



## The prostitute, the city, and the virus

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### ABSTRACT

The present article has two goals. First, it seeks to establish, for non-specialized readers, the history of what we label “hygenization” in Brazilian urban and health policies and their intersections with the sale of sex and the prevention of pandemic disease. Secondly, we aim to show how concepts in contemporary Covid-19 vocabulary such as “social distancing” and “quarantine” have historical roots in morally driven (anti)prostitution policies, which illuminate the racialized dimensions of State intervention in times of public health crises. Finally, we aim to inform readers as to how the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic are being met within the context of this history, particularly by Brazil’s organized sex workers. By necessity and location, in this time of quarantine, our focus is on the city of Rio de Janeiro, which has historically provided an example for what has been called “the Brazilian model of urbanization”. We begin our article with a brief overview of this model and then proceed to a historical look at two prior pandemics, how they were dealt with and, in particular, their intersections with sex work. We finish by analyzing what the COVID-19 pandemic may mean for sex workers in Brazil in light of the country’s ambiguous public health traditions.

### 1. Introduction: prostitution and pandemics in Belindia

Brazil has been an odd case in global history since at least the beginning of the 20th Century. Simultaneously understood to be “western” and “non-western”, it is a “puzzle” that exists on (or perhaps constitutes part of) the “borderland of the Western World” (Da Matta and Hess, 1995). Its Cold War nickname – Belindia (Belgium in the middle of India) – expresses this ambiguity well (O Estado de São Paulo, 2017), which hasn’t been much altered by its recent identification as one of the BRIC nations. As political scientist Oliver Stuenkel points out, the country is, at most, a “partly Western” emerging power that continues to strongly identify with its “non-Western, underdeveloped side” (Stuenkel, 2011: 194).

Stuenkel’s qualification is particularly apt because it puts the finger upon the essential characteristic that makes a “Western” nation: more

than cultural affinities, it is a question of wealth, power, and relative economic development. This is well reflected in the field work of one of the authors of the present article, who has interviewed many foreigners on this very topic (Blanchette). “Gringos” often point to economics when defining Brazil as “the most Western of non-Western nations and the most non-Western of Western nations”.<sup>1</sup>

Whether or not Europe, Japan, China, and the U.S. consider Brazil to be “Western”, however, the country has historically oriented itself, as best it can, towards the U.S. and Western Europe. However, “oriented” does not mean “blindly copy” or even “able to copy”. Nowhere are the contradictions of “Belindia” more apparent than in the intersections between urban policy, public health, and prostitution,<sup>2</sup> particularly in the city of Rio de Janeiro, historically the country’s first metropolis and still Brazil’s “post card to the world”. The on-going COVID-19 pandemic has cast these contradictions into sharp relief as the Bolsonaro government

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<sup>1</sup> Quote taken from ethnographic fieldwork among Anglophone sex tourists in the Copacabana region of Rio de Janeiro.

<sup>2</sup> The terms “sex work” and “prostitution” will be used interchangeably in this article to refer to the commercial sale of physical sexual/affective acts. We do not include sex work such as phone sex, pornography, or camming in the definition used in the present article, but such things as erotic massage or being a “paid companion” (with a sexual relationship implied) are included.

has mirrored many aspects of Donald Trump's response to the pandemic by belittling its gravity, denying responsibility, dismissing science and mask wearing, while promoting the use of unproven drugs and sowing discord in a politically polarized climate (Malta et al., 2020; Ortega and Orsini 2020). At the same time, however, Brazil's historical approach to pandemics – most particularly its response to HIV-AIDS – has informed resistances at the grass-roots level. These have the potential to mobilize into wider forms of contestation regarding the proper role of the State in securing health and social justice for all citizens. As a group of scholars and activists, centered in an Urban Policy Studies Institute in Rio de Janeiro and dedicated to ethnographic and historical research on sex work and public policy and collaborating with the organized sex worker movement in Brazil over the past 15 years, we are charting how these contradictions develop while helping sex workers to organize for survival and political power.

The present article is being written almost in “real time” as events unfold in Brazil. As of October 2020, Brazil had registered more than 155,000 Covid-19 deaths and 5.3 million cases. The Minister of Health, Eduardo Pazuello – an active duty military general with no health training – was just diagnosed with the virus, making him the 12th cabinet member to contract it, in addition to President Bolsonaro himself.<sup>3</sup> This news comes the day after President Bolsonaro contradicted and retracted Minister Pazuello's official memo and statements that the Ministry would be buying millions of doses of a vaccine (produced by China) that is in the final stages of testing in São Paulo, where one of Bolsonaro's main adversaries is governor.<sup>4</sup> Everyday, new information comes in or new policies are announced that supersede what was the state of affairs a few days earlier<sup>5</sup> as politics, moralities, xenophobia, racism and a disdain for science guide the nation's response. As such, the present article is a necessarily preliminary look at the intersection between sex work, public health, urban policy in Brazil in syn- and diachronic terms.

We have two goals. First, we want to briefly establish for non-specialized readers the history of what we label “hygienization” in Brazilian urban and health policies and their intersections with the sale of sex; secondly, we want inform readers as to how the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic are being met within the context of this history, particularly by Brazil's organized sex workers. By necessity and location, in this time of quarantine, our focus is on the city of Rio de Janeiro. However, it should be noted that Rio, Brazil's capital until 1960, has for most of the country's history been synonymous with its urban and public health policies and has thus formed the basis for what Brazilian urbanist Maurício de Abreu has described as a Brazilian model of urbanization (Abreu, 1987).

We start our article with a brief overview of this model and then proceed to a historical look at two prior “plagues”, how they were dealt with and, in particular, their intersections with sex work. In this section,

<sup>3</sup> <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2020/10/ministro-da-saude-eduardo-pazuello-recebe-diagnostico-de-covid-19.shtml>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www1.folha.uol.com.br/cotidiano/2020/10/pazuello-enviou-um-dia-antes-ao-diretor-do-butantan-oficio-confirmando-compra-da-vacina-corona-vac.shtml>.

<sup>5</sup> There are innumerable examples of this, yet perhaps the most consequential was Bolsonaro's announcement of a Program called Renda Brasil, a program that would permit maintaining much of the emergency funding to families provided during the pandemic and was billed as an expansion of the previous Worker's Party program, *Bolsa Família*. Nonetheless, austerity measures put in place in the previous government made it impossible to finance the program without either reducing retirement funds – the Economic Minister Paulo Guedes' suggestion – or removing restrictions put in place on social spending through a controversial constitutional amendment. Since there was no way to reconcile the neoliberal agendas with Bolsonaro's desire to maintain his increased popularity through the promise of such programs, he cancelled it, saying it was, “prohibited to say the words “RendaBrasil”. <https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2020-09-15/bolsonaro-desiste-de-criar-renda-brasil-e-ameaca-dar-cartao-vermelho-a-equipe-de-paulo-guedes.html>.

we note how concepts so common in contemporary Covid-19 vocabulary such as “social distancing” and “quarantine” have historical roots in morally driven policies in prostitution contexts that do much to illuminate the racialized dimensions of parastatal (Amar 2013) intervention in times of public health crises. We then analyze what the pandemic has meant for sex workers in Brazil in light of the country's ambiguous public health traditions. We conclude by looking at Brazilian sex worker mobilizations on-going in the face of COVID-19.

Our observations are based on long-term (15+ years) qualitative research using archival analysis and participant-observation ethnography. This latter methodology has been employed in four specific spheres: street level prostitution (i.e. brothels, strolls, saunas, massage parlors, etc.), political ethnography in the organized sex workers' rights movements (most particularly in the Brazilian Prostitutes' Network), political ethnography in state health and security apparatuses (especially in the committees and civil/state partnerships created to prepare for, organize, and deal with the results of the mega sporting events of 2012–2016 in Rio de Janeiro), and in the public health system, particularly the clinics and hospitals dedicated to dealing with HIV and other STDs. Our archival analysis has concentrated particularly on the extensive documentary collection of the Brazilian Prostitution Network, as well as more general readings of the questions involving hygienization/gentrification in the context (for a more in-depth summary of these analyses, see Abia & Davida, 2013; *Da Prostituição, Forthcoming*; Blanchette et al., 2014; Blanchette, Mitchell & Murray 2017; Blanchette & Schettini, 2017; Murray, 2015; Murray et al., 2018).

Data regarding sex workers' reactions to the COVID crisis has been gathered through three methods: engagement with and monitoring of the primary sex worker organization social media channel currently active in Brazil (a whatsapp group specifically created by sex worker organizations to organize reactions and mutual aid in the face of the pandemic); ground-level political ethnographic work with CasaNem and Vila Mimosa sex workers; regular rounds of downtown sex work venues conducted on foot and by bicycle, briefly interviewing workers while mutually masked, in the open air, and maintaining 2 m of distance (mostly to get or update contact information) and follow-up open-ended interviews via whatsapp. Observatório ethnographer Thaddeus Blanchette has made over a dozen of these field trips since social distancing began in March. We want to remind readers that there is a history of struggle against stigma in the Brazilian prostitutes' movement (Lenz 2008) and a good part of this struggle was welcomed, supported and empowered by and through the field of public health, particularly in the late 20th century (Murray et al., 2018). The very concept of *health* can expand during times of crisis, contemplating positive recognition as the essence of health, be it emotional, physical, or social. The *care of the self*, extensively historicized by Foucault (2005, 2006), returns as a debate under the demand that *care for oneself* implies *care for the other*. Under these conditions, one can think of both comfort (of a social position, of a house, or of the streets of a neighborhood) and of social valorization expressed through the treatments experienced in the most diverse everyday situations.

However, Brazil's history also holds a darker lesson regarding public health and prostitution, one in which those who sell sex (particularly women) are understood to be especially contagious, potentially dangerous and needing to be controlled and contained (Carrara 1996). On this side of Belinida, prostitutes are lumped together with a (poor, black and brown) Brazilian majority understood to be an agencyless mass, affectable but not effective, which needs to be tutored and even occasionally violently pruned if the country is to reach its long-dreamt of goal of being an unqualified part of the West (Ferreira da Silva, 2007; Fischer, 2008; Valladares, 2000, 2005).

Which Brazil will become dominant in the current pandemic is still an open question at the moment this article goes to the editor (October 22nd, 2020). Organized sex workers, however, a politically active and particularly stigmatized population that have historically occupied a strategic position in public health reactions to pandemic disease, are a

group that should be carefully watched as the COVID-19 drama unfolds if we want an answer to this question.

## 2. Hygenization: public health and social distancing in Rio de Janeiro

Rio de Janeiro began its existence as a “European” city in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, in a context of Great Power conflicts for control over the trade routes of the South Atlantic and, in particular, the African slave trade (Alencastro, 2000). During the colonial period, Rio’s political economy revolved around two principal focuses: international trade and national/colonial administration. Historian Manolo Florentino emphasizes the city’s relative lack of direct economic production, pointing out that, to keep the city supplied, Portuguese sugar merchants had to be ordered by the Portuguese king to stop off in Rio on their way to the more lucrative sugar colonies of the Brazilian northeast (Florentino, 2014). Possessing one of the best natural harbors of the South Atlantic, however, Rio became increasingly important to international trade following the Brazilian gold rush of the 18th century. In 1763, it became the capital of the Portuguese Empire’s “State of Brazil” and, finally, the capital of the Empire itself in 1808, as the Portuguese Court fled to the city to escape Napoleon Bonaparte’s armies.

Historians generally understand this moment as the foundational mark for modern Brazil (Malerba, 2000; Morel, 2016; Souza, 2000), emphasizing the simultaneous opening of the colony’s ports to international trade, which transformed Rio into one of the principal cities of the South Atlantic and an almost obligatory stop-over for shipping heading around the Capes of Good Hope and Horn. As gold poured out of Rio (helping to finance the British industrial revolution), African slaves poured in and were distributed throughout the hinterlands of South America (Alencastro, 2000). The profits accumulated in this trade were partially spent on the importation of European luxury goods (whose traces were widely encountered by archeologists during the urban renewal projects leading up to the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympic Games (Veja, 2013)). Rio became *the* “European” city of Brazil, a showcase for the nation and the world. This status only intensified with Brazil’s transition to independence in 1822, when Rio became the capital of the new nation.

But at the base of this “Europeanization” lay slavery. And – unlike the case of Bristol in the U.K. or Boston in the U.S. – Rio could not hold this fact at a comfortable distance. Africans passed through its port daily. They were employed in every aspect of the city’s economy. Their cultural and even political influence (at least in the realm of street politics) was enormous and at times appeared almost overwhelming. And what Gilberto Freyre would later label their “biological influence” could be seen in almost every Carioca<sup>6</sup> face. Black women – slave and free – were particularly important in this context, given that the slave trade was heavily skewed to the importation of men and there were relatively few white women of any class (Freyre, 1933). Slave brothels were an ubiquitous feature of 19th century Rio de Janeiro (Graham, 1991).

With the arrival of Abolition in Brazil in 1888 and the consequent overthrow of the Brazilian Empire a year later, the capital of the new Republic of the United States of Brazil began a prolonged period of urban crisis and renewal. (Abreu, 1987). To simplify a complex and nuanced situation, the problem was that Rio retained all the architectural and social baggage of a semi-feudal slaveocratic metropolis when it wanted to be seen as a Paris of the tropics, a rival to Buenos Aires and Montevideo (see Fig. 1). With the collapse of Brazilian agriculture brought on by the end of slavery, a wave of free black migration hit Rio, which did not possess an infrastructure capable of adequately housing, feeding, employing, or policing its new masses. At the same time, the Republic began to open Brazil to mass migration from Europe, believing that “whitening” the country’s population would pave the way to establishing

Brazil as a modern nation state along Western European lines. Poor European immigrants also began to flood into the city (Schwarcz, 1993).

Rio’s impoverished masses were agglomerated in tenement slums, generally dilapidated buildings from the colonial period stitched together with ad hoc constructions into giant complexes known as *cortiços*. These housed almost 25% of Rio’s population in the last decade of the 19th century (Santucci, 1997). One *cortiço*, the infamous “Pig’s Head” located in the port zone, reputedly had over 4000 residents (Benchimol, 1990; Carvalho, 1990; Valladares, 2000). Prostitution was rife in the city, possibly due to the imbalance in the male-to-female ratio of the population and the general lack of work for the poorer strata of the population. In fact, the sale of sex was understood to be so common among the female lower classes that the doctors and lawyers who investigated the city’s “plague” of prostitution at the time qualified any independent female worker – flower saleswomen, washerwomen, actresses, kiosk clerks, etc. – as belonging to the ranks of “clandestine prostitutes” (Blanchette & Schettini, 2017; Engel, 1990).

While much has been written about the relatively upper-class sex working women of this period, known as *francesas* (French women), little is known about the vast majority of poor women and men who sold sex. The *cortiços*, however, were seen at the time as their universe, where they mixed in with *capoeiristas*,<sup>7</sup> dock workers, itinerant laborers, washing women, and other “disorderly bums” (Gazeta de Notícias, 5/21/1893, APUD (Santucci, 2008)). The *cortiços* were a world unto themselves, often directly opposed to State authority of any sort. As historian Jane Santucci describes them, they were:

A territory that was closed to the police, who were prevented from entering even to resolve internal conflicts, such as fights between residents. On these occasions, as soon as they saw the police, the people immediately forgot their quarrels in order to unite and push out the authorities. These were fights in which everyone participated – men, women, and children – furiously attacking in defense of local autonomy. (Ibid: 58).

As such, the *cortiços* were seen as both a physical and moral threat to urban health. With the advent of the Republic, Brazil’s first generation of urban planners began a protracted campaign to demolish them (and a significant portion of the old Rio) under the banner of urban sanitation and the struggle against the city’s perennial smallpox and yellow fever epidemics (Cukierman, 2007). As many authors have pointed out (Santucci, 2008; Abreu, 1987; Chalhoub, 1996; Lowy, 2005), this campaign cannot be understood simply in terms of physical improvements to the city, although it was always carefully wrapped in the rhetoric of defeating Rio’s many epidemics. Using the term employed by its authors, this “hygenization” of Rio de Janeiro was as much social as physical, and depended upon separating the “dangerous classes” (particularly the poor brown and black cariocas) from “proper citizens”, envisioned as white and bourgeois.

Thus, while the city’s port district, Downtown and the neighborhood of Lapa were lavishly made over according to Hausmannian models, little attention was paid to the perennial urban housing crisis. *Cortiço* residents were pushed into the streets and, finally, up into the hills of Rio de Janeiro, founding the first of the *favela* slums that today garnish the city.

<sup>7</sup> Practitioners of the Afro-Brazilian martial art of *capoeira*, criminalized during the period and long understood to be the reigning kings of the carioca streets and slave hierarchies (Santucci, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> “Carioca” is the adjective form for people and things from Rio de Janeiro.



**Fig. 1.** Angelo Agostini's widely published political cartoon of 1896 encapsulates the dilemma faced by an urbanizing and Republican Rio de Janeiro desirous of the title of "first capital of South America". Pigs run the epidemic-haunted barnyard while properly European Buenos Aires and Montevideo look on in disgust. A spray-gun, synonymous at the time with public sanitation measures, hangs unused on the wall of the pigpen. It is labeled "public resistance". Source: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/10/Angelo\\_Agostini-Pires.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/10/Angelo_Agostini-Pires.jpg).

In fact, the first hillside slum which would give the *favelas* their name,<sup>8</sup> established on the Morro da Providência, literally sprang up in what was the back yard of the "Pigs Head", one of the first great *cortiços* to be demolished.

As Santucci documents, in the period stretching from 1890 to 1905, Rio was rocked by periodic revolts in the face of this "top down" urban renewal conducted in the name of physical and social health, culminating in the most famous rebellion of them all: the "Vaccine Revolt" of October–November 1904. The spark which ignited 5 days of street fighting in the city and an abortive coup d'état was the Republic's Mandatory Vaccination Law, which authorized the use of the police in order to forcibly vaccinate the population against smallpox. The revolt was swiftly crushed and its results were ambiguous. Mandatory vaccination was repealed, only to be reinstated five years later after a smallpox epidemic killed 9000 cariocas (Meade, 1986; Needel, 1987).

More importantly, following the revolt, hygienization picked up steam, culminating in the establishment of what urbanist Maurício de Abreu describes as the Brazilian model of urbanization. This can be characterized as a city divided into three parts: a wealthy center and south zone; a suburbanized working class; with *favelas* and other "areas of exception" sprinkled throughout (Abreu, 1987). In truth, this model can be even further simplified – as Cariocas are wont to do – into the two antagonistic, socially distanced, and yet complimentary emic categories:

<sup>8</sup> There are many conflicting stories about how this settlement came to be named "favela", but most trace it back to soldiers returning from the Canudos campaign, where the Republic brutally put down a messianic rebellion in the Brazilian northeast (Cunha, 1902). Supposedly, the veterans of this war were detained in Rio de Janeiro while awaiting the government to pay out their war bonuses (Santucci, 2008). Joining refugees from the urban hygienization campaign and dock workers, they founded the Morro da Providência colony, naming it after the hill upon which the Brazilian Army Headquarters and principal artillery batteries stood. It must be understood, in this context, that the Morro da Providência stands in relation to the then Ministry of War as the Morro da Favela stood in relation to the city of Canudos. "Favela" can thus be understood to imply a threat. This was not lost on reporters of the time, one of whom claimed that "following the Canudos War, the most daring delinquents began to inhabit the top of the hill, calling it Favela, because in that redoubt no police could enter without being defeated" (Gazeta de Notícias, 5/21/1903, APUD Santucci, 2008: 58).

*morro* (hill) and *asfalto* (asphalt). On the "asphalt", the municipal laws regarding planning, hygiene, fire control, and sanitation more-or-less apply, or at least are applicable. The "hill" (an allusion to *favelas'* traditional hilltop locations), however, is a world unto itself. Much like the old *cortiços*, police can only enter in well-armed bands and local authority overrules municipal law. And although *favelas* are traditionally understood to be "hill", there are many other places and people in Rio de Janeiro which also occupy a similar position, most notoriously the demi-monde of sex work.

In the decades following the Vaccine Revolt, prostitution became increasingly subject to police control in a model of non-regulated regulation. The earlier urban model in which sex work was more-or-less evenly distributed throughout the city was replaced by one in which prostitutes would have an official place; a quarantine zone. Dubbed "The Mangue", this was situated on the outskirts of town in a section of recently drained marshland. Most sex workers – particularly black, brown and poor white – were forcibly removed by police to the new district, which became synonymous with prostitution and was provided with its own venereal disease hospital (Simões, 2010; Caulfield, 2000; Leite, 2005; Moraes, 2006). Meanwhile, brothels catering to the elite were allowed to continue to operate in the now Bohemian districts of Lapa and Glória.

In both cases, however, prostitution was subject to an official, unwritten set of laws, codified in judicial decisions and in police power. Legally, houses of prostitution were prohibited under Brazilian law. "Women's boarding houses", however, were allowed if their owners were female, they paid a licensing fee to the city, and registered all boarders with the police and public health authorities (with obligatory gynecological exams). Thus, in both the Mangue and elsewhere, Rio de Janeiro created a form of French-style regulated prostitution without ever formally legalizing brothels. Police were ultimately the "pimps" in this scheme as they were the authorities who had the real power to say where, when, and how the sale of sex could take place. Licensing fees – as well as numerous bribes and "tips" for extra service – went directly into the force's pocket, culminating in the establishment of a police precinct specialized in overseeing "Popular Parties and Entertainments" which, in effect, administered sex work in Rio de Janeiro (Blanchette & Schettini, 2017; Blanchette, Mitchell & Murray, 2017; Chaumont et al., 2017; Engel, 1990; Leite, 2005).

This model of sex work organization would, *mutandis mutatis*,

continue in operation for most of the 20th century and is arguably functioning even today. While the days of “boarding houses” being officially overseen by the police are long gone, the authors’ fieldwork, carried out over the last two decades, has made it clear that police and other carioca authorities are still “silent partners” in almost all of our city’s commercial sex venues.

The overriding objective of this model has been one of both physical and moral quarantine and “social distancing”, with sex work portrayed as an integral part of the urban landscape (Saint Augustine and Aquinas’ proverbial “necessary sewer under the palace” (Richards, 1991: 118)), but also a “zone of exception” in terms of laws and morality, which needed to be kept under firm police control and set apart from the bourgeois world of family and propriety.

Sueann Caulfield points out (Caulfield, 2000) and our present day ethnographic work confirms that this “corralling” of prostitution has never been wholly successful. In fact, as Blanchette & Schettini remark (Blanchette and Schettini, 2017), no region in which prostitution has ever established itself in Carioca history has ever been made “family safe” again. Even in the 21st century, one of the main downtown “strolls” is located precisely where early 19th century Rio had its principal slave brothels, right between two of the city’s most famous parks and its largest popular commercial district. Anthropologist Soraya Simões has described how the Mangue never fulfilled its role as Rio’s only red light district and how later attempts to shut it down only resulted in its migration and transformation into today’s Vila Mimosa, Rio’s largest concentration of commercial sex venues (Simões, 2010).

But for most of the past century, sex work in Rio de Janeiro has continued operating under the control of the police, either directly or indirectly (Blanchette, Mitchell, & Murray, 2017), being largely restricted to certain areas. To a degree, sex work (though not necessarily, curiously, sex workers) itself has been treated as a pandemic disease in carioca history: finding it everywhere, municipal authorities have sought to quarantine it to certain times, spaces, and bodies, keeping these at a distance from “good families”. This paradigm began to change, however, with two simultaneous events in the 1980s: the end of the Brazilian civil-military dictatorship and the explosion of the AIDS/HIV crisis, as part of processes that Jeffery Weeks has referred to as a balancing between “reform and control” or “reform as a means of control” (Weeks, 2010). In the next section, we will explore how the eruption of the AIDS/HIV crisis in the waning years of the civil-military dictatorship created opportunities for Brazilian sex workers to challenge the barriers of the socially-distancing moral quarantine to which their work was subjected.

### 3. AIDS and the Brazilian Prostitutes’ movement

The beginning of the AIDS epidemic was characterized by widespread fear and blame constructed and spread by scientific and media discourses that in turn shaped the ways in which government and civil society responses to the epidemic took shape (Triechler 1987). As a virus transmitted by blood, semen and vaginal secretions, it quickly became associated with certain subjects, who, alongside with their practices, were classified as “dangerous” and “risk groups”; that is, those who were members of populations considered to be the most exposed to the risk of HIV infection. The criterion most employed to define “at risk groups” was that these fell outside of a certain norm (heteronormativity, to be precise).

As was the case around the world, in Brazil the government responded slowly to the urgency of the epidemic. The country’s first case of AIDS was reported in 1982 and rapidly transformed the country’s political, sexual and public health landscapes. Civil society mobilization around the HIV epidemic began alongside a much larger and powerful sanitary reform movement that was key in push to establish health as a universal right in the country’s 1988 democratic constitution (Daniel and Parker 1991; Parker, 2003; Trevisan, 2000). At first, the federal government’s lack of response to the first cases of AIDS contrasted with civil

society mobilizations, particularly in São Paulo, not only the site of the most reported AIDS cases as compared to any other city, but also the center of Brazil’s recent gay liberation movement and opposition to the dictatorship (Parker, 2003) and the first documented sex worker mobilization against police violence in 1979.

When the epidemic first emerged, it was primarily concentrated among men who have sex with men (MSM) and intravenous drug users (IDUs) (Barbosa Jr., 2009), yet by 1987, sex workers were also fighting the stigma of having been identified as one of the primary “risk groups”. They would come to occupy a critical political and cultural position at the beginning of the Brazilian epidemic. On the one hand, they were still understood to be subjects of sanitary control and intervention. On the other, however, sex workers became fierce public critics of the deadly consequences of epidemic research and prevention models centered upon stigmatizing and shaming populations (de Zalduondo, 1991).

One sex worker in particular, Gabriela Leite, who had led protests against police violence in São Paulo in 1978 and had worked in Vila Mimosa (the successor of Rio’s Mangue), would come to occupy a central role in the defining the country’s response to the epidemic (Leite 1996). In the late 1980s, Gabriela was working at the Institute for Religious Studies (ISER), leading a project called, “Prostitution and Civil Rights.” She was invited to Brazil’s capital, Brasília, to discuss a national HIV prevention project – PREVINA – with sex workers, prisoners and drug users. Many people from the sanitary reform movement had taken jobs within the Ministry of Health during the redemocratization process, and as such, despite initial missteps and silences in the mid 1980s, by 1988 were directly engaging with civil society. In this fashion, the previous, “traditional” model of public health promulgated under hygienization, which saw the “unfavored” masses as agencyless human objects upon which unilateral action could be taken, eroded as part of the broader process of constructing Brazil’s Universal Health Care System (SUS).

Despite a climate of broad civil society mobilization and the emerging sex worker movement, however, the original project design of PREVINA presented a conservative and morally charged vision of prostitution (typical of the broad Brazilian political Left at the time), associating it with exploitation and suffering (Murray et al., 2018). In this way it was remarkably similar to the discourses surrounding prostitution at the turn of the twentieth century, employed by earlier generations of urban hygienizers in that it linked prostitution to poverty and the sexual exploitation of minors.

The direction of the project drastically changed, however, with the involvement of Gabriela Leite and Lourdes Barreto, a leader of the sex worker movement from the Northeastern state of Pará. These women co-organized a national meeting of sex workers in 1987. Though not the focus of the event, AIDS prominently figured in its discussions, focusing in particular on sex workers’ resistance to the “risk group” category. As Enir Gonçalves, one of the sex workers at the 1987 meeting was quoted as saying, “Enough of talking about us as a risk group! We use condoms. I am a woman of the life [referring to prostitution] and a human being like any other. I deserve respect” (Jornal do Brasil 1987). Sex worker criticisms contemplated not only their occupation as part of a larger universe of jobs (looking at what working conditions were capable of promoting preventive practices and prevent various types of abuse) but, above all, a necessary recognition that prostitution, as a stigmatized behavior, should be interpreted as *work* and, therefore, be *respected*.

Two years later, at another national meeting focused on “AIDS and Prostitution”, sex workers rebelled against the exclusivity of medical specialists discourse. In the *Beijo da Rua* (a sex worker newspaper) article about the event, Gabriela Leite stated that she “felt that people were distant from everything and that the doctors were, of course, involved in a debate with themselves. So the next morning, I came back in a low cut black dress, high heels, exaggerated make-up and I talked about my life” (Lenz 1990:4). Gabriela’s intervention reversed more than the meeting’s dynamic: it set the tone for a partnership with the Ministry of Health that respected the protagonist role of sex workers, crafting a public policy response that placed sexuality, pleasure, and respect for sex work at the

center of the sanitationist discourse cast in Caroca emic terms, the *morro* and the *asfalto*<sup>9</sup> had met and the “doctors” of the asphalt had conceded that, not only could they learn from the “whores” of the hill, an equal partnership needed to be established between the two groups in order to effectively combat HIV.

As part of this process, adapting to both national and international pressures from a variety of social movements and AIDS researchers, the Brazilian Ministry of Health adopted the concept of *vulnerability*, eschewing the concept of *risk groups*, which became less and less relevant in the plans to contain the epidemic. First developed in the context of HIV research by Jonathan Mann, and expanded upon by Brazilian researchers (Mann et al., 1993; Paiva et al., 2012) vulnerability provided a framework for politicizing the epidemic and including citizenship as a core component of HIV prevention. *Vulnerability* made it possible to better see, and therefore intervene, in the social and cultural contexts in which vulnerable subjects were inserted. Foundational concepts of the early organizing of around the epidemic (Daniel and Parker 1991; De Souza and Herbert, 1994, “solidarity” and “mobilization” came to be understood as central parts of the government response. Individual, collective, programmatic, structural, and institutional vulnerabilities were highlighted in State interventions and research, and all forms of discrimination that “vulnerable” groups were subjected to started to be treated as an integral part of the response (Paiva et al., 2012; Parker 2003). Many new frameworks for addressing the epidemic were forged and new “world-views” created – a process that seems to often occur on extreme occasions (such as our present COVID 19 crisis) when the unknown manifests itself as a *trickster* or a *ghost in the machine*.

Over the following two decades, social movements would continue to make decisive contributions to the struggle against HIV. The virus itself forced a reorientation of politics, moving away from being a “gay disease” as the international media first called it, and becoming increasingly seen as something that also affected children, mothers, and fathers. The Brazilian family’s sexuality was exposed to public scrutiny and it was found that, in practice, its was not necessarily so different from that of the so-called *vulnerable groups*. Apparently, the *asfalto* wasn’t so far removed from the *morro* in its sexual and moral habits, a finding that overturned the hygienizationist presumptions of the previous century’s public health policies.

City, work, gender, sexuality, and stigma were thus brought together in one package, re-situating the debate on HIV/AIDS prevention in Brazil, a country which came to be seen as a global example of best practices in its combat and treatment of HIV/AIDS, thanks to its mobilization of society and, in particular, the members of so-called “risk groups.” The sex worker movement continued to be a foundational component of the country’s HIV/AIDS response, strategically leveraging aspects of “puta subjectivity” in Brazil to mobilize allies, media attention and State power in favor of prostitute rights. Referred to as “puta politics” by Murray (2015), this is a form of politics invested in the transformative potential of what is often perceived of as immorality. Constantly disrupting and blurring divisions between “asphalt” institutional structures and the realities of the populations occupying the streets and hills, puta politics did, on a national level, what Gabriela Leite had done at the first AIDS and Prostitution meeting when she showed up in her low cut dress and demanded to be heard. Important gains were made such as the inclusion of “sex professional” in the Brazilian Ministry of Labor and Employment’s Classification of Occupations in 2002 (Simões, 2010b). Brazil also achieved widespread international attention when it refused more than \$40 million in US funds because USAID, the US’s development arm, demanded that organizations receiving said funds condemn prostitution as a precondition.

<sup>9</sup> Literally “the hills” and “the asphalt”, referencing Rio’s favela-covered hills and it’s more westernized urbanized valleys and coastlines.

#### 4. Reaction and retrenchment

Over the past 10 years however, Brazil’s leadership in the AIDS response and, in particular, its solidarity and community mobilization based approaches to health have slowly begun to fade. This has been due to many complex and overlapping factors, yet two in particular stand out and have been highlighted by activists and scholars (Corrêa, 2016; Seffner and Parker 2016).

First, the aggressive neoliberalization of Brazil’s economy that began in the 1990s has continued with increasing force while the country is confronting one of its worst economic crisis in decades. This has resulted in a decrease of federal investment in public health overall and changes in the ways in which the HIV/AIDS program was funded, which subsequently meant less funding for the program and for the NGOs that were at the forefront of the Brazil’s social response to the epidemic (Seffner and Parker 2016). A second factor has been the increased moralization of all aspects of politics, as conservative and evangelical religious forces in Brazil have gained power, pressuring the leftist Workers’ Party government to censor HIV prevention campaigns for gays in 2012 and sex workers in 2013 (Abia & Davida, 2013; Murray et al., 2018). Without projects, many sex worker organizations also drastically reduced their actions and, consequently, reach.

These processes culminated in the election of far-right president Jair Bolsonaro in 2018, but sex workers were some of the first groups to feel the pressure of both gentrification and police repression even under the previous Workers’ Party government (Amar 2013; Blanchette et al., 2014). Aside from an increase in police violence directed at sex workers, there have been numerous small, but symbolic changes such as removing the word *puta* from the CBO (Abia & Davida, 2013). Most importantly, in the context of sex work, prostitution is being pushed back into a quarantined space under the control of *parastatal formations*. We use this term in the manner pioneered by Paul Amar: “forms of public-private partnership, NGO mobilization, and development of expertise” (Amar, 2013:7). In thinking about prostitution in Rio, this also includes informal and illegal partnerships, particularly with the paramilitary militias that also function as state auxiliary forces, beholden to conservative political actors in the Federal, State, and Municipal fields.

As Amar notes, however, the conservative moralities now flexing their political muscle in Brazil are deeply ingrained in both police and paramilitary forces, which have also been intimately tied to the gentrification efforts we have been investigating in prostitution areas in Rio since 2005. In many ways, what we see here is a re-emergence of the racist, sexist, and classist values and structures that drove urban hygienization, social distancing and physical and moral quarantines in the years of the early Republic – not surprising, given that President Jair Bolsonaro much admires the second President of the Republic, authoritarian Marshal Floriano Peixoto, a man who inaugurated the period of late 19th century violent repression described above (Blanchette & Silva, Forthcoming; Topik, 1996).

Amar draws many parallels between post-liberal urbanization and development in Brazil and Egypt, which should also be read in the light of human rights analyst Scott Long’s extensive discussions of the engendered and ethnic/racial dimensions of Egypt’s authoritarian turn. In essence, what Bolsonarismo represents is a return to the “social distancing” and “moral quarantines” of top-down driven development and sanitation that sees the majority of Brazilians not as citizens partners, but as a problem to be managed – violently, if necessary. Nowhere has this been more clearly demonstrated than in Bolsonaro’s March 26th comment to the nation, where he claimed that Brazilians have an in-built resistance to COVID-19 because “they play in sewers” (Gomes, 2020). Obviously, Bolsonaro does not see himself as “playing in sewers” and yet he speaks of this as a defining characteristic of “Brazilians”, who are simultaneously cast as unclean, perversely immune to the new coronavirus, and – consequently – not needing any special treatment or policies in the face of the epidemic. One needs to ask: which Brazilians is the President imagining here? In Rio de Janeiro, one of Bolsonaro’s principal

allies, Congressman Rodrigo Amorim, is demonstrating who is being contemplated and how they should be dealt with.

Brought into power on the same conservative wave that elected Bolsonaro, Amorim made a name for himself during the election by publicly destroying a street sign that paid homage to black, bisexual city councilwoman from the Maré favela, Marielle Franco, who was an ardent defender of human rights (Fig. 2). Franco had been politically assassinated in early 2018 and the probable murderers are reported as having intimate ties to the Bolsonaro family and to Amorim himself (Lourenço, 2020). The sign had taken the place of an earlier sign giving homage to Marshal Floriano Peixoto and (Dimenstien, 2019) and the remains of the sign paying tribute to Marielle have been mounted on Congressman Amorim's office wall as a trophy.

Amorim has taken a particular interest in the São Cristóvão neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro, which has long been marked for urban renewal (Costa, 2013; Extra, 2011; Capelli, January 2019; 3/2019). Shortly following his inauguration, the state congressman launched an unauthorized invasion of the Maracanã Indian Village, an urban occupation conducted by Native Brazilians in the neighborhood. After calling the Village "urban trash" and saying that "those who like Indians should go to Bolivia" (in a clear allusion to the on-going racist coup against Bolivia's Native President Evo Morales), Amorim invaded the Village in a surprise "inspection" (Capelli, January 2019; 3/2019; Capelli, January 2019; 3/2019). A few months later, Amorim conducted an unauthorized invasion of Pedro II high school, one of Brazil's oldest and most prestigious learning institutions and a cornerstone of São Cristóvão, alleging that the school was a factory for "leftist militants" (Werneck, Leal, & Rodrigues, 2019).

Amorim's greatest impact on Rio's new frontier of urban cleansing, however, has come through his leadership of the State Parliamentary Inquiry Commission into fires and firefighting.

Following a disastrous series of blazes (one of which, coincidentally, razed Brazil's national Museum, located in São Cristóvão, and another a downtown brothel), this commission was detailed to "clean up" Rio de Janeiro. Echoing the forced sanitation campaigns of the early 20th century, Amorim's Commission has emphasized actions against racialized and engendered "areas of exception", and his largest target to date is Vila Mimosa, the red light district descended from the old Mangue, which lies in the heart of São Cristóvão.

In December 2019, when COVID-19 was still a distant threat for most Cariocas, firemen under the direction of Amorim's Commission, shut down the Vila, putting some 4000 sex workers out of work. The alleged reasons for VM's closing were that it was both a fire and health threat (although the city had ignored the conditions in the Vila for three decades). For weeks on end, many prostitutes had to suspend their

activities, feeling the same economic fragility that today afflicts billions of people around the world.

Leadership from the Vila Mimosa's community association were able to pressure Amorim to hold a public hearing about the situation with representation from the state legislature, fire fighters and interested parties from the Vila on March 13th, 2020. The hearing opened with Amorim showing a series of photographs from his report, including everything from the precarious and illegal electrical wiring systems to the cubicles where sex workers attend to clients (which he narrated as, "I know it isn't the focus of this investigation, but look at the level of human degradation of this place"). Images of condoms on the floor, narrow hallways and food left out at one of the kilo restaurants were used as further evidence of what he referred to as the "inhuman" and "grotesque" nature of the Vila Mimosa. The stigmatizing nature of the presentation and his insistence that his goal was to dignify, not denigrate were questioned by attorneys and Vila community members present. In particular, they pointed out that all of the legalities required by the ALERJ committee were not required of other institutions, such as the ALERJ itself (the room where the public hearing was held did not have any signs indicating exists and fire extinguishers) and the Rio de Janeiro court house next door, which also didn't have the necessary documentation from the fire department to be functioning.

Such contradictions highlighted the selective and stigmatizing nature of the working group, and the hearing ended with a decision that pending approval of their superiors, the fire department would sign a temporary order to reopen the Vila the following Friday while they resolved the more expensive electrical wiring renovations. The mood was thus hopeful as the hot pink colored bus that had taken dozens of women to the State Assembly to witness the hearing returned to Vila Mimosa with everyone eager to get back to work. On that same day, however, much of Rio de Janeiro was already starting to close down due to the new coronavirus and the on the day that the Vila had planned to re-open, it too shut down many of its houses as part of the state-wide lockdown.

The police would continue heavily patrol the Vila in the early months of pandemic both due to the fire code violations and lockdown restrictions. As many women were unable to work, the "concern for women's health", so prominent in the public hearings in the arguments favoring its interdiction before the pandemic, did not result in any state aid to the workers of the Vila after Rio began social isolation. Instead, the women continued to be harassed by the police as NGOs mobilized food baskets and cleaning supplies to cover basic needs. They have since been allowed to return to work, but with no formal provisions being made for their or their clients' health.

#### 4.1. Sex worker mobilizations around Covid-19

As sex workers have arguably been targets of the moral and economic forces currently overtaking Brazil longer than many other groups, they found themselves confronting the COVID-19 epidemic from an especially precarious place, both from the perspective of the institutional fragilities of the organized movement and the ambiguous nature of sex work as an occupation in Brazil. In this sense, the COVID-19 pandemic sheds new light on this distressing collective experience through a nostalgia for the times of formulation of public health policies with integrated the effective participation of social movements. It also calls up fears of what can happen when critical populations are left out of State responses or are they themselves targeted as groups which must be eliminated for the greater good. Indeed, those who depend on a living, populated street had to resort to local ties more than ever in the early months of the pandemic while waiting for action from the same State that, in recent years has dismantled social safety nets, labor rights, social movements and the SUS. As at the beginning of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, COVID-19 unveils the weaknesses and prejudices of State structures, especially with regards for the care of the elderly and informal workers including sex workers.

Sex worker organizations have used their political savvy cultivated through decades of responding to the HIV epidemic to mobilize local

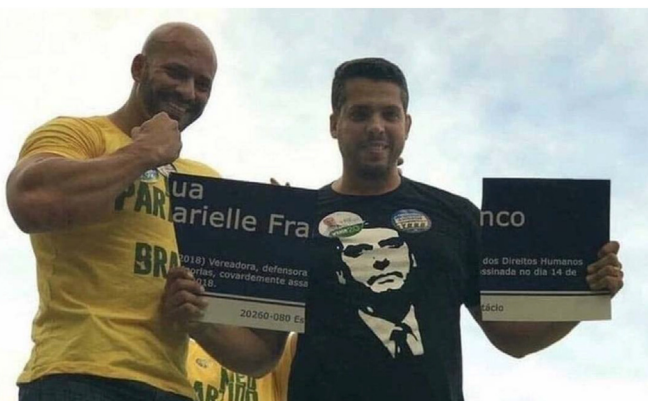


Fig. 2. Ricardo Amorim on campaign in 2018, wearing a t-shirt with Jair Bolsonaro's image and proudly holding the street sign he destroyed, which paid tribute to assassinated Councilwoman Marielle Franco. Source: Dimenstien, 2020.

networks of power and influence, bridging once again the *morro e asfalto* together and organizing to fill the void left by a lack of a coordinated State response through online campaigns to raise funds and direct outreach work to distribute food baskets, cleaning and protection kits (i.e. alcohol gel and masks) and information about how to work safely. While there are many organizations that continue to do admirable work, here we continue our focus on Rio de Janeiro by looking at the example of the CasaNem occupation, an urban squat and educational and cultural project for the LGBTQIA + community that plays a particularly central role in radical activism and essential services for travestis and trans-people in Rio de Janeiro. It was created and is led by Indianare Siqueira, a vegan transvestigênera whore, founder of the NGO Trans-revolução, member of the Brazilian Prostitutes' Network and current candidate for city council.

At the beginning of the pandemic, the CasaNem occupied a seven-storey building on Rua Dias da Rocha, in the upper middle class, "post-card" neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro, Copacabana.<sup>10</sup> Affiliated with the Internationalist Front of the Homeless (FIST), CasaNem collectively organized a series of measures to guarantee the functioning of the building in times of coronavirus as well as extensive outreach activities to Rio's most vulnerable populations. One floor of the building was set aside for those who need to be quarantined, and food, shelter, pet food and essential supplies were provided for the 65 residents of the house (as a vegan, Indianare emphasizes care for animals). The CasaNem also distributed more 3500 ration packs including food, water, clothing, personal hygiene, cleaning supplies to LGBTQIA+, sex workers, the homeless population and poor communities on the outskirts of Rio through their extensive government and non-governmental networks. Through a sewing initiative, *Mascaras do Bem (Masks for the Good)*, they sewed and distributed thousands of masks. The CasaNem gained positive attention in the mainstream for their actions, including a story featuring a photograph of the governor, Wilson Witzel's son, Erick Witzel, who is a trans man, dropping off food baskets for the house (Calixto 2020).

Despite this recognition and providing vital public services, in August 2020, heavily armed police blockaded the squat's Copacabana residence. In front of the T.V. cameras, the residents proclaimed that either the State would make a peaceful deal with them or they would fight to the last drop of blood to keep their home. Barricades went up in the squat and, outside its gates, protesters gathered to stand vigil with CasaNem, while some neighborhood residents sided with the police. Faced with bloodshed on the nightly news and the shame of throwing vulnerable people into the streets in the midst of a pandemic, the state government of Rio de Janeiro agreed to temporarily settle CasaNem in an unoccupied school and work to find them a permanent space. After much struggle and pressure, in September, the CasaNem received the keys to what the state government has assured it will be its permanent home: a large yellow, two story house that previously housed an Evangelical church. As Indianare frequently says, "Evangelical churches have been taking territory away from social movements, gay cinemas, and clubs since forever. Now the CasaNem is taking these back".

Under Indianare's leadership, the puta politics of the CasaNem has very successfully occupied an ambiguous space of partnering with city and state governments under Evangelical leadership while also pushing the limits of legality through their occupations of abandoned buildings and radical calls for a pro-whore, trans, LGBTQIA, vegan, and police free urban order that would include taking down the elite status of universities (but in a very distinct critique from Bolsonaro's current war on education). This bridging of the *morro* with the *asfalto* through CasaNem's conquest of a permanent residence in a neighborhood that strongly backed Bolsonaro, in a building that is named for one of the leaders of the vaccine revolt could not be more emblematic of the kinds of connections

<sup>10</sup> Ironically, CasaNem's squat occupied a building that was built by and housed one of the few "old money" families that actively resisted the forced vaccination campaigns that led to the Vaccine Revolt of 1904.

and partnerships forged by sex workers to ensure both survival and visibility of their activism and constituents.

As we move towards our conclusion, we reinforce that it is just this kind of radical solidarity and knowledge of how to both conflict and collaborate with such diverse constituents that is what we see to be key to any response to the Covid-19 epidemic. And as Indianare so frequently says, this isn't something that we learned through our formal doctoral programs or post-docs, but rather through conversations on street corners with sex workers. The backlash against science is worrisome and we in no way endorse it, but we also must not forget that many of the most important lessons for confronting deadly epidemics historically have come from those who were most affected by them.

Meanwhile, in the Center, the region of Rio de Janeiro with the highest concentration of sexual commerce in the city of, all the dozens of spas, *fast fodas*, *relaxs*,<sup>11</sup> nightclubs and massage parlors in the region closed down from March 23rd to mid-July. There was also almost no street commerce in places like the Praça da República during this period although there was a small amount of movement still going on around the Central do Brasil rail station, where prostitutes – particularly older ones, who do not have other resources – look for clients among the already reduced flow of workers that come and go via the suburban trains.

Since July, however, downtown venues have reopened, although at much reduced capacity. The relative lack of clients seems to be a function of the COVID crisis worsening Rio's already bad economic situation. A similar situation is occurring in Rio's one "formal" red light district, Vila Mimosa, which has re-opened in the midst of the pandemic (after previously being closed, prior to COVID, due to "health concerns" on the part of the State government). The vast majority of the sex workers in the Downtown and in Vila Mimosa are not politically organized and have been largely abandoned by the Ministry of Health in the last years of the Workers' Party government. Consequently, both groups have been swept by the virus, with Vila Mimosa being hit particularly hard. Faced with this situation, sex workers in these regions must employ what James Scott calls "the weapons of the weak" (Scott, 1985), seeking individual or small-group solutions through personal networks and clients (especially in the case of financial resources), usually without directly challenging power.

## 5. Conclusions

The coronavirus pandemic helps us to review past Brazilian political responses to epidemic and endemic disease and to think about the collective sentiments regarding the importance of a public health system and the end of health inequalities. Critical moments such as the present favor the recognition of what can and should be fundamental and universal. We are again immersed in a distressing collective experience, on a global scale, and the procedures for identifying a disease, its forms of contagion and its origins open a wide field for *subjects* to also be identified and recognized as a *major* part of the transmission chain. In the case of COVID-19, some examples of this process of subjectification have already occurred, all of them containing racist and xenophobic aspects, as often happens when human collectivities search of the origin of "evil". As we've shown above, even before the new virus hit, sex workers, Native Brazilians, and "communist" youth were already being recast by the governing party in Rio de Janeiro as "trash" and threats to both moral and physical health in terms that frankly (and apparently consciously) recover the ideological content of the city's early 20th century hygienization campaigns.

The new coronavirus, with its so far unbeatable capacity for propagation, outlined an overwhelming social imaginary. The largest "risk group", – the elderly, – are our grandfathers and grandmothers, fathers,

<sup>11</sup> "Fast Foda" and "Relax" are both English-rooted terms describing lower-end brothels which specialize in 15 min sex acts. "Fast foda" is a play on the English term "fast food" with "foda" meaning "fuck" in Portuguese.



mothers, uncles and aunts. The virus necessarily reminds one of the family – a type of family that in no way refers to those affinities that are constituted by those who have been cast out by or on the run from their birth families.

As the pandemic has continued to overtake Brazil, racial and class divisions have emerged in terms of what groups are at the highest risk for dying from the disease while once again laying bare the deep social inequalities and colonial structures that continue to ravage the country along with the pandemic (Malta et al., 2020; Santos et al., 2020). As Santos et al. note, race/colour as a category were not even being monitored by the Brazilian government in the early weeks of the pandemic, and more recent data has made clear that black, Indigenous and poor Brazilians have the highest mortality rates (Santos et al., 2020; Araujo and Caldwell). Despite a context of structural inequalities, the government's response has continually been marked by exalting individual freedom over collective interest and public health guidelines. Phrases defending the “right to come and go” have been repeated as mantras against lockdown as well as publicly declaring that no one would be obligated to take an eventual vaccine (although such a negation would go against the law that Bolsonaro himself signed in the beginning of the pandemic in addition to the country's child protection laws). Francisco Ortega and Michael Orsini have rightly noted that public health governance under Bolsonaro “might be best characterized as a conscious intensification of state neglect, in which the federal government can capitalize on a public health emergency to reassert its policies of dispossession”(Ortega and Orsini, 2020 pg. 1265).

In all of this, there is an oppression that sustains a certain organization of the city as well, marked by mores that, although very contested, remain in force, operating various forms of oppression. Red light districts, hotels, motels, bars, clubs, spas, roadside gas stations, beaches... Prostitution presents itself where the people are and where the people go. It even creates *deviations*, drawing people away from the “normal”. The COVID-19 pandemic and the controversies surrounding the lockdown diluted cities, emptying their streets and eliminating or greatly reducing the activities that take place in them. Those who depend on the living, populated street had to resort to local ties more than ever before while waiting for action from the same State that, in recent years has been dismantling of social safety nets, labor rights, and the SUS. As at the beginning of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, COVID-19 shows the weaknesses and prejudices of state structures, especially with regards for the care of the elderly and informal workers including sex workers. And as during the sanitation battles of the early 20th century, sex workers have used their political savvy cultivated through decades of responding to the HIV epidemic to mobilize local networks of power and influence, bridging once again the *morro* and *asfalto* together.

The COVID-19 pandemic through Brazil into a unique balancing act that is highlighted by its past history of dealing with pandemics, particularly among urban and marginalized populations such as men and women who sell sex. The division between the “asphalt” and the “hill” in Rio de Janeiro – which can also be glossed as rich versus poor and white versus black – is the Carioca representation of Brazil's more global ambiguous positioning on the “frontier of the West”. But as anthropologist Gilberto Freyre once pointed out in his classic work *The Masters and the Slaves*, Brazil really only exists where these two polarities must deal with each other and work out some form of *modus vivendi*. The past has shown us that the “asphalt” is fully capable of treating large sections of their fellow citizenry – particularly those who are most heavily stigmatized, such as poor black sex workers – as, essentially, expendable – less than animals, really. Sacrifices to be made in the name of a national “whitening” process that is both simultaneously physical and moral.

At the same time, however, the past shows us what can be done when the “asphalt” listens to the “hills” and sits down at the same table with them, as partners, to forge creative responses to pandemic disease. The current political moment in Brazil is very dark and many of the actors who were responsible for the HIV/AIDS policies of the late 20th century that are still alive and active have been side-lined by a government that is

frank in its portrayal of certain Brazilian populations as unnecessary and even eliminable *en masse*. Sex worker organizations across Rio and, particularly in Rio de Janeiro, organized locally in the face of the existential threat posed by the combination of COVID-19 and quasi-fascist authoritarian government. As we've shown, however, these actors, have been greatly weakened by the past decade's retrenchment in human rights, public health, and social responsibility – of which sex workers were one of the first groups to be thrown under the bus.

As of the second rewriting of this paper for publication (October 2020), it has become very clear that the Bolsonaro regime sees the pandemic as something that largely affects the very populations it feels it was elected to combat or even eliminate: pensioners, poor urban blacks living in informal communities, and rural indigenous groups, among others. COVID-19 has hit particularly hard among these populations, dependent as they almost entirely are upon a public health system that the Bolsonaro government has intentionally undermined (following the lead of the previous president, Michel Temer).

What will happen in the upcoming months is not clear. The pandemic weakened the Bolsonaro government at the beginning of the pandemic, yet he was able to recuperate some of this popularity as it has waned on and the government economic support was positively viewed by the country's vast poor population. The situation, however, continues to be dire as the country's major cities have nearly fully re-opened without, still, any federally mandated and clear guidelines on prevention and Bolsonaro continuing to undermine an effective response. Nonetheless, we take comfort (however small) in Brazil's rich past of subaltern insurrection, often protagonized and even led by sex workers. Whether we are on the brink of another hopeless revolt against genocidal hyge-nization, or the dawn of a new era of rapprochement between the “asphalt” and the “hills”, we can be sure that Brazilian sex workers will be leading change from the front.

#### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Soraya Silveira Simões:** All four authors are equal co-authors of this piece. Data comes from all four of our research projects in the historiography and ethnography of sex work, health, and urbanization in Rio de Janeiro. **Laura Murray:** All four authors are equal co-authors of this piece. Data comes from all four of our research projects in the historiography and ethnography of sex work, health, and urbanization in Rio de Janeiro.

#### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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