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

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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.
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.
unless you can show us how you do your services.*

and, like, and they start hitting us with planks and

I just want to remove myself from everyone, and just be like

One morning me and my friend was picked up
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 Workers 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.
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.

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).
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.

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.
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.

**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**

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