

# CAER: Co-creating a Collaborative Documentary about the Lives and Rights of Trans Latinx People Working in the Sex Industry in Queens, NYC

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Between October 2016 and December 2020, the SEXHUM (Sexual Humanitarianism: Migration, Sex Work and Trafficking) research project studied the relationship between migration, sex work, and human trafficking in the global sex industry, analysing migrants' own understanding and experiences of agency and exploitation. The project was characterised by collaboration with (migrant) sex workers' rights associations directly affected by the social phenomena studied in order to amplify their understandings and experiences. In this sense, the project challenged outsider views on the complex interplay between migration, sex work, exploitation, agency, and trafficking by focusing on the perspectives of migrant sex workers about how anti-trafficking and other humanitarian policies and interventions impact their lives and rights. SEXHUM builds on the concept of 'sexual humanitarianism',<sup>1</sup> referring to the ways in which humanitarian concerns, policies, and interventions about migrant groups and individuals constructed and targeted as vulnerable in relation to their sexual behaviour often legitimise harmful anti-sex work and immigration initiatives. SEXHUM studied the impact of sexual humanitarianism in eight strategic urban settings in Australia (Melbourne and Sydney), France (Marseille and Paris), Aotearoa New Zealand (Auckland and Wellington), and the United States (New York and Los Angeles) that are characterised by different policies on migration, sex work (criminalisation, regulation, decriminalisation), and human trafficking.

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<sup>1</sup> N Mai, *Mobile Orientations: An Intimate Autoethnography of Migration, Sex Work and Humanitarian Borders*, Chicago University Press, Chicago, 2018.

At the core of the project was a qualitative methodology based on long-term ethnographic observation allowing for a meaningful relationship to emerge between researchers and research participants, which formed the ethical precondition for the collection and analysis of emic data through qualitative interviews and collaborative ethnographic filmmaking. The inclusion of collaborative filmmaking as a key method was inspired by Jean Rouch's ethnofictions,<sup>2</sup> which involved research subjects as active producers and performers of their own interpretations, transcending established distinctions between fiction and non-fiction, participation and observation, as well as knowledge and emotions within conventional documentary filmmaking.

The film component of SEXHUM focused on the production of two collaborative ethnofictions in France and the United States, because these were the two most criminalised national project contexts, and because in both countries an organisation of migrant sex workers decided to become involved in the process of co-creative and collaborative filmmaking in the context of long-term fieldwork. The two SEXHUM films emerged from the collaborative writing of fictional characters and stories as a strategic way of expressing and analysing migrant sex workers' individual and collective understandings and experiences of agency and exploitation. They were devised, produced, and edited in collaboration and co-creation with associations representing immigrant sex worker communities, some of whose members also played the roles and stories they wrote.

In the United States, SEXHUM produced *CAER*,<sup>3</sup> a 61-minute ethnofiction resulting from the collaboration between Nicola Mai, the project's lead researcher, and the Colectivo Intercultural TRANSgrediendo (TRANSgrediendo Intercultural Collective), a grassroots association that advocates for the rights of migrant Latinx trans people in Queens, New York. The Colectivo decided to collaborate after the initial presentation of the idea to make the film following several months of fieldwork by the research team in New York, led by local researcher Heidi Hoefinger and supported by project PI and film director Nicola Mai. The reasons for the Colectivo's participation are best expressed in Liaam Winslet's own words: 'at the Colectivo we have always believed that the stories, the struggle, and the resistance need to be narrated by us, with us, and for us. Civil society should see in all its great complexity the reality we face as Latinxs, migrants, and sex workers in a country like the United States, where claiming our rights, our existence puts us at high risk.'

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<sup>2</sup> J Rouch, *Ciné-Ethnography*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2003.

<sup>3</sup> For more information, see the film website <https://caer-film.org>. *CAER* is available on demand for general viewing here: <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/caercaughten>. For academic screenings, the film is available on the Kanopy.com platform: <https://www.kanopy.com/en/product/12168699>.

The co-creation process was carried out through the organisation of about ten collective creative writing workshops at the Colectivo's facilities in Queens during the fall of 2018 and spring of 2019, resulting in the writing of the film's script. The foundational questions that guided this phase of the co-creation process were: if we were to make a film about the lives of the trans Latinx community in Queens, who would the protagonists be? What would they do? What would happen? Why?

As a result of this collaborative and co-creative process, the fictional story that forms the core of *CAER* shows the two protagonists, Rosa and Paloma, as they fight transphobic violence and police persecution, and defend their trafficking cases by applying for humanitarian protection (T-visa) in an increasingly anti-immigrant political environment in the United States. But the fictional story of Rosa and Paloma is only part of the film, which shows members of the Colectivo, including some of the actresses, fighting for their rights and lives through public demonstrations, while expressing their identities in a positive way during a drag show that allows them to counter their marginalisation and stigmatisation. The film also includes several documentary scenes during which members of the Colectivo discuss important issues concerning the trans Latinx community in Queens, such as police persecution, the difference between sex work and human trafficking, and the lack of employment alternatives to sex work.

The film was shot in September 2019 and edited in accordance with the collaborative scenario between November 2019 and October 2020, including an intermediate collective feedback session in January 2020, during which we discussed changes and improvements. During the final editing phase, the fictional story and documentary sections were framed within selected excerpts from the

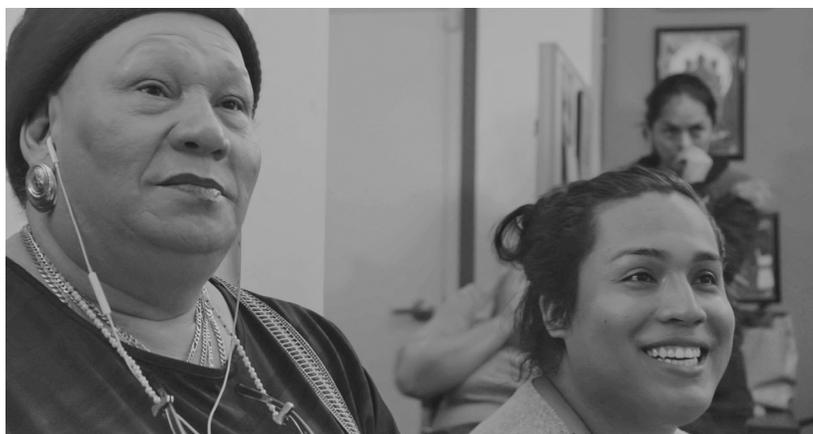


Image 1: Still from *CAER*: Lorena Borjas and Liaam Winslet watching the first version of the film during a co-creative editing feedback session.

filmed editing feedback session in order to include discussion among Colectivo members about their collaboration in the filmmaking process and the story and characters they wrote in relation to their personal and collective experiences.

*CAER* is first and foremost a tribute to the work and legacy of Lorena Borjas, the mother of Latinx trans women living in Queens and founder of the Colectivo Intercultural TRANSgrediendo. Lorena was one of the first victims of COVID-19 in New York and passed away on 30 March 2020. It is to Lorena and her empowering legacy that the film is dedicated.

Our film was screened at several international film festivals, where it was praised for having presented, amplified, and celebrated the realities and voices of trans Latinx people. It was a key and strategic part of the broader research project framing it because the findings, publications, and films resulting from SEXHUM all aimed to ensure that the communities and individuals directly concerned owned the terms of their representations across the project's outputs and dissemination activities. SEXHUM's overall outputs and findings highlight the strategic role of sex-gendering and racialisation in the sexual humanitarian targeting, control, and bordering of migrant groups, while excluding non-cis migrants from humanitarian and legal protection.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, *CAER* and the other project publications and findings in the US underline the great complexity in which trans Latinx migrants working in the sex industry find themselves fighting for their lives and rights. They do so by highlighting the danger of extending sexual humanitarian bordering and repression to trans Latinx migrant sex workers, while also emphasising the need for more resources and services tailored to their specific experiences, particularly when they are designed with a health or legal focus and run by trans community members, as is the case with the Colectivo.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> N Mai *et al.*, 'Migration, Sex Work and Trafficking: The Racialized Bordering Politics of Sexual Humanitarianism', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 44, issue 9, 2021, pp. 1607–1628, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2021.1892790>.

<sup>5</sup> A Fehrenbacher *et al.*, 'Transgender People and Human Trafficking: Intersectional Exclusion of Transgender Migrants and People of Color from Anti-trafficking Protection in the United States', *Journal of Human Trafficking*, vol. 6, issue 2, 2020, pp. 82–194, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2020.1690116>.