

WOMEN AND MIGRATION(S) II



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7. Island Putas

Gabriella N. Báez

Sex work is one of the world's oldest professions and among the most stigmatized. Yet in countries with declining economies, like Puerto Rico and other Caribbean islands, more women, queer, and non-binary folk opt to make sex work the primary means of earning their livelihood. Despite Caribbean popular culture being classified as 'hyper-sexual'; misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia continue to play a role in the marginalization of sex workers.

Island Putas is an ongoing photographic documentation of queer sex work in the Caribbean, following economic decline in the aftermath of natural disasters. In the wake of hurricanes and earthquakes, poor economic infrastructures amplify poverty. The project explores how sex workers in the Lesser and Greater Antilles cope with economic hardship and create community to support and protect each other from humiliation, violence, and even, trafficking.

Sex work in the Caribbean is heavily tied to migration, with individuals crossing territorial lines for sex tourism and dancing in strip clubs a few islands over. While the first chapter of this project focused on sex workers navigating online platforms to continue their work during the COVID-19 pandemic, the project also aims to explore migration patterns between Puerto Rico and the US Virgin Islands, both colonial territories of the United States, albeit with different demographics.

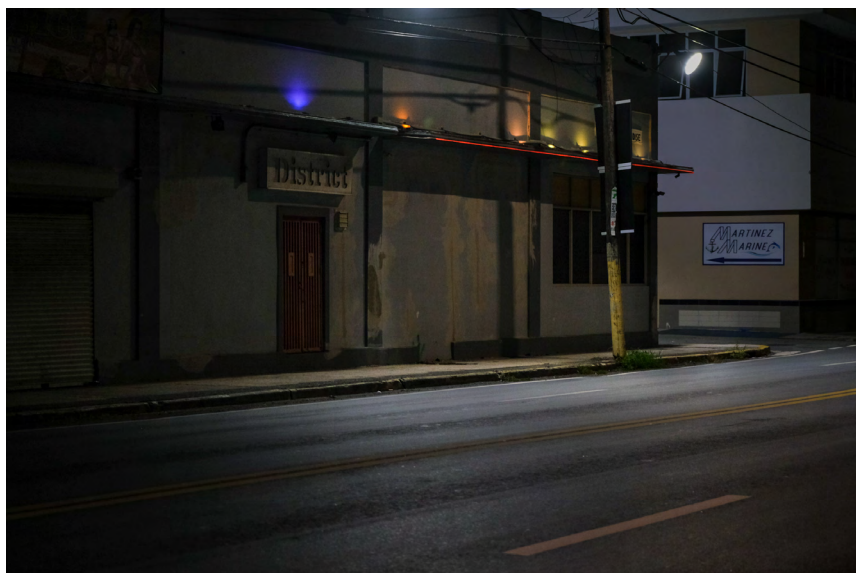


Fig. 1 The empty road and front doors of the adult entertainment club District in Santurce, Puerto Rico, closed due to COVID-19 shutdowns and curfew. Created 23 April 2020. Copyright: Gabriella N. Báez 2021 ©.



Fig. 2 Gala (she/they), twenty-four, is a stripper from Bayamón. She began dancing at the beginning of the year and was making a steady weekly income. When COVID-19 arrived, Gala found herself in a tough spot. “A lot of my colleagues have started selling digital content to maintain relationships with their clients and to have income, but unfortunately, because my family doesn’t know that I am a sex worker, that is not a possibility for me right now. I’ve been trying to figure out how to go about my work since the pandemic because I need to make money. Some of my colleagues have regular clients, but they’ve been working at the clubs way longer than I’ve had, and they’ve been able to negotiate and do business with them over the course of quarantine and social distancing orders. In my case, I’m new to this, I’m new to the club. I don’t have regular clients yet.” Created 24 April 2020. Copyright: Gabriella N. Báez 2021 ®.

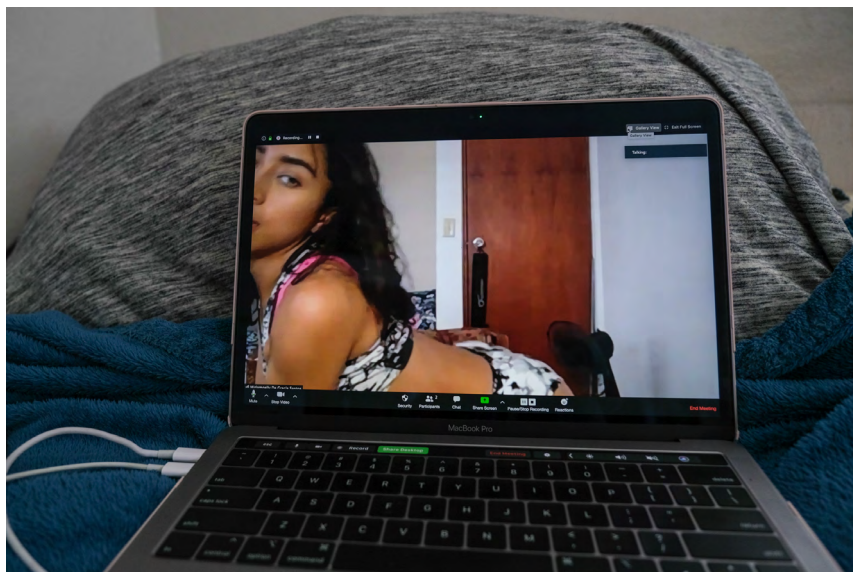


Fig. 3 Nairobi (she/her), twenty-five, is a sex worker from San Juan. Before the arrival of the coronavirus, she had already thought of opening up an OnlyFans page to sell content digitally. The pandemic only heightened her determination. "Before the pandemic, I was already selling digital content and it was like a side hustle. I could make some \$135 in a single day just selling pictures, but now that everyone is in quarantine there's been more clients. There's a lot of men that are single, that are alone, and they constantly ask for pictures. But again, it was never my main income and not being able to dance at the club has impacted me economically a lot. Working as a stripper is super hard now, almost imposible, unless you are one of the girls that has an OnlyFans page where they post their dances and get paid for that. A lot of girls are also not willing to go digital because they can't expose themselves like that." Created 25 April 2020.

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Fig. 4 Teresita and Akila, sex work advocates, discuss establishing a mutual aid network that members of the sex worker community can use to protect themselves and each other against the coronavirus. "I imagine it as an organization based on solidarity," one of the advocates explains, "to help build support networks between people that understand and live these experiences." Created 3 June 2020.

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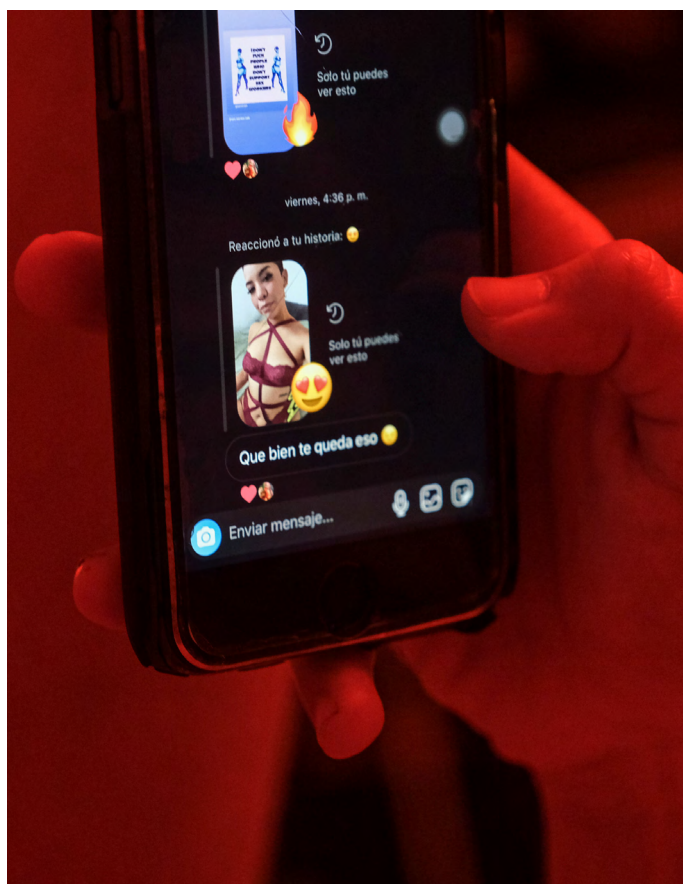


Fig. 5 Akila exchanges messages with one of her clients. The client's image has been blurred to protect their identity. Created 27 March 2020.
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