

# Children in Chains: On the Productive and Exploitative Tendencies of Representation in *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*

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Currently on its sixteenth season, there is no question that NBC's *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (SVU) has gained immense popularity in modern television. One of many spin-offs from the original "Mother Ship" *Law & Order* program, SVU focuses on crimes with "special victims," which usually refer to those of sexual assault, as the opening narration states:

In the criminal justice system, sexually-based offenses are considered especially heinous. In New York City, the dedicated detectives who investigate these vicious felonies are members of an elite squad known as the Special Victims Unit. These are their stories.

It also depicts other crimes including cases with children, the elderly, and trafficking victims.

This show is not without its critics, however. Many in the academic community point to the sexually-charged content as both the reason for SVU's success and also the site of its controversy. Scholar of media culture and author Cynthia Chris states, "No amount of stolid narrative closure... could temper the graphic fear contained in" a particularly harrowing 2008 episode. "There was something sticky and toxic at work in the show," Chris continues, "and I could not overlook it ever again" (62). Scholars like Chris find themselves questioning SVU's graphic content, coming to the same conclusion: "we don't really know why so many are drawn to these entertainments, nor to what effect. We don't even have a firm grasp on the scope and received meanings of violence contained within popular entertainment products" (62).

Many others focus on the implications this show has for questions of gender and race in the media. SVU hangs on a point of tension within the critical discourse thanks to the diversity—and lack thereof—in the cast, which has yet to receive much explicit attention. The show features many elements characteristic of the white savior trope, since only one

## ABSTRACT:

This paper explores the depiction of child enslavement in the television show *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* and how this portrayal is ambiguous as it both productively explores this issue and also exploits it for entertainment purposes. The author focuses on the program's use of revictimization, the white savior trope, and its voyeuristic tendencies.

## KEY WORDS:

*Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, revictimization, white savior, child slavery, exploitation, trafficking

main detective, Odafin “Fin” Tutuola, is black. However, the gender factor disrupts the pervasiveness of this motif: this literary device usually leans heavily on strong white males, but *SVU* features a distinctly strong and empowering female presence in the character of Olivia Benson, the only detective to endure through all sixteen seasons and whose actress, Mariska Hargitay, is an influential victims’ rights advocate in real life. In this way, I propose that the show hangs in limbo between detrimentally buying into harmful media practices and productively contributing to diversity discourse.

Working within the more prevalent lines of discussion, professors Lisa M. Cuklanz and Sujata Moorti argue in their article, “Television’s ‘New’ Feminism: Prime-Time Representations of Women and Victimization,” that, while *SVU* does indeed incorporate a productive feminist perspective regarding sexual assault, the show’s depiction of women themselves problematically demonstrates “an anxiety about feminine characteristics and the power women possess within the private sphere” (304). In this way, Cuklanz and Moorti argue in a fashion that is representative of the feminist discourse surrounding the show, using scholarship ripe with “seemingly contradictory” moves (303). Often, the same scholars praising *SVU*’s efforts are also those tearing them apart.

In this paper, I will be engaging in a similar pattern of discussion, here addressing *SVU*’s depiction of child slavery—a facet of the show that has yet to receive much attention. While this program does indeed bring several important critical themes to light regarding enslavement and trauma, *SVU* still has exploitative tendencies. Here, I will examine several specific episodes about child enslavement to demonstrate the productive and exploitative tendencies of the show, analyzing specifically the themes of revictimization, the white savior trope, and problematic imagery, along with their implications for the show as a whole.

### INNOCENCE AND EXPLOITATION: CHILD ENSLAVEMENT IN *SVU*

Slavery is abhorrent on all levels, but when the victims are children, the facts become much more heart-breaking. In the words of Sally Stoecker, a Scholar-in-Residence at the Transnational Crime and Corruption Center of American University in Washington, DC, “It is a sad commentary on the state of the global economy... that women and children are being traded as quickly as commodities.... This phenomenon can be called the ‘commodification of persons’” (13). In *SVU*, the storyline of several episodes includes depictions of child victims, often in the context of trafficking. While this practice could serve to dynamically bring about awareness regarding various aspects of the trafficking discourse, the potential for the situation to turn exploitative creates a site of moral ambiguity which needs to be considered.

In their essay, “Does ‘Special’ Mean Young, White and Female? Deconstructing the Meaning of ‘Special’ in *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*,” Central Washington University scholars Sarah Britto, Tycy Hughes, Kurt Saltzman, and Colin Stroh discuss the types of victims the show portrays and the implications of these choices: “Age, in both extremes, is used as a way to depict innocence,” and *SVU* certainly capitalizes on this (Britto et al. 43). The fact that many of *SVU*’s victims are children places a form of inherent emphasis on the subject matter of those episodes since “children represent both vulnerability and potential for the future and as such their images are attention grabbing and powerful, particularly when the issue is crime” (Britto et al. 42). In this analysis, I will be examining several episodes in which children in particular are the victims of slavery because of this emphasis.

By using children as the object of these crimes, *SVU* draws special attention to the subjects of these episodes and the messages they convey. Oftentimes, episodes contain scenes in which characters discuss the issues at hand in such a way that viewers can learn about real-life situations through the show's treatment of them. In "Merchandise," for example, a scene between detectives and an assistant US attorney informs the audience about the little-discussed issue of American children in various types of domestic slavery. According to the episode's executive producer Neal Baer, "We hear about sex trafficking, which is horrendous, but we don't hear as much about trafficking where kids are forced to work on farms and work for people in their homes" (qtd. in Keehn). In the episode, the characters discuss how foreign victims have access to aid, whereas domestic slaves "get nothing"; the assistant US attorney then describes several examples of children enslaved across the country. In this way, I propose that *SVU* constructively contributes to the much-needed efforts in the overall trafficking discourse "to expand the definition of trafficking to include purposes other than prostitution, such as forced labor, forced marriage, and slavery-like practices," as Dr. Jyoti Sanghera, Section Chief of Human Rights and Economic and Social Issues at the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva, says (10). This scene in "Merchandise" is exemplary of how the show fits in moments meant to inform viewers while simultaneously moving the storyline along.

In addition to these conversations, characters often portray the real effects that enslavement can have in such a way that viewers can become more informed about trauma. Continuing our analysis of "Merchandise," the episode continues its efforts to engage in critical slavery dialogue when a child victim named Micah reveals the inherent non-linear nature of trauma in a way that can enlighten viewers into this aspect of a victim's experience.

Often, victims of extremely traumatic experiences face difficulties putting those experiences into a chronological, linear narrative that normal experiences generally allow. They instead remember and recount their trauma in nonlinear flashes of memories and feelings, which is evident in Micah's interview with psychiatrist Dr. George Huang. Micah begins his story in the middle, describing the sounds, smells, and feelings of the cellar in which he was held. He then says, "Do something wrong, make a mistake, and we all get a beating" ("Merchandise"). The rest of the conversation follows this nonlinear pattern. Huang attempts to put Micah on a chronological path with leading questions, but Micah's narrative continues to push back. This conversation demonstrates how severe trauma like slavery is resistant to a linear narrative.

In addition to nonlinearity, *SVU* also reveals the traumatic implications these experiences can have on their victims, based on real-life experiences. In her analysis of real-life child trafficking victims, Daniela Nicolaescu notes, "The analysed subjects show us that ... the forms of abuse which the child endured while being trafficked have disastrous consequences on the emotional balance and on the general behavior of the children," including Stockholm syndrome, panic, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and anxiety (102, 95, 99). Often, victims on *SVU* deal with these same results from their traumatic experiences, such as Kristen in "Stranger," a victim of prolonged sexual enslavement who suffers from PTSD and Stockholm syndrome. This episode even features a scene when the detectives discuss the implications of the latter, thus informing the audience about a commonly-misunderstood mental issue.

However, despite the various productive ways that the show is raising awareness about various slavery- and trauma-related issues, it is important to recognize the fact that it exists

within an entertainment medium. As Britto et al. explain, “children’s images... are often the basis of moral panics, suggesting when crime stories focus on children they have more salience among consumers” (42). They go on to speculate that this, perhaps, is the reason why *SVU* is the most popular of the Law & Order spin-off shows and to note that nearly “one-half of all the victims on *SVU* were under the age of 18, compared to NCVS [National Crime Victimization Survey] reports that suggest the actual figure is closer to one-quarter [of] all victims” (46). This calls into question whether the program’s emphatic and disproportionate use of child victims is as innocent as it may at first appear. *SVU* could be using this particular demographic in order to draw attention to issues, but the reasons could also be exploitative. They could be attempting to attract and maintain the attention of more viewers or perhaps unknowingly, but nonetheless perversely, providing a voyeuristic opportunity for viewers to observe the torture and maltreatment of children. Even with the ways that *SVU* is contributing to a discourse about trafficking, it is important to consider whether the price is worth paying in exchange.

Although one might hope that the show’s goals are to bring the abovementioned issues about slavery and trauma to light, the fact still remains that channels like USA broadcast *SVU* among other shows like *Necessary Roughness*, *Royal Pains*, and *Satisfaction*. It would be a very difficult case to argue that these other programs have activist goals in mind when they are so clearly meant for entertainment, and it is disturbing to consider that *SVU* may be using child enslavement for the purpose of entertainment. What does it mean when these types of seemingly-productive discourse-raising themes are present in a show which keeps such company? The use and heavy reliance on the child victim character type and the fact that this show is clearly at least partially, if not entirely, intended for entertainment creates a site of ambiguity when considering whether as a whole *SVU* productively contributes to the trafficking discourse.

### WHEN WILL THE MADNESS END?: AN EXAMINATION OF REVICTIMIZATION ON AND OFF SCREEN

Victims of these types of crimes often experience further victimization after the initial crime has taken place. From the police officers who first take their statements to the medical professionals who attempt to care for their physical and mental needs, victims often seem to find themselves thinking that they would have been better off if they had simply remained silent. This process is known as revictimization, and it is prevalent in reality as well as in *SVU*.

In an article for *The Washington Post*, special counsel on human rights Malika Saada Saar recounts the story of Tami, a 15-year-old victim of forced prostitution who, when she finally escaped, was arrested instead of protected, and she questions: “But should an abused child be incarcerated for the abuses perpetrated against her?” Saar continues by arguing that “the people who rape these girls, the politely termed ‘johns,’ are rarely arrested for statutory rape, child endangerment or sexual assault of a minor.” Often, children forced into prostitution are treated like criminals when they are actually victims of a much graver offense; under-aged prostitutes, regardless of whether they are slaves or not, are victims of statutory rape and should be treated as such.

Often in *SVU*, revictimization is overtly prevalent, and thus the show productively raises awareness about it. Victims often express their displeasure with the way that they are treated

by the state, a sentiment grounded in reality. According to a study performed by Rebecca Campbell of Michigan State University, “43% to 52% of victims who had contact with the legal system rated their experience as unhelpful and/or hurtful” (704). The show makes it clear to viewers that, even though there is a chance for justice to be served, that chance often comes with a price.

Kristen exemplifies the cost a victim might face from pursuing justice in a particularly overwhelming scene from “Stranger.” She suffers from PTSD as a result of her enslavement. Soon after she is released from the hospital, the detectives take her out to retrace her steps in order to find her abuser. Throughout, Kristen becomes increasingly overwhelmed and triggered by the loud sounds and the detectives’ pressuring questions. Even though the purpose of this process was to assist her in getting justice, the overall result was further victimization. This demonstrates to viewers that even the most well-intentioned servants of the state may inadvertently cause further suffering for victims in the process of helping them get justice.

Within other episodes of *SVU*, the concept of revictimization becomes a site of contradiction. The show both raises awareness about this troublesome reality and also participates in it. One episode exemplary of this contradiction is “Merchandise,” which focuses on child enslavement and demonstrates “how these heinous crimes can be hidden in plain sight—and how victims of sex trafficking are often prosecuted as criminals” (Keehn). Detectives discover that Micah has a record for prostitution, despite the fact that he is only thirteen years old. Since Micah is paradoxically a victim of sex trafficking being charged with prostitution, the show points to how the legal system is revictimizing him by criminalizing actions that he was forced to perform. Instead of arresting the pimps, “johns,” or traffickers, officers have arrested their victim.

This theme continues later in the episode, only in a different light because the characters and the show itself revictimize Micah. During a struggle to take the boy in, his shirt tears, revealing a back covered in lacerations—putting the boy’s injured body on display for the viewers. Even though Micah is a fictional character, the way this scene takes advantage of the set-up of the episode and the real-life implications of this type of treatment are extremely problematic. This moment of cinematography is exploitative on many levels: it exposes the body of a victim, it shocks some viewers into a state of pity (which is problematic in and of itself) without the probability of productive action to take in response to this experience, and it capitalizes on other viewers’ desire to witness the results of torture.

When Micah begins to repeatedly hurt himself, Fin then goes to restrain Micah for his own protection. Detective Eliot Stabler protests, “You saw his back—they made him a slave. Are you going to treat him like one now?” To this, Benson states, “Maybe it’s the only thing he’s used to.” Here, Benson argues that Micah has been treated like a slave for so long that he can no longer process anything else, explaining his self-destructive behavior. However, regardless of what Micah is “used to,” they should not subject him to further victimization. By putting him in handcuffs, they are doing exactly what the show accused other officers of earlier: they are treating the victim like a criminal. Benson’s comment may have been true, but that does not justify further victimization of a child who has already been forced into labor and prostitution, repeatedly raped and sodomized, and arrested and charged with crimes out of his control.

Another source of secondary victimization is through the medical professionals with whom victims interact after an assault, specifically through the harrowing process of getting a rape kit. Campbell states that because “the survivor’s body is a crime scene,” an extremely

invasive and meticulous medical procedure is necessary to preserve evidence of the crime, a process which often leaves victims feeling as though they have been raped a second time (706). This aspect of revictimization is also addressed through *SVU*, but the way in which it is brought to light merits scrutiny. In “Stranger,” when a victim of sexual enslavement goes to the hospital with Benson, the scenes that follow are problematic. While Benson asks her about her trauma, the camera pans over the girl’s exposed body in suggestive patterns, down her back, up between her legs, and over her chest; focuses on a needle slowly penetrating her skin; and shows her expressionless, motionless, haunted face. These startling and pseudo-pornographic images, along with how her narrative is given as a voice-over, draw attention away from her narrating her trauma and toward her body. While this scene certainly demonstrates and raises awareness about the trauma of getting a rape kit, it does so in a way that is also exploitative.

### THE WHITE KNIGHT WITH A BADGE: *SVU*’S USE OF THE WHITE SAVIOR TROPE

Throughout literature pertaining to slavery, one widespread trope is that of the white savior—the “messianic white self” who “is the redeemer of the weak, the great leader who saves blacks from slavery or oppression” (Vera and Gordon 33). The white savior is persistent throughout film and TV alike in such blockbusters as *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, *The Matrix*, *Avatar*, and *The Blind Side*, and it is much more harmful than it may seem.

Originating in Western traditions of enslavement, the white savior represents a history of white paternalism and racist abolition movements, as well as a supposition of nonwhite submission and an inherent need for a savior. According to authors Hernán Vera (a professor of sociology and a prolific race relations writer) and Andrew M. Gordon (an associate professor of English and a film critic), in contemporary media, these types of characters present “whites with pleasing images of themselves as saviors rather than oppressors of other races,” when history clearly shows the latter to be a much more accurate depiction (34).

When analyzing the depiction of an issue as racially-charged as slavery, it is important to evaluate whether the work in question is complicit in the use of this harmful and pervasive character type. Upon evaluating several episodes of *SVU*, I have found the white savior to be alarmingly prevalent. In order to demonstrate the various ways that the white savior trope is present in *SVU*, I will examine two episodes in particular: “Ritual” and “Merchandise.”

In “Ritual,” a white man purchases a young black boy from Nigeria through a trafficking ring to use for his own sexual perversions while his wife is away. The episode evolves to revolve around how these young black children from Nigeria are taken under false pretenses from their homes to be trafficked into the United States for sexual exploitation and domestic servitude. Throughout this episode, the black child slaves are portrayed in a way similar to how Vera and Gordon analyze the treatment of natives in the film *Stargate*: they are “credulous, ignorant, and superstitious” and even have special amulets like the black characters of that movie (36). This places these characters in a white-savioristic situation, which problematically “racializes and separates people into those who are redeemers (whites) and those who are redeemed or in need of redemption (nonwhites),” as Mathew W. Hughey describes the trope in his book *The White Savior Film: Content, Critics, and Consumption* (2).

Over the course of this episode, the detectives work to uncover the trafficking operation. Toward the end, the detectives receive information which leads to a raid on a warehouse and the discovery of dozens of black children in chains, huddled in the dark, their faces now up-

turned from their previous stupor of hopelessness as they are rescued by their white saviors. This image of black bodies—much less those of black children—in chains is problematic on many levels which will be discussed later, but here I will emphasize the way that this episode positions the seemingly ignorant, helpless, compliant black slave children with the bold, justice-seeking white adults.

Later on in the episode, it is revealed that the main perpetrator of enslaving these children is a man from Nigeria himself, thus positioning the only adult from these children's home as the episode's villain. What's more, the typecasting for this character buys into mainstream colorism, a type of discrimination based on skin color (distinctly different from racism which is based on ancestry and various other factors in addition to skin color). According to Dr. Ronald Hall of the University of St. Thomas, who is one of the nation's leading scholars on skin color, "African American males who have darker skin are viewed as more sinister and threatening by both the dominant and dominated populations" (178). Since the actor for the Nigerian trafficker is one of the darkest male characters in the episode, the show is simultaneously ascribing negative connotations to him based on his darker skin color and potentially contributing to viewers' preexisting colorism mentalities. Even at the end of this episode when the one black detective, Fin (who notably happens to be much lighter than the trafficker), is accosting the trafficker and the situation turns violent, the white detectives intervene to make the official arrest, thus yet again "saving" the day.

In "Merchandise," the white savior trope takes a turn by juxtaposing the power of the various detectives on the force. When the case of enslaved at-risk American youths becomes one of federal jurisdiction, Benson and Stabler become temporary U.S. Marshals. It is important to note here that even though Fin—again, the team's only black detective—played an integral role in the case thus far, it is the white detectives who achieve this new level of authority. Indeed, directly following this scene, Fin expresses how impressed he is with their new credentials, reinforcing the underlying theme of white saviordom by juxtaposing his lack of power to save the children with the white detectives' newly-empowered ability to do so.

As these episodes are representative of trends within the show, it is clear that *SVU* leans on the white savior trope throughout its treatment of slavery. Even though we have already examined several ways in which *SVU* is productively adding to the trafficking discourse and raising awareness about real-world slavery concerns, it is important here to discuss the ways that its reliance on this character type could be causing some level of harm to viewers and, by extension, to race relations in modern society.

The white savior is a trope of contention wherever it appears with "people wrangl[ing] over the site and suitability" and "stak[ing] out a position along the spectrum of evaluations: good to bad, progressive to racist, and stereotype to true story" (Hughey 3-4). Within the context of *SVU* specifically, it is my position that the white savior falls on the latter side of this spectrum because of its subtlety; it is extremely prevalent without being so obvious that the average viewer would necessarily notice. The motif makes appearances in such a subversive way that could potentially derail any productive efforts the show could be having within the trafficking discourse. Similar to films depending on this trope, *SVU* characters might come across as straight-forward depictions of heroic characters, and "yet they are sites of both purposeful ideological labor and implicit explanations about race so normalized as common sense that many may fail to recognize them as ideological" (Hughey 8). From a show with a flawed framework which allows for this kind of treatment of race relations, it is

important to be critical about whether it can still make positive and productive contributions to the discourse surrounding slavery.

In a study on racial stereotypes, S. Plous and Tyrone Williams of Wesleyan University ascertained that: “Some 20% of the public expresses a belief that blacks are innately inferior in thinking ability, and a majority endorses at least one racial stereotype concerning inborn ability. In addition, roughly 50% of the public endorses at least one stereotypical difference in anatomy between blacks and whites” (811). Their research summary explains how stereotypes of this sort have firmly rooted themselves in the American history of oppression since early views about blacks centered on “characteristics which, it was argued, naturally suited them to slavery” (796). One of the reasons for these types of stereotypes remaining persistent today can be ascribed to the media’s treatment of people of color. In our visual culture, images have the ability to shape people’s worldviews. This includes both obvious sources like the news and also more seemingly innocent forms like entertainment television. In turn, we can posit that the way shows like *SVU* lean on racist and colorist tropes like the white savior is problematically adding to this harmful trend.

However, while certainly problematic, there could potentially be a somewhat plausible motive behind its use. Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Nicholas Kristof often uses this trope within his own writing, but he believes that it is for a greater cause:

Frankly, the moment a reader sees that I’m writing about Central Africa, for an awful lot of them, that’s the moment to turn the page.... One way of getting people to read at least a few [paragraphs] in is to have some kind of foreign protagonist, some American who they can identify with as a bridge character. And so if this is a way I can get people to care about foreign countries, to read about them, ideally, to get a little bit more involved, then I plead guilty. (qtd. in Hughey 3)

While Kristof’s argument may be partially applicable to *SVU*, it cannot fully excuse the trope’s presence due to the entertainment factor. Regardless of its attributes, this show still runs on TV stations like USA alongside other shows like *White Collar* and *Psych*, programs whose main purpose is to entertain. This begs the question of whether or not the primary goal of this show is to divert audiences, as opposed to getting them “a little bit more involved.” Thus, what value does its use of the white savior truly have? Especially when one considers all of the evidence which points to the trope being harmful, these small attempts at using it productively seem to be a weak justification at best.

Although it is clear that *SVU* has a problematic tendency to lean on the white savior trope throughout its treatment of the issue of slavery, this seemingly clear-cut issue is complicated by a single factor, namely a single character: Olivia Benson. Detective Benson is a strong female character in the show and always has been from the first season. Throughout the show’s sixteen seasons, she has advanced through the ranks to become the current supervisor of the detective squad. As a “feminist heroine” (Cuklanz and Moorti 305), Benson demonstrates many characteristics that many within the feminist conversation surrounding the show have praised as one of *SVU*’s most powerful and positive contributions to the gender discourse in modern television.

However, as a white detective, Benson still finds herself in the position of the white savior quite frequently, raising concerns about her character’s productive nature within the critical discourse surrounding the show as a whole. In his book, Hughey points to several films which include “characters whose innate sense of justice drives these tales of racial cooperation, nonwhite uplift,



and white redemption” (7). While these particular themes may not be applicable to the show as a whole, one can certainly make a case that they are present in the episodes discussed thus far in this analysis. Benson is certainly a white protagonist character who fits Hughey’s description of this type of white savior; however, we arrive at the point of contention when the gender factor comes into play because, usually, the white savior trope refers to a man.

Amidst the productive ways that Benson’s character interacts with the storyline in regards to feminist theory, there are these problematic elements of her character which stem from the show’s favoritism toward white savioristic depictions and situations. This again raises the question of whether or not the show is productive or problematic within the trafficking discourse. The severity of this tension makes it difficult to discern whether there is a clear answer.

Indeed, Benson is further complicated by the actress who plays her: Mariska Hargitay is an activist and advocate in real life for victims of sexual assault, domestic violence, and child abuse. “It all started for me when I began my work on *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* over a decade ago,” she says on the website for her organization, the Joyful Heart Foundation. She describes shocking statistics about sexual abuse, along with letters from viewers who wanted to share their stories about abuse. “That these individuals would reveal something so intensely personal—often for the very first time—to someone they knew only as a character on television demonstrated to me how desperate they were to be heard, believed, supported, and healed,” she writes, and these experiences moved her to become an activist. Not in name only, Hargitay has received training to become a crisis counselor, studied the subject, used her visibility to become an advocate and affect change, and has several advocacy awards to show for it.

This is not to sing Hargitay’s praises but to demonstrate her dedication to bringing about awareness and change regarding several issues central to the conflict in *SVU*. Indeed, according to Cuklanz and Moorti, “Hargitay’s volunteer work outside the show... emphasize[s] the commitment of both *SVU* the program and Benson the character to victims’ perspectives and experiences” (305). How, then, could a person so passionate about productive discourse possibly find herself complicit in a show which, as we have seen, has so many exploitative tendencies?

## CINEMATOGRAPHIC SINS: EXPLOITATIVE PORTRAYALS AND VOYEURISTIC TENDENCIES

Since television is predominately visual, it is vital to consider the imagery in a show like *SVU* when questioning its potential for being productive versus exploitative. As viewers of this program most likely have noticed, often the images the producers select to tell these stories of trauma can be traumatizing in and of themselves. When discussing the issue of slavery, these images can have even more sinister implications which could potentially stand in the way of *SVU* being a productive venue for the trafficking discourse by becoming complicit in voyeurism.

In many episodes, the body of a victim is put on display for viewers. This has caused a great deal of controversy within feminist discussions of the show from the very beginning because “while the majority of the episodes in the first season focused on the victimization of ‘classic’ powerless subjects—women and children—storylines have increasingly drawn attention to other violated bodies, those gendered subjects who occupy the space of the female body in ‘rape scripts’” (Cuklanz and Moorti 301). Indeed, this progression has continued throughout the seasons with increasingly more disturbing visual representations of

victims' traumatic experiences. A prime example of this trend can be found in the medical exam scene from "Stranger."

These kinds of pseudo-pornographic images become much more explicit in some of the other episodes like "Slaves." In this episode, detectives investigate a case of a young Romanian girl being held as a domestic/sex slave. Even though "Slaves" brings to light several of the issues surrounding domestic slavery in the United States, several moments overtly point to the BDSM (bondage-discipline/dominance-submission/sadism-masochism) subculture. Throughout the course of questioning a suspect, the detectives use photos of tortured female bodies who allegedly had died as a result of torture. Later, upon searching the home of the suspect, they find various incriminating devices, including chains, head cages, and other instruments of torture, which could clearly point to sexual slavery. However, the case is complicated by the wife's seemingly willing participation (which turns out to be anything but) in these practices until the detectives discover the Romanian girl being held in a cage box built into the underside of the couple's bed.

The fact that this episode relies so heavily on BDSM culture while simultaneously engaging in the topic of slavery is a site of tension because of the fact that several sexually deviant behaviors associated in BDSM, while consensual, have their roots in fantasies of rape and sexual slavery. Scholar Marcus Wood asks in his book *Slavery, Empathy and Pornography*:

"Is it too much to see bondage, body art, sado-masochism, mystical religious cults, the constructions of black male and female sexuality by whites as having evolved, more or less directly, out of the submerged and devious reaction of successive Western societies to the inheritance of Atlantic slavery?" (12).

When considering *SVU*, the answer is an emphatic no. Even though the victim here is white, the episode nonetheless makes connections between the slave trade and modern sexual practices in such a way as to invite a voyeuristic viewing from audience members. Thus, it implicitly welcomes "white fantasies of black lives and suffering," which is "more or less, the cultural memory of English slavery," according to Wood (21). Specifically, the imagery of instruments of torture is fetishized by the photographs of tortured female bodies, the BDSM themes, the final image of the girl in the box, and the general context of the episode as a whole. In summation, this episode's imagery plays into a highly problematic tendency to associate legitimate sexual slavery with its consensual counterpart. "Slaves" is even more disarming to the viewer since it is the finale to the first season, which was one of the most moderate of the sixteen seasons.

Potentially even more problematic than the show's treatment of the enslaved female body is that of the black slave body. *SVU* buys into a media tendency to discount the value of a single black voice by reducing individualized narratives in favor of groups in need of salvation: "although a single white victim was frequently the sole focus of an episode on *SVU*, minority victims were almost always portrayed in groups" (Britto et al. 47). This practice mirrors that of reality since "similar to past media research when minority victims are shown [in *SVU*], they are often depersonalized by only showing a photo rather than a person and grouping victims together and not developing their individual stories" (Britto et al. 50).

This practice is arguably never more prevalent than in "Ritual" during the liberation scene. In this scene, the group of black children in chains draws on highly sinister roots in the heri-

tage of the slave trade. Historically, chains have served not only as devices of physical control but also of psychological dehumanization. By placing the slaves in chains, they are likened to animals, who are then rendered much easier to exploit and control. According to Wood, “The comparison of slave body with the animal body has often been considered in terms of the manner in which it legitimated inhuman behavior on the part of the slave owner” (403). “Ritual” specifically draws on this history in a disconcertingly vivid way since the children are often kept as domestic “pets” by white families: “Yet perhaps of more sinister cultural import is the manner in which the slave-animal comparison, within the context of the domestic pet, opened up areas of positive emotional identification” (Wood 403). Wood goes on to discuss the significance of the use of the collar and other forms of restraints in the iconography of enslavement, a trope which is clearly evident in this scene from “Ritual.” As one of the show’s most disturbing moments, this scene seems to serve no productive purpose and draws on a history of black subjugation in the exploitative context of the black child slave’s body, in addition to the white savior themes.

The fact that these types of abuse of the victim’s body take place within the context of a TV show adds an extra level of exploitation because of the viewer’s voyeuristic ability to re-watch scenes of torture and subjugation. This relates directly to Wood’s discussion of Laurence Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey*, when he says of the narrator: “He can come back to, and ‘enjoy’ the suffering of his fantasy slave at any time, and in any way he likes. This act of imaginative possession exists in a troubled relation to the manner in which a real slave-owner can use the slave’s body at any time, in any way” (16).

### WATCHING REAL CHILDREN IN CHAINS: AN AREA FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

Besides the various ways examined here regarding *SVU*’s exploitative practices, I believe that an even deeper and more threatening issue merits further consideration. There has yet to be meaningful research about what these experiences do to the child actors who facilitate these traumatic narratives. For example, a great number of young child actors of color were needed for the liberation scene from “Ritual” discussed at length above, and these young performers were actually physically occupying the space of a trafficked child being saved by white detectives. What is the show performing when it creates this situation where these children are acting out these highly traumatic scenes of racialized subjugation at such an impressionable age? While this is not a question I am qualified to answer here, it merits further consideration and warrants mentioning here since it represents a potentially highly problematic site of exploitation.

### CONCLUSION

According to Baer, “*SVU* asks the major questions—troubling, difficult, intractable issues of our time ... I’m interested in how things fall apart” (qtd. in Lee 92). Indeed, the show does seem to spend a considerable amount of effort in productively participating in trafficking dialogue and raising awareness about critical issues pertaining to real-life themes. However, these efforts “fall apart” when one considers the various exploitative implications and underlying sinister themes of individual episodes and, by extension, the show as a whole. In order to be truly productive, *SVU* would need to shy away from harmful practices like the white savior trope and treat issues like revictimization in ways in which it does not end up participating in it themselves.

In such a visual medium as television, it is vital to ensure that a show of this nature does not become explicitly exploitative through cinematographic decisions. While graphic moments may draw viewers in, it does so for voyeuristic reasons, which are harmful to the show's overall value as a productive participant in the dialogue. In tackling difficult subject matter like child enslavement, it is understandable that a program merely meant for entertainment may come up short when critically examined for these types of issues. However, by choosing to focus on "special victims," *SVU* opens the door for this type of criticism. In terms of visual culture, it is important to note that because "images can educate as well as corrupt," the show has a responsibility to guide viewers to the former, although "the power of interpretation, or revision ... lies solely with the viewer" (Bachman 151). As the show progresses through its sixteenth season, critical viewers can hope that these types of considerations will be taken into account so that the potential for productive conversation can come to fruition.

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