

2009

Joyce Apsel on To Plead Our Own Cause: Personal Stories by Today's Slaves. Edited by Kevin Bales and Zoe Trodd (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008). 260pp.

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Recommended Citation

Apsel, Joyce (2009) "Joyce Apsel on To Plead Our Own Cause: Personal Stories by Today's Slaves. Edited by Kevin Bales and Zoe Trodd (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008). 260pp.," *Human Rights & Human Welfare*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/hrhw/vol9/iss1/10>



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Abstract

A review of:

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Keywords

Human rights, Slavery, Contemporary slavery

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To Plead Our Own Cause: Personal Stories by Today's Slaves. Edited by Kevin Bales and Zoe Trodd (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008). 260pp.

How does one write into history the voices and experiences of those on the margins, the silenced and unseen? Literature on the phenomenon of modern slavery has multiplied in the last two decades. This book adds an important contribution, collecting ninety-five written and oral accounts by modern-day slaves, and allows the reader to hear their complicated, painful histories—such as those of the child slaves working in India’s and Pakistan’s carpet industry or the voices of girls and women who are slaves from Thailand to Eastern Europe and who are part of the international movement in human trafficking. The editors emphasize that these life stories continue the tradition of 19 th century slave narratives, reflecting individual agency as a form of speaking out and as resistance to oppression.

The volume is for a general audience rather than specialists in the field, and will be of interest for undergraduate courses in subjects such as human rights and globalization, and in disciplines ranging from literature to history and sociology. Editor Kevin Bales has played a path breaking role in bringing attention and social scientific analysis to both the existence and characteristics of modern slavery in works such as Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy(1999) and Understanding Global Slavery (2005) and in his advocacy as President of Free the Slaves. Editor Zoe Trodd’s focus is on history and literature, including work on slave narratives, John Brown, and American Protest Literature (2006). The accounts are compiled from government testimonies, non-governmental organizations, particularly anti-slavery organizations, and interviews. It would have been valuable if the editors had included information on how these testimonies were recorded and authenticated (many are listed as “told to...”) and how these particular narratives were selected (Are there many more such testimonies?).

The title of the book “to plead our own cause” comes from the abolitionist newspaper *Freedom’s Journal* first issue on March 16, 1827, which stated “We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentations, in things which concern us dearly.” At the beginning of each chapter is a quote from a 19 th century slave alongside one from a modern day slave, emphasizing that the narrators continue the history of slaves’ protest literature and are explicit in their desire to “effect change with storytelling” (3) and to “reach out to other slaves as well as those in power” (4).

The Introduction provides a brief overview of the history and characteristics of modern global slavery. It is a distillation of key ideas and data from Bales’ earlier research, pointing out the fact that twenty-seven million slaves exist today, and highlighting the cheapness and disposability that characterize modern slavery. Bales and Trodd point out that the moral argument against slavery has been won and that slavery is illegal world-wide, yet, the practice persists. The editors argue that “no revolution is needed to free slaves today, just adjustments” (13). They advocate for public awareness, education, honest law enforcement, government action, economic support, and rehabilitation. However, after reading the accounts of slaves, more than an “adjustment” seems necessary to offset the deep poverty and global profiteering from cheap labor and human trafficking.

The slave testimonies are divided into five chapters, through which the reader is introduced to the global geography of individuals who have been enslaved. The cases range from the most common form of modern slavery, debt bondage, which is found primarily in South Asia and South America, to contract slavery, which is the fastest growing form of slavery world-wide. The personal stories convey the terrible physical and psychological toll slavery exacts on its human cargo, and also illustrate the human capacity to exploit and inflict terrible harm on others by a range of men and women involved in the business of slavery locally and internationally.

Chapter One looks at a variety of places, that is, the sights and scenes of modern slavery. For example, former slaves relate the terrible conditions in prison camp slavery in China's "laogai" (reform-through-labor) camps, where an estimated 4-6 million people are held in around one thousand forced labor camps. This cheap labor enters the global economy through the inexpensive products produced under slave conditions. Chapter Two includes the voices of girls and women, many of whom experience sexual exploitation. The stories are from females from Asia, Africa, the United States and Eastern Europe, some of whom were trafficked across international borders and others who were trafficked internally. Poverty and sexual abuse at home are repeated themes in their stories; the psychological and physical harm include rape in private and public to starvation, abortions, and ongoing threats to themselves and their families. Chapter Three contains the stories of a number of slaves who escaped, and describes how they came to do so; this chapter also identifies different psychological and physical turning points from bondage to freedom. But, of course, the repercussions of being enslaved continue. The final two chapters describe the challenges of being free. In Chapter Four, former child soldiers, sex slaves, *restavec* and chattel slaves tell about their different stages of reaction and recovery, and in the final chapter, former slaves speak out on how they try to regain control over their own lives, including the unusual example of Ramphal and other quarry slaves from the state of Uttar Pradesh in India, who were part of the founding of the village of Azad Nagar, "the land that is free."

There are few happy endings in these stories, as freed slaves point out how they are ostracized by their families and communities and how governments continue to ignore laws against slavery. As thirty-three year old Masha points out, "ten years have passed since I was trafficked, but the situation has still not changed. Is the German government really not aware of what is happening in their country? Or are they happy to profit from our suffering?" (212). This collection reveals in stark detail the individual suffering entailed in modern global slavery and advocates for governments and citizens to become aware of their own complicity and to work to stop the international crime of slavery.

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