individual as a “victim” or a “survivor” for the rest of their life. Abolitionism removes all the power from the victim, leaving them hopeless unless a white savior comes along that deigns to help them out of their tragic predicament. A human rights approach,

on the other hand, allows a victim to become a survivor. It grants a survivor the power to save themselves and change the course of their life.

Method

Using these two perspectives to guide my analysis, my purpose is to find where Operation Underground Railroad fits on the spectrum. My research is based on information found on the Operation Underground Railroad website, including documentaries, facts sheets, and survivor stories.

Operation Underground Railroad board members, directors, and employees. Of the 30 board members, directors, and employees listed on their website, 28 appear to be of white European heritage. The two that are not have indicated in their biographies to be native Utahans (Operation Underground Railroad, 2019, “The Team”).

Operations or “jumps”. Operations teams “consist of former CIA, past and current law enforcement, and highly skilled operatives that lead coordinated identification and extraction efforts” (Operation Underground Railroad, 2019, “The Process”). Operation Underground Railroad claims to always run these operations “in conjunction with law enforcement throughout the world” (Operation Underground Railroad, 2019, “The Process”). Operation Underground Railroad sometimes refers to these operations as *jumps*. There appear to be five steps in the process of selecting and preparing for an operation. First, Operation Underground Railroad assesses the feasibility of a successful rescue attempt. According to the site, “[t]his must take into account the willingness of local authorities to work with us since we not only want to save the children but arrest the perpetrators as well. We also want everything to be done legally and above board” (Operation Underground Railroad, 2019, “The Process”). Second, teams research the location, the victims who are to be rescued, and traffickers. During this stage, Operation

Underground Railroad reports searching “for vetted care facilities that will take the children once they are rescued and not only give them food and shelter but rehabilitate them as well. In some instances, the children are able to return to their families” (Operation Underground Railroad, 2019, “The Process”). Third, teams design a strategy for rescuing the victims. “This is the logistical part of the process. As former CIA, Navy Seals, Special Agents, etc., [team members] have a very unique skill set to make this happen safely, efficiently and legally” (Operation Underground Railroad, 2019, “The Process”). Fourth, the actual operation takes place. “In some instances, [team members] go undercover and arrange to ‘buy’ [victims] as if [they] were a customer. After the purchase, [they] move in with the [host-country] police, arrest those responsible, and rescue the [victims]” (Operation Underground Railroad, 2019, “The Process”). Fifth, perpetrators are arrested, tried, and convicted.

Aftercare. According to the Operation Underground Railroad site, aftercare services are planned with the purpose of “supporting survivors in their healing process. Operation Underground Railroad vets and assesses aftercare centers around the world, which consists of partnering with different organizations, safe homes, and aftercare centers. Aftercare also works directly in collaboration with the Operation Underground Railroad Jump Team and government officials to communicate the assessments and potential aftercare centers for [victims]... If Operation Underground Railroad is not able to vet the specific aftercare center, [they] invest in building relationships with government social workers so that [they] can provide assistance if needed” (Operation Underground Railroad, 2019, “Aftercare”). Operation Underground Railroad claims that the key to their aftercare services is “collaboration” (Operation Underground Railroad, 2019, “Aftercare”). “Operation Underground Railroad has found the most effective model is empowering and supporting in-country aftercare centers. Through collaboration, we

have been able to support the care of survivors far beyond what [would have been possible] to do on our own. In order to be most effective, [Operation Underground Railroad] believes that people who have already invested years in the country are the experts and understand the culture far greater than those who do not live there” (Operation Underground Railroad, 2019, “Aftercare”).

Breakdown of Operation Underground Railroad’s budget. The only breakdown to how funds are used is on the “Frequently Asked Questions” page (Appendix C). According to the infographic for 2018, 85% of funds were used for operations and aftercare, 11% for fundraising and development, and 4% for overhead and general administration. When asked how much each operation costs, the site says that “[e]ach situation is different depending on travel, research, sting set-up, working with governments, aftercare, etc., but on average one operation can cost anywhere between \$50,000-\$75,000 and each operation can save anywhere from 1 to 50 [victims]” Operation Underground Railroad, 2019, “Frequently Asked Questions”). As there were 21 operations in 2018, the total amount spent on travel, research, sting set-up, working with governments, and aftercare in 2018 is between \$1,050,000 and \$1,575,000.

Work within the United States. According to an infographic provided on the Operation Underground Railroad website’s homepage, only two of the 21 operations conducted in 2018 were conducted within the United States (Appendix B). Regarding the question of why more operations are not done here in the United States, the website indicates that “Operation Underground Railroad salutes our nation’s law enforcement officers and prosecutors at the federal, state and local levels who protect our country’s children. Law enforcement professionals skillfully investigate, arrest and prosecute those who violate children. *Our nation’s police efforts to protect children in the United States are light years ahead of many, if not all other countries*

[emphasis added]” (Operation Underground Railroad, 2019, “Frequently Asked Questions”). Instead, the site claims that “[c]ollaborating with law enforcement will reduce duplication, promote best practices and avoid other potential issues which might arise without close coordination” (Operation Underground Railroad, 2019, “Frequently Asked Questions”).

Survivor Stories. There are six survivor stories from mid-2019 (July) to the end of 2019 (December) listed on the site. The titles for these articles range from “7 and 9-year-old sisters flourish in aftercare”, “My story started with my mom and stepdad when I was 7”, “After escaping, I had to piece my family back together”, “How Luna is building confidence in aftercare”, “Young girl learns to protect herself through martial arts”, to “McKenzie fulfills dream of becoming a teacher”. All of these articles chronicle women and girls that were liberated from sex trafficking in countries outside of the United States and who “owe all their current prosperity to Operation Underground Railroad and the men on the operations teams that rescued” them (Operation Underground Railroad, 2019, “7 and 9-year-old sisters flourish in aftercare”; Operation Underground Railroad, 2019, “My story started with my mom and stepdad when I was 7”; Operation Underground Railroad, 2019, “After escaping, I had to piece my family back together”; Operation Underground Railroad, 2019, “How Luna is building confidence in aftercare”; Operation Underground Railroad, 2019, “Young girl learns to protect herself through martial arts”; and Operation Underground Railroad, 2019, “McKenzie fulfills dream of becoming a teacher”).

Operation Touissant. Operation Underground Railroad’s most recent documentary follows Ballard “and his special forces team as they go undercover in Haiti to bring a ring of sex traffickers who bribed their way out of jail, to justice” (Brunson, Dickerson, Dicks, & Nanton, 2018). The opening title of the film is a painting of what appears to be Ballard, framed in a halo

of light, carrying a young girl wrapped in blankets like an infant on the tracks of railroad. Other white persons follow behind him, carrying children, and similarly framed in a halo of light. Around them, a crowd of non-white people part to make way for Ballard, with some bowing on bended knee and looking up at him as if in awe (Appendix A). At one point in the film, a man describes Ballard as going “into the darkest, vilest corners of the world” and “rescuing victims from the clutches of evil men” (Brunson, Dickerson, Dicks, & Nanton, 2018).

Analysis

There are several issues that arise from the information gathered above. First, there appears to be a distinct *white savior complex*, as described by Gould. This can be seen in the examples of the documentary film *Operation Touissant*, from the title graphic painting (Appendix A), to the assertion that Ballard is rescuing victims from “the darkest, vilest corners of the world” (Brunson, Dickerson, Dicks, & Nanton, 2018). It is also exemplified in the makeup of the board members, directors, and employees at the organization. By insisting on working in countries other than the United States, the organization fails to acknowledge the presence of human trafficking domestically, while also implying that only “dark, vile corners of the world” outside of the United States are guilty of human trafficking.

Second, the survivor stories indicate a lack of focus from the organization on different types of victims beyond women and girls in sex trafficking situations. As Claire Renzetti explains in her piece, *Service providers and their perspectives of the service needs of sex trafficking victims in the United States*, not all victims are young girls. Victims that do not fit the stereotype are “more likely to be subjected to victim-blaming than are female sex trafficking victims” (Renzetti, 2015, p. 149). Anna Maternick compliments Renzetti’s work by asserting that there needs to be a “wider exploration of trafficking to include men and transgender persons”

(Maternick, Dragiewicz, & Ditmore, 2015, p. 46). Those that “do not conform to stereotypes of the typical victim... endure even greater difficulty accessing services than others ... The transgender women in particular experienced discrimination when trying to seek help from law enforcement or other social service organizations” (Maternick, Dragiewicz, & Ditmore, 2015, p. 46).

Lastly, the lack of transparency in the organization as a whole, especially concerning its aftercare services, is troubling. The problem with this, as Whitney Shinkle explains in her article, *Transatlantic Perspectives on Migration: Preventing human trafficking: An evaluation of current efforts*, is that “[d]espite the growing attention to human trafficking and the increasing number of policies directed at its elimination, knowledge about [the methods of anti-trafficking movements] is very limited. Credible qualitative and quantitative data are in short supply. Due to the clandestine nature of the practice, information on the characteristics of victims and their experiences, as well as the characteristics and networks of traffickers is mostly anecdotal and often hard to generalize” (Shinkle, 2007).

Conclusion

In Susan Dewey’s article, *Invisible agents, hollow bodies: Neoliberal notions of ‘sex trafficking’ from Syracuse to Sarajevo*, Dewey argues that victims of trafficking can sometimes become a “population invisible to most [nonprofits and their staffers], who thus fail to see the agency such [survivors] demonstrate as part of broader strategies to improve their lives” (Dewey & Zheng, 112). As Dewey so eloquently puts it, “The trafficked [individual] is thus constructed as a sort of hollow body, an empty figure to be filled up with the assumptions of the relatively privileged staff members at most international organizations, governments, and nongovernmental organizations” (Dewey & Zheng, 112-113). Even with the best of intentions, Operation

Underground Railroad does exactly this. Operation Underground Railroad ends up filling the empty figures of trafficking victims with the assumptions and desires of the relatively privileged staff members within the organization instead of working from a human rights-based perspective, which would actually help the victims harness the power to become survivors.

Thus, the tactics employed by Operation Underground Railroad “are not effective or rights-based solutions, and do nothing to support victims... [R]ather than address the root causes of exploitation – lack of opportunity, histories of abuse, and obstacles of race, gender and immigration status – the emphasis on arresting” and rescuing victims “diverts already scarce resources from more effective solutions, increases risk for those in the sex trade including trafficking victims, and ignores trafficking for any purpose outside of” sex trafficking (Freedom Network USA, 2015). Indeed, as Freedom Network USA explains, “[a]ll of the time, resources, and funds [Operation Underground Railroad] spends on [operations] does nothing to solve the one common factor that underlies all exploitation and trafficking— vulnerability” (Freedom Network USA, 2015).

In using Freedom Network USA’s recommendations for a human rights-based approach, I recommend that Operation Underground Railroad start “supporting policies which address trafficking across all forms of labor” (Freedom Network USA, 2015). This includes “support [for] legislation which increases rights and protections of sex workers”; “[p]rioritizing strategies which address the root causes of exploitation, including poverty and economic injustice, racism, gender-based discrimination, lack of enforcement of employment law protections, and restrictive immigration policies”; “supporting comprehensive and robust services for youth, with special attention paid to the needs to LGBTQ and youth of color, including access to housing and shelter services, independent sources of income and education”; “expanding the conversation to include

the demand for low-cost, low-skilled, and easily replaced labor and services, which results from consumers' tacit acceptance of exploitation"; and "prioritizing education, job training, and employment [within their aftercare] programs to provide an opportunity for individuals to have control over their own lives" (Freedom Network USA, 2015).

All in all, Operation Underground Railroad's abolitionist approach robs victims of the power to save themselves and change the course of their life. Until Operation Underground Railroad is able to make these sustainable changes towards a human rights based-approach, their efforts will continue to be largely superficial.

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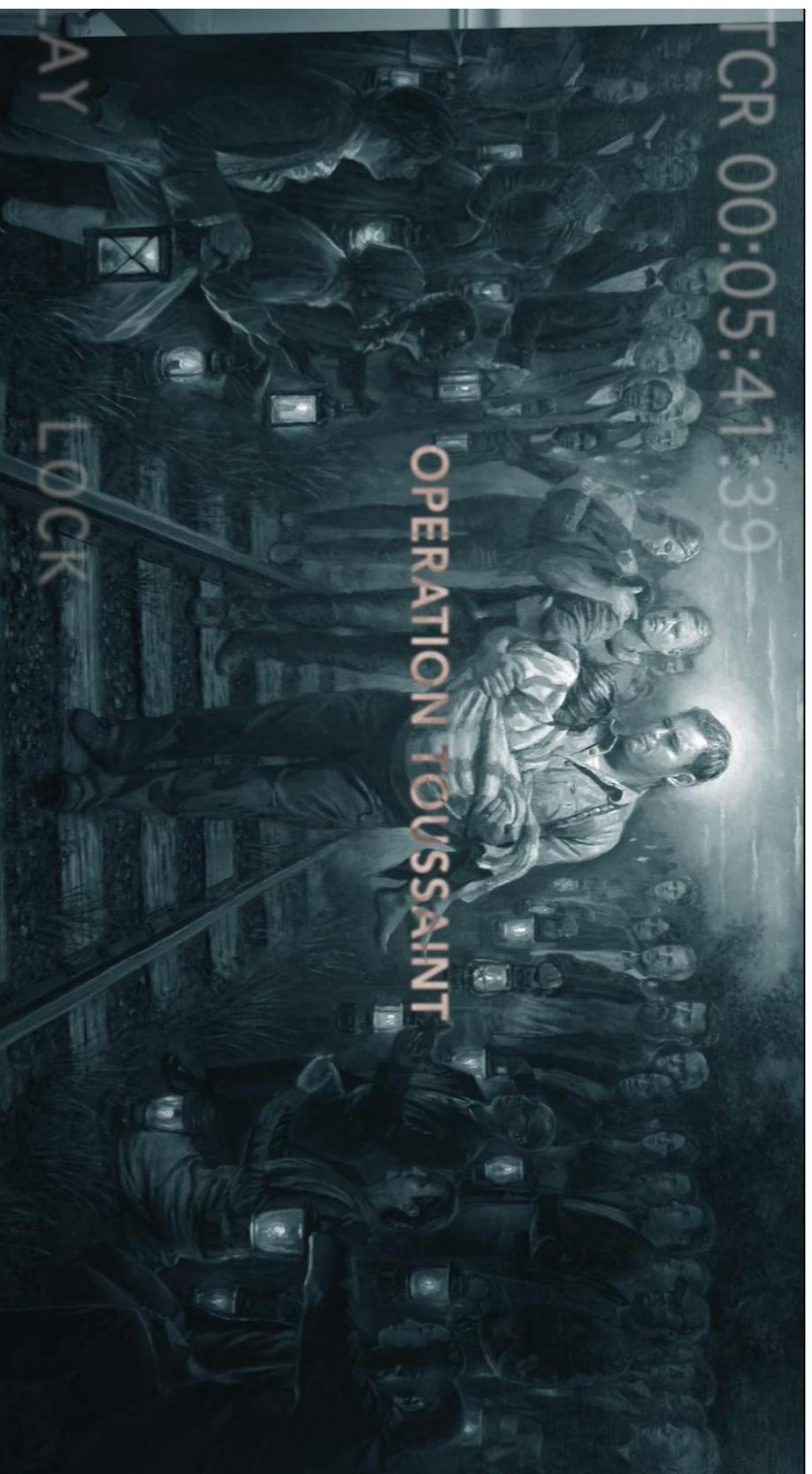
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Appendix A



Appendix B

| 2018 OPERATIONS | | |
|--|--|---|
| Opened Riverbank : Cambodia 4 rescued, 2 arrested | Operation "MIL" agro : Dominican Republic 1 rescued, 0 arrested | Operation Toussaint : Haiti 6 rescued, 12 arrested |
| DN Nagar : India 2 rescued, 2 arrested | Landmark : India 2 rescued, 3 arrested | Find Gardy : Haiti Mission in progress |
| Operation Duo : Lima, Peru 4 rescued, 1 arrested | Net Nanny 10 : Washington, U.S.A. 0 rescued, 20 arrested | KSA : Cambodia 0 rescued, 1 arrested |
| Second Chance : Guatemala 9 rescued, 2 arrested | Cuatro : Colombia 1 rescued, 1 arrested | Inchal : India 3 rescued, 2 arrested |
| Longstay : Thailand 4 rescued, 2 arrested | Preying Manta : South America 21 rescued, 2 arrested | Hotline : Haiti 5 rescued, 1 arrested |
| Miracle Follow Up : Mexico 0 rescued, 3 arrested | November Rain : Arizona, U.S.A. 0 rescued, 9 arrested | Hiro : Thailand 1 rescued, 1 arrested |
| 3,2,1 : Cambodia 5 rescued, 1 arrested | Ioeman : Thailand 1 rescued, 1 arrested | 08 (Zero-Eight) : Cambodia 1 rescued, 2 arrested |

In 2018, 85% of O.U.R. budget was utilized towards conducting operations and aftercare efforts around the world.

