

UMSAEP UM-UWC Academic Exchange Program Report 2019-2023 Project

Aliens from the Sky: **An Experimental Documentary Telling the Stories of Sex Workers in Cape Town**

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Columbia

UWC Host: Cherith Sanger, School of Law, University of Western Cape (UWC)

Synopsis

Aliens from the Sky was created to advocate for the decriminalization of sex work in South Africa, through the power of storytelling. By sharing the stories of three sex workers and the challenges they face confronting police corruption, the film aims to spread awareness in an artistic way about the issues this community faces and to promote change through storytelling.

In 2019, I received a grant from the University of Missouri South African Exchange Program (UMSAEP) to fund the storytelling project *Corruption in the Policing of Sex Work: A Digital Storytelling Intervention* with my collaborator Cherith Sanger, a law faculty member at the University of Western Cape. In July 2022, I was finally able to travel to Cape Town (rescheduled from May 2020 due to COVID) to film the project in collaboration with the NGO SWEAT (Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Task Force) on advocating for the decriminalization of sex work in South Africa. In Cape Town, I worked collaboratively to conduct interviews with sex workers who have experienced police corruption. These interviews and the footage I captured during the research trip led to the 12-minute experimental documentary and art installation, *Aliens from the Sky*, which advocates for the decriminalization of sex work in South Africa. The completion of the film in December 2022, coincided with the introduction of a Bill to Parliament on November 30, 2022 to decriminalize sex work and provide protection, safety, and justice for survivors of Gender- Based Violence.

Despite ongoing efforts to tackle police corruption in South Africa, it remains rife and adversely affects the country economically, socially, and politically. The buying and selling of sex services and all related activities are criminalized in South Africa. The criminalization of sex work means that sex workers are frequently in conflict with the law and compelled to engage with the criminal justice system. The criminalization of sex work marginalizes sex workers by placing them in a powerless position in society. They are vulnerable to abuse and exploitation and are unlikely to report crimes and human rights violations perpetrated against them. This is especially true for trans and female sex workers. *Aliens from the Sky* tells the story of three female identifying sex workers in Cape Town, South Africa and the systems they must navigate in order to survive.

A Digital Storytelling student and animator, Abby Blenk, assisted in South Africa and worked on the project during the Fall 2022 semester to produce the animations and captioning. This film premiered at the San Francisco Bay Area Sex Workers Film and Arts Festival at the Roxie Theater in San Francisco, CA on May 27, 2023.

Process for Project

- 1) Familiarize ourselves with the SWEAT organization team and schedule meetings with participants who are sex workers who have faced police corruption.
- 2) Schedule filming dates for individual participant interviews, group participant interviews and B-roll filming days with participants to record audio.
- 3) Film all interviews and B-roll with participants.
- 4) Take portraits of participants for animation references.
- 5) Identify additional filming sites for B-roll and film footage for the experimental documentary short about police corruption in sex work.
- 6) Edit and transcribe all footage.
- 7) Animate portraits and scenes.
- 8) Caption final edit of film.
- 9) Build out marketing packet and promotional images and film festival submission strategy and application packet for gallery installations.
- 10) Apply for exhibitions and festivals and network to support project.
- 11) Attend festivals the film is accepted to and install accepted exhibition proposals for gallery shows.
- 12) Transcribe interviews for further written research publications with Cherith.

Participant Interview Details

A total of three sex workers participated in the project. This number was due to the willingness of sex workers to participate. This is the case because sex workers are not eager to speak out about police misconduct. The criminalization of sex work has resulted in sex workers fearing reprisal from members of the police service. All the participants were sex workers living and working in the Western Cape. The participants included sex workers who work in the central business district and surrounding areas, as well as those working in the suburbs and outside of Cape Town. The interview participants were mostly secured prior to the commencement of the interview process with the filmmakers. Participants were secured through the sex workers non-profit and non-governmental organization, the Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce (SWEAT). The organization provides services and programming to sex workers daily and essentially serves as a one-stop-center for sex workers which provides holistic and sensitized services tailored for sex workers. These services and programs seek to provide psycho-social, legal, health support to sex workers. The participants were each compensated R200 per day for food and travel. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. To supplement interview transcripts, researchers kept notes during group interview sessions, noting participants' nonverbal reactions to interview questions and other observations. Participants were asked to provide written consent to

participate in the project. A licensed clinical social worker was made available to participants for emotional support throughout the workshop and in the month afterward.

Film Notes

Although the stories of the participants are incredibly heavy, important, emotional, and meaningful, we didn't want to have equally heavy visuals within the film. We wanted the focus of the film to be on the stories of the participants. Two types of cameras were used to make this film, an iPhone and a Harinezumi digital toy camera. Since both filming tools are small and handheld, this allowed us to be closer to the participants and less intrusive, allowing us to focus more on the stories and have more immediate filmmaking process. We chose the locations for the B-roll for the film based on recommendations from the participants as well as specific locations mentioned in the film, in addition to Robben Island, which we used to reference the incarceration discussed in the film.

Our goal with this project was to let each individual participant tell the story that they wanted to tell. While each participant has a different lived experience when it comes to sex work, the common thread throughout was the goal of decriminalizing sex work in South Africa. We wanted to weave and thread the stories together in a way that each individual voice was heard and that each story, no matter the background, was honored. We were also careful about editing out specific speech patterns and dialect, choosing to leave in the "umms" or specific speech patterns that were unique to the individual participants. We did choose to incorporate subtitles however, just to be sure that each of their voices could be understood by a global audience and for those who are hearing impaired. This project was all interview based, with no script, except for the written text at the beginning and the end. We chose to conduct two types of interviews with the participants, individual and group, where they bounced stories and language off each other. All these interviews were woven together for this project. While we had some specific questions, that were crafted with Cherith, the goal was to just be a listener and to capture their stories. This also carried through into the editing process, where we tried to capture the heart and essence of their narratives. We tried not to interrupt, but rather let the stories flow naturally, even if they strayed from the original questions. This allowed the participants to tell the stories that they wanted to tell in that moment. We wanted to just let the camera run to capture it all.

While this film does not reflect my personal lived experience, it does very directly share the lived experience of the participants in the film. These issues of police corruption do not only pertain to this specific community, but many communities throughout the world. This is why the film remains important to continue illuminating these stories.

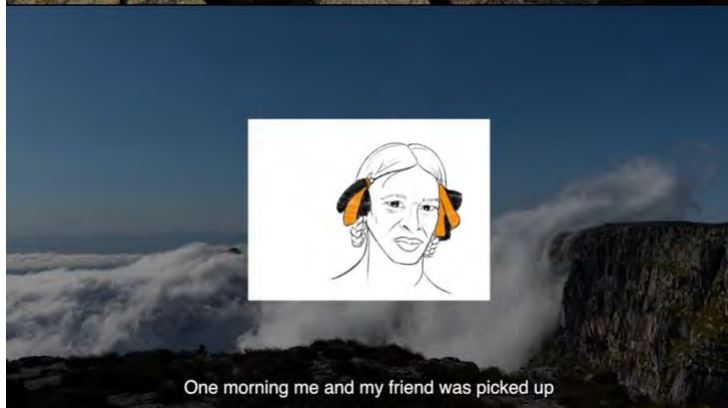
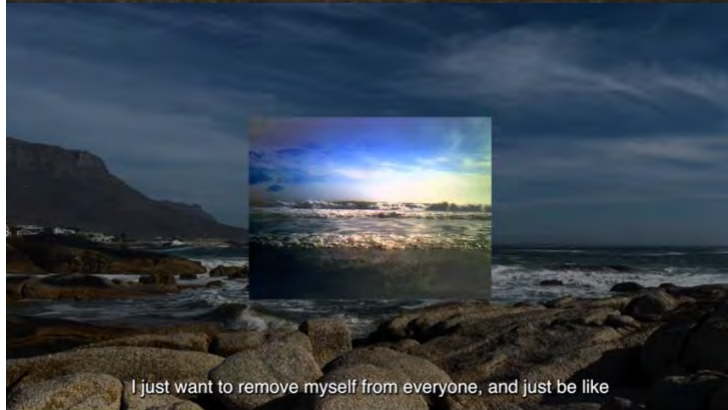
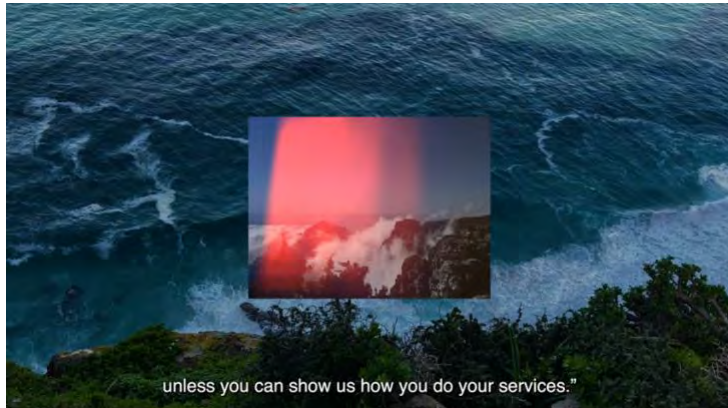


Katina Bitsicas and Abby Blenk on site for filming at Robben Island.



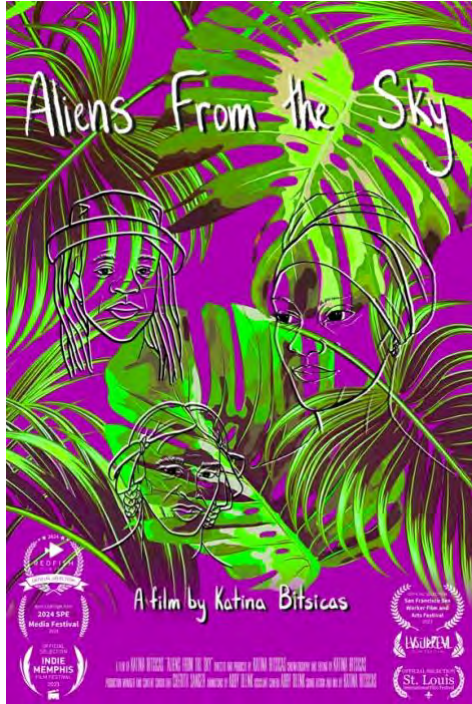
Abraham Hamman, Abby Blenk, Katina Bitsicas and Cherith Sanger at UWC.

Film Stills



Outcomes

Since 2023, the film and installation *Aliens from the Sky* has already screened in 10 festivals and exhibitions in 5 states in the US, in 4 countries (US, Ireland, South Africa, and Germany), and has won one award.



Aliens from the Sky premiered at the San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival held at the historic Roxie Theater in San Francisco, CA on May 27, 2023. Premiering here was so special, since the film played to the audience it was made for and about. Acceptance by the sex worker community is so important to me for this film.

18th Biennial San Francisco Bay Area Sex Worker Film and Arts Festival

May 19th-28th, 2023

Festival Director: Elizabeth Dayton
Event Producers: Elizabeth Dayton, Sophia Amelia, Delphine X, Tala Navaro, Raven Devaux, Failed Films, BAWP, Carol Leigh Memorial Collective, Kate Marquez, Anne Sprinkle, Beth Stephens, Jovelyn Richards, Carol Quinn, Erica Berenik, Kim Nevan, Bamfi Roung, Kaylin Bailey, Leah Moore
Film Curators: Elizabeth Dayton, Morty Diamond, Failed Films, Bamfi Roung

sexworkerfest@gmail.com
www.sexworkerfest.com
[sexworkerfest](https://www.instagram.com/sexworkerfest)

THE SEX WORKER FILM AND ARTS FESTIVAL

The Roxie • 4311 16th St. SF, CA 94103

Doors Open @ 12:30pm

POLICY
1:00-2:00pm

LETTERS OF THE WEST
2023 Filmmakers: Sierra Critique & Brodin Petrichor. In 1913, the San Francisco Bulletin published a serialized memoir of sex worker Grace Smith, which was reprinted in thousands of magazine letters to the editor from many sex workers. These words are excerpts from their letters. Runtime: 2:17

LOVE IN THE MIDDLE
2022 Filmmaker: Eve Jabronsky. Coming with heart aces vs a park and go on a date in West Hollywood, CA. Runtime: 22:30

CELESTIAL BEES
2024 Filmmaker: Kameron Ibarra. Filmed in Florida during the 800th anniversary of Queen Poppo de Leon's arrival on Florida's coast. Sara brings to life a 'national pearl' via concealment, obscuration, and greedily. A performance of the body's relation to itself and its consumers. Runtime: 02

AMNESIA OF THE SEX
2023 Filmmaker: Katina Bitsicas. The buying and selling of sex services and all related activities are prohibited in South Africa. The film tells the story of sex workers in Cape Town and the systems they must navigate in order to survive. Runtime: 22:25

THE LAST FAREWELL
2023 Filmmaker: Ian Halpern. Banned from many theaters in France, 'The Last Farewell' documents the social and political fallout when the forest people around the country's strip clubs in 2020. The film is a first-hand account from the perspective of a sex worker. Runtime: 1:15:00

RELATIONSHIPS
4:30-9:30

WAGS OF THE TAIL: IS YOUR LOVE
2020 Filmmakers: Anne Sprinkle & Beth Stephens. Series of shorts, 23 artists and filmmakers visualizing non-romantic relationships for Earth. Shifting metaphor from 'Earth as Mother' to 'Earth as lover' to engender a mutual and sustainable relationship. Runtime: 23:34

THIRTY TWENTY
2023 Filmmaker: Andri. When Chelsea, a white grant lady of the night, sneaks away for a missing scene encounter in her client's room, she goes back a day later when Kofi's wife Marie shows up with a bag of aces to scatter at the family home. A brief intimate look at two women who cannot sleep about the same man. Runtime: 12:00

WHERE IS THE FEMINIS FEEL?
2022 Filmmaker: Anna Matter. In search of the creation of an acronym, Anna Matter seeks to control her unpaid labor as a trans woman. Phrases of honest self-expression, sharing stories of moments & breaking silences speak to queer struggle, friendship, shame culture, and patriarchy. Runtime: 11:17

THE BEAUTIFUL
2022 Filmmaker: José Joaquín Gutiérrez Méndez. An old farmer in the middle of a war at work watches an illicit video, where a young trans person appears. Spirited by a provocative reaction, he accedes towards sexual desire in multiple forms. Runtime: 11:00

AKA
2022 Filmmaker: Guy Hodgkinson. When given an ultimatum do you stay or do you run? At some point, you have to decide. Aura and Chance are ready. It's a new coming-of-age film by Guy Hodgkinson taken from his experiences of working in the adult industry. Runtime: 10:05

REPARATIONS
2022 Filmmaker: Kim Ye & Megan LaTone. Phoenicia, a sex worker, is reluctant to write this piece chronicle her wedding to her partner. Inspired by trans reality TV, the film uses intertextuality to traverse topics of BDSM & ethical escorting, abuse, identity & trauma. Runtime: 38:00

The film then screened at La Sur Real Film Festival in Berlin, Germany in August 2023 and was then invited to screen at the Red Umbrella Film Festival in Dublin, Ireland, which is Ireland's first sex worker film festival.

RED UMBRELLA FILM FESTIVAL

**19-22 OCTOBER 2023
DUBLIN, IRELAND**



**LIGHT HOUSE CINEMA ◊ WIGWAM
UNITE THE UNION ◊ GRAND SOCIAL**

SATURDAY 21ST OCTOBER

Workshop: Legal Questions

This one-hour workshop will answer legal questions and share information on sex workers' legal rights. The workshop is sex worker only. If you don't feel confident asking in person or cannot attend on the day, please email your questions to redumbrellafilmfestival@gmail.com

Location: Unite the Union
Time: 12 PM
Admission: Free (sex worker only)

Workshop: Stripper Skills

A stripper style floorwork workshop for absolutely all levels of experience. If you have always been fascinated by club culture and want to nail some of those mesmerising floor moves, this one's for you! Please bring a yoga mat (and heels if you have them)

Location: Unite the Union
Time: 12 PM
Admission: Free

SATURDAY SHORTS

Soy Negra, Soy Marcia, y Soy Puta
Cec Van der Plas, Hugo Meljar | Colombia | 2012 | 127 min | Spanish with English subtitles

The short documentary, "I'm black, I'm queer and I'm a whore," stars Diana Navarro, a sex worker and lawyer who is fighting for the rights of trans people and sex workers in Colombia.



Aliens from the Sky
Katina Blitskas | South Africa | 2022 | 12 min | English (CC)


Aliens from the Sky tells the story of three sex workers in Cape Town, South Africa and the systems they must navigate in order to survive.

Boycam
Arturdo Bischen, Rodrigo Silva, Ernani Silveira Neto | Brazil | 2021 | 20 min | Portuguese with English subtitles

Alexandre, 30, virtual sex professional, father of Ana Laura, 7 years old, has to cope with the moral conflict between the oldest profession in the world and paternity.

SATURDAY 21 OCTOBER

The film was then one of six films selected to screen in the National Documentary Shorts Competition block at the Indie Memphis Film Festival in Memphis, TN on October 26, 2023 (Satellite Screening partner for the Sundance Film Festival).



**INDIE MEMPHIS
FILM FESTIVAL** October 24-29, 2023

South Duncan State Williams

ALIENS FROM THE SKY


Documentary Competition New

Aliens from the Sky tells the stories of three sex workers living in Cape Town, South Africa and the systems they must navigate in order to survive.

MORE DETAILS

Showings - select to order tickets:
[\[Available October 25, 6:30 PM - October 25, 11:59 PM, 2023\] Stream online...](#)
[Thu, Oct 26th, 6:00 PM @ Hattiloo Theatre](#)

Year:	2023	Director:	Katina Blitskas
Runtime:	12 minutes	Cast:	Chantelle Van Wyk, Shillah Cele, Regina Petersen
Language:	English	Announcer:	Abby Blenk
Country:	United States	Music:	Adigold
Premiere:	Regional Premiere		
Subtitle Language:	English		

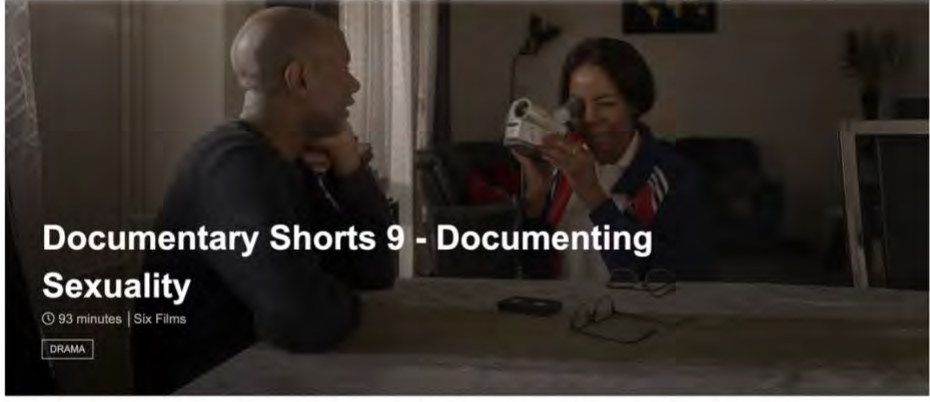


National Documentary Shorts Competition
 Thursday, October 26, 2023 6:00 PM CDT
 Hattiloo Theatre

The film then screened at the St. Louis International Film Festival in St. Louis, MO, an Oscar qualifying film festival as part of the Documenting Sexuality Shorts block.

CINEMA ST. LOUIS

HI-POINTE SLIFF EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS EVENTS ABOUT US SUPPORT MEMBERSHIP DONATE VOLUNTEER



Identity. Orientation. Preference. Work. Sexuality is about so much more than physicality. Explore the nuances of the LGBTQ+ community through the lens of these documentary shorts.

Showtimes
Thursday, Nov 16 at 1:15pm
Alamo Drafthouse Cinema Theater 3



Aliens from the Sky
Directed by: Katina Bitsicas
U.S. | 2022 | 12 minutes | English
Explore the economic, social, and political impact of South Africa's police corruption through the story of three female-identifying sex workers in Cape Town.

The film then saw its Cape Town premiere when it screened at The Greatmore at the Centre for Humanities Research, part of the University of the Western Cape. There was also an organized panel session and Q&A after the screening (virtual and in-person). Many of the participants in the film attended the screening in person. The film then played again in Cape Town at the Sex Work Film Festival, hosted by SWEAT.

Aliens From the Sky
A film by Katina Bitsicas

We invite you to an evening of film and conversation with an exclusive screening of the documentary short "Aliens from the Sky," an international collaboration between artist Katina Bitsicas (University of Missouri), researcher Cherith Sanger (University of the Western Cape), and the NGO SWEAT, advocating for the decriminalization of sex work in South Africa.

Thursday, 9 November 2023
Screening begins at 7pm
Q&A, panel, and reception to follow

The Greatmore at the Centre for Humanities Research
University of the Western Cape
66 Greatmore Street, Woodstock, Cape Town
(Entrance on corner of Regent and Greatmore Streets)

RSVP is required by 2 November to Cherith Sanger at csanger@uwc.ac.za
A virtual option will also be available via Zoom with RSVP.

Logos for Indie Memphis, St. Louis, Faculty of Law University of the Western Cape, SWEAT, and School of Visual Studies University of Missouri are visible at the bottom.

To close out 2023, in December, *Aliens from the Sky* was turned into a gallery installation for a solo exhibition at the Ryniker-Morrison Gallery at Rocky Mountain College in Billings, MT. This exhibition included both a projection of the film and an installation of the digital animated portraits on monitors, surround by the designed flora wallpaper. The portraits are of the participants in the experimental documentary project and the flora projection is based off the wallpaper at SWEAT, a safe haven for sex workers in Cape Town.



In 2024, *Aliens from the Sky* will screen at the 2024 SPE Media Festival in St. Louis, MO in March, where the film was honored as best film in the LGBTQIA category. The film will then screen in April at the Redfish Film Fest in Panama City, FL.

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2024 SPE Annual Conference | **Schedule**

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SPE Media Festival

An international juried video festival

Thursday, March 21 - 9:00AM to 5:00PM
Lindell

2024 SPE MEDIA FESTIVAL

March 21-23, 2024, St. Louis, MO

Festival Co-Directors: Lynn Estroff, Amanda Kline

LGBTQ Caucus Jurors: Nick Simko, Dana Smeester

Multicultural Caucus Jurors: Shadia Nifroogh

Women's Caucus Jurors: Lynn Estroff, Amanda Kline, Kaitlin Rees

LGBTQ MEDIA FESTIVAL

BEST LGBTQ FILM:

Aliens from the Sky | 9:00 am

Directed by Katina Bitsicas | Distribution: katina.bitsicas@gmail.com | 2022 | 12:16 min

Aliens from the Sky tells the story of three female identifying sex workers in Cape Town, South Africa, and the systems they must navigate in order to survive.

Budget

We requested funds for the travel of Katina Bitsicas and the travel of Abby Blenk to Cape Town, which occurred July 5-24, 2022.

Appreciation

I would like to express my thanks for the support offered by the UMSAEP UM-UWC Academic Exchange Program and the faculty at UWC (Umesh Bawa, Abraham Hamman, Lindsay Clowes) and staff at SWEAT (Duduzile Dlamini) who hosted me and supported this project.

Thank you to the participants Chantelle Van Wyk, Shillah Cele, and Regina Petersen, who bravely shared their experiences to promote change through storytelling. Thank you to my collaborators, Cherith Sanger and Abby Blenk, whose efforts made this project come to life.