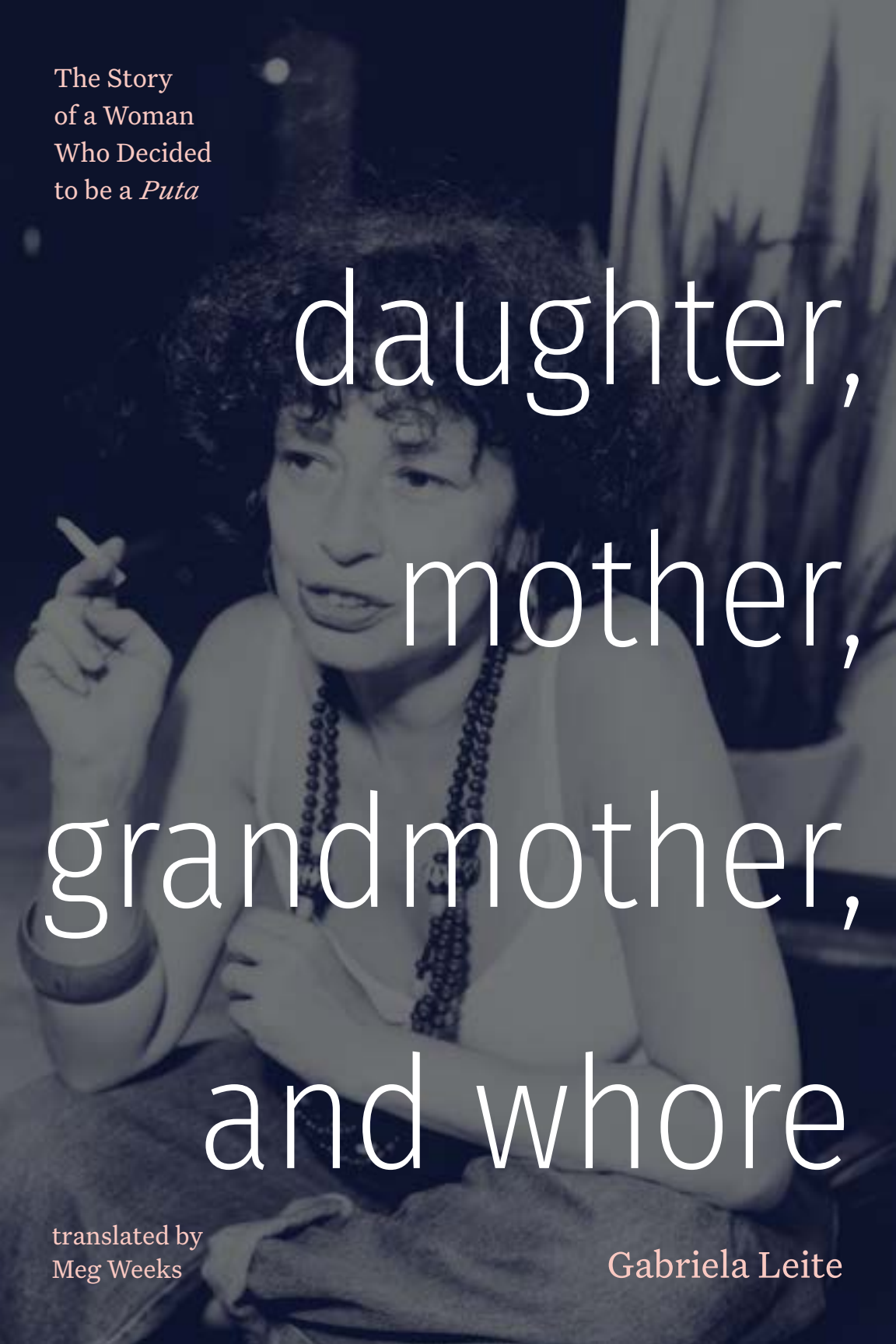

The Story of a Woman Who Decided to be a *Puta*

daughter, mother, grandmother, and whore

translated by Meg Weeks

Gabriela Leite

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FOREWORD BY CAROL LEIGH

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Foreword

CAROL LEIGH

I was always a great admirer of Gabriela Leite. When I was first invited to write a foreword to the English translation of her memoir, I wanted to make sure I could comment in a way that would speak both to all those who knew and loved her and those who never had the opportunity to meet her.

The timing of the invitation was also significant, as my own end-of-life-cancer journey brings me to this reunification with Gabriela, nearly ten years after her death in 2013. I was diagnosed with cancer in 2015, and Gabriela's journey was always part of my own relationship with the disease. As an older sex worker, the kind of ideas she had at the end of her life meant a lot to me. In fact, my prostitution philosophy was the natural outgrowth of being raised in community with women like Gabriela and being informed by their philosophies. I am mostly known for coining the term *sex work* in the late 1970s, but I consider myself a younger sister of that first generation of whore leaders, of which Gabriela was a part.

What a great fortune for a political activist to find oneself on the precipice of a new movement. When I think of my own work, I feel lucky to have been in the right place at the right time. In writing this foreword, I looked back to decipher the inception and trajectory of our movement and the contributions of our early leaders. I often make myself dizzy trying to answer questions such as "How did this movement emerge?" and "Who are we as a movement?" I recall the lengthy philosophical discussions from the early days of sex-worker activism, which always seemed to ping-pong between two questions in particular: "Why do they hate and criminalize us?" and "What makes us so important to them that we 'deserve' the honor of being the primary target of their hatred?"

These questions permeated the 1989 World Whores' Summit in San Francisco, where I first met Gabriela. It was a time when formal international organizing of sex workers was relatively new. Margo St. James and Gail Pheterson were based in San Francisco, which has a hearty history of activist prostitutes.

Margo was the first public political whore to come forth in the United States in 1973, forming COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics), and Gail was an activist, a psychologist, and a researcher. Together, in the early 1980s, they began organizing the World Whores' Congresses, which took place in Amsterdam in 1985 and Brussels in 1986. At this time global communication among prostitutes' rights activists was expanding greatly, evolving along with international communication methods. Sex work always has had a particular relationship to migration and international networking, as stigmatized prostitutes were forced to leave home to escape recognition. So, we were indeed World Whores.

After the Amsterdam and Brussels conferences, Margo, Gail, and fellow COYOTE leader Priscilla Alexander organized the 1989 San Francisco conference based on the work established in Europe. They invited sex-worker leaders and allies from around the world, including Gabriela.

When I first saw Gabriela, she almost seemed like a sister; her demeanor reminded me of my mother and aunts, and I thought we even looked alike. She was very friendly and had a beautiful smile. In my eyes, she shone; I was immediately struck by the character of her beauty, her warmth, clarity, and humble intelligence.

Gabriela had come to the summit after a huge success in Brazil. As the first public political prostitute in her country, Gabriela and her colleagues had just established the Brazilian Network of Prostitutes in 1987. In the late 1980s, she was also at the beginning of her career working for NGOs, and she would go on to found the prostitutes' advocacy organization Davida in 1992. The AIDS crisis had emerged in the 1980s and there was international support and funding for sex workers as health educators. Like a number of other sex-worker activists at the time, however, Gabriela's emphasis went beyond the mechanics of AIDS education, addressing a wide range of issues and insisting that health should not be separated from political empowerment.

At the time of the summit, I had become an avid videographer, recording conferences, interviews, and demonstrations. In that role, I was fortunate to spend some time getting to know Gabriela and documenting her political passions. I was particularly concerned with abolitionist attacks on our work and related debates among feminists, and I was struck that our rhetoric in the United States had a lot in common with her concerns about police violence, the media's role in the AIDS crisis, and stigma. She answered my questions exactly how I would have.

In one interview, I asked her about the red-herring accusation that prostitution could never be a choice—an assertion as reductive and classist then

as it is today. Does one choose to work at McDonald's? This line of thinking drove me crazy. Gabriela explained to me that there is *some* choice, even when choices are limited. "It's dangerous to start from a position that people have no choices in life," she explained. "Because, if we do that, we only look at them as victims and victims have no choice *and no voice*."[1]

Prostitutes' rights were a revelation for so many of us. Like other pioneering global whore leaders, Gabriela developed her occupation, role, and philosophies in an environment of increasing sexual freedom and expression. In the 1960s and 1970s, women's roles were shifting, and the earliest inkling of a prostitutes' rights movement was beginning to emerge, even against the backdrop of a repressive military dictatorship in Brazil. That handful of first-wave whore leaders such as Gabriela was just beginning to work as prostitutes. As we see in this memoir, Gabriela proudly embraced her sexuality, leaving behind the shame that imprisons most of us and stepping forth courageously to speak out as a prostitute.

I often think about what made Gabriela so valuable in the prostitutes' rights movement, and I always come back to the fact that she was largely a strategist. Then again, as I reflect, so many of the early leaders of our movement were primarily strategists. It was so much the norm that I joke that the sex-worker-as-general should be another sex-worker archetype. But the thing that was different about Gabriela, what inspires us so deeply, was that she was so effective. Ultimately, I think this effectiveness stems from the combination of her brilliant, strategic mind with her fierce emotional strength, courage, and unwavering commitment to the movement. In a sense, I think her memoir provides us with a road map to this effectiveness, showing us how she developed these skills in the context of her household politics. Gabriela had suffered from the power struggles within her family, and she became a tough, rebellious child who strove to create a life for herself beyond the limitations of her family.

The Whore's-Eye View

In her role as a strategist, Gabriela understood that the prostitution stigma is central to our oppression. This is another intersection at which I felt my sisterhood with Gabriela, as the whore's-eye view offers front-row seats in the theater of society's hypocrisies.

1 Carol Leigh, dir., *Outlaw Poverty, Not Prostitutes*, 1990.

Like Gabriela, I was concerned with the power of language, both as a poet and as a feminist. In my play *Scarlot Harlot*, first performed in the early 1980s, the main character struggles to find the courage to come out as a prostitute. "Sex workers unite! We won't remain anonymous!" she exclaims as she finally tears the paper bag from her head. I had heard that there was tension in the naming of the Brazilian Prostitutes' Network, as Gabriela had embraced the words *prostituta* and *puta* as her identity rather than *sex worker*, which had become the prescribed term in NGO contexts. She believed that *puta* was a rich, evocative word with a history and culture, and that *sex worker* was thrust upon her in NGO circles to sanitize prostitution. I know what she meant. Many of us feel that prostitution, sex work, whoring, and so on is larger than labor, and that it can be reductive to only use that term to describe not only our work but also our roles, our activities, and our identities. Like Gabriela, I also feel strongly about the word *whore*, and I embrace it. The word itself is transgressive, providing the jolt needed to provoke people into listening to us.

Scarlot Harlot, in which I launched the term *sex worker*, was an embrace of the rights of prostitutes/sex workers *as well as* a satire on political correctness. The term *sex work* can be comedic. For example, when Scarlot Harlot tells her mother she is a sex worker, Mom replies, "What?!? You're working in a dildo factory?"

The Whore is an archetype, or many archetypes rolled into one. The Whore of Babylon, the Whore Goddess(es), the Sacred Whore—*whore* contains within it archetypes of victimization, disrespect, abuse, and deceit. But it can also bring to mind the power that comes from being different. Because of this, my peers and I embrace it. It is the word I use most casually, as a term of endearment. Margo St. James once told me that *whore* also means "beloved."

Then there is *puta*, a word embraced by prostitutes across the Americas. In the United States, trans Latina sex workers have reclaimed the term and formed a new movement of *putas*. I suggest *puta* has an English meaning, too: it means "whore," but a little nicer. Perhaps to us it seems more romantic because it's in another language.

The term *sex work*, however, has been politically advantageous for us. I coined it at a more serious juncture, in the 1970s, as a response to a workshop titled "The Sex Use Industry." That phrase was obviously stigmatizing! Plus, as a feminist, I thought we should be referring to *what women do* from our own perspective, not men's. Men use the services and women do the work, so it should be called sex *work*! It was obvious to us.

So, for us, *sex worker* ended up being a more useful term than *prostitute*. While we used *prostitute* in formal interviews and in the media until the 1990s, we didn't particularly like it, preferring euphemisms like *working girls* and others. When *sex worker* was added to the lexicon, it unlocked a certain political potential for us, and with it blossomed a huge international movement.

While I understand what possibilities this term opened up, I agree with Gabriela that we cannot forget the provocative spirit of the whore and the power that comes from embracing the terms that have been used to stigmatize us. *Puta* owns the stigma and metamorphosizes it. Gabriela was among those who would not be limited by convention and expectation. Like many, she reminds us that we should not be hemmed in by terms of reference. The *puta* is more than a worker; she is a powerful part of culture and our collective psyche. Throughout her career, Gabriela constantly sought to reclaim the terms *puta* and *prostitute* as part of a political strategy to fight the stigma surrounding prostitution and develop and implement strategies inspired in the red-light districts of Brazil.

Whore Leadership and Looking Ahead

Gabriela's history has spread through much of the field of sex work studies in volumes of research, but this is the first time an English readership is able to read her in her own words. Her memoir communicates to sex workers and students of sex work understandings that are sorely missing from the short history of our politics. What does Gabriela represent at this time in terms of whore leadership? I would say that it is the strength and wisdom acquired in adversity, a deep love and respect for humanity and culture, a pride that allowed her to follow her instincts, and a deep commitment to freedom.

The stark honesty of Gabriela's memoir reaches beyond stereotypes and allows us to witness the factors that shaped her. It is also a warning about the limitations of advocating solely around an idea of prostitutes as workers. Gabriela warns us from inside the NGO, existing on the border between prostitutes' communities and the government, that the risk of sanitization accompanies the incorporation of sex workers into mainstream categories. She saw the results of the problematic co-optation of the prostitute movement, and, in doing so, she opened the doors even wider for a fuller expression of provocative and transgressive activism outside the confines of government-funded prevention projects, such as the clothing line Daspu.

As I write this in 2022, we are on the one hand alarmed by the current political climate in both the United States and Brazil, in particular the rise of fascism and violent right-wing extremism. At the same time, while formal politics are falling apart, the policies for sex workers are becoming more just. We have recently had some victories for decriminalization, such as the introduction of a bill in the New York state legislature to decriminalize sex work and the endorsement, finally, of decriminalization by many major human rights and research groups. And at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, I was also inspired by the community-building and community-care efforts I witnessed in sex-worker communities around the world. In times of distress, people pull together.

To conclude my foreword and introduce the pages that follow, I would say that this compelling memoir is deeply rooted in the physical details of Gabriela's existence, offering an almost painterly grasp of the scenery of everyday life, from family relationships to brothel etiquette to the bohemian world of urban Brazil. We particularly need stories like Gabriela's to offer us guidance as we confront ongoing taboos and change laws and practices in our communities and countries. Gabriela possessed the attributes we need to recognize as we fortify our future. What courage these pioneers mustered, to overcome the profound social stigma, to step forth and speak out as prostitutes!

Translator's Note

MEG WEEKS

When I first decided to translate Gabriela Leite's memoir, originally published in 2008 in Portuguese, I was well aware of the gravity of the project. Through my doctoral research on the history of the sex workers' movement in Brazil, I fully grasped Gabriela's importance for both Brazilian prostitutes and other sexual minorities, as well as for international mobilizations of sex workers beginning in the 1970s. Although I never knew her personally, I felt as though I did, as I was intimately familiar with the audiovisual and material traces of her that I had discovered in the archives. Yet, despite the proximity I had established through my research, bringing her words into English was an exhilarating, novel experience, one that in turn unlocked new understandings and insights for my scholarship. The two projects—this translation and my scholarly monograph—have advanced hand in hand, borrowing literary and intellectual depth from one another and shepherding one another into existence.

A particular challenge I encountered in translating Gabriela's writing stemmed precisely from my own knowledge as a researcher, which at times conflicted with her recollections as recorded in this memoir. In addition to confronting various linguistic puzzles, I grappled with the inconsistencies and unreliability of the genre of memoir; how should I approach the episodes that I suspected Gabriela misremembered, embellished, or exaggerated? Ultimately, I decided that "correcting" the text did not fall within my purview as a translator, although the experience did provoke interesting reflections on the nature of memory and the stubbornly idiosyncratic quality of oral history. In any case, it is worth keeping in mind the permeability of testimonial literature as one reads Gabriela's life story.

Another challenge that I confronted was choosing how best to render in English Gabriela's frank treatment of race and gender, which often employs language that does not neatly conform to that of contemporary racial justice and feminist movements. To one equipped with US sensibilities, Gabriela's

tendency to identify a person's race only when they are a person of color may come across as distasteful. Moreover, she subscribed to what at times seemed like an essentialist view of gender at odds with many second- and third-wave feminist understandings of the often oppressive nature of gender as a social construction. While race and feminism in the Brazilian context will be discussed in the book's introduction, I want to touch upon this issue briefly. While she was undoubtedly an advocate of gender and racial justice—an insurgent feminist in my view, though she did not consistently identify with the term—one of Gabriela's most steadfast commitments throughout her life was to speak plainly and candidly. In fact, she frequently professed an aversion to "political correctness," especially as the international prostitutes' movement came to favor the term *sex work* and foreground a more technocratic, pro-work orientation that she felt sanitized the transgressive ethos of a political formation on the margins of society. This penchant for unbridled speech and provocation was aimed not just at her peers, however; it sought to expose hypocrisies and fragilities across the political spectrum, from conservative moralists and Catholic ideologues to dogmatic second-wave feminists and orthodox leftists.

In addition to annotating the memoir itself to identify historical and cultural phenomena, I also make ample use of footnotes to define Brazilian terms that I chose to leave in the original Portuguese due to their fundamental untranslatability. Because I am not only a translator but also a scholar of Brazilian history and of the Brazilian sex workers' movement in particular, I believe that the following introduction, coauthored with my collaborators Laura Murray and Esther Teixeira, will serve as a means of contextualizing Gabriela's life and work without speaking for her—a crucial distinction considering that self-representation was one of the first and most vociferous demands of the movement she helped found. And, as you will observe in her memoir, she was more than capable of speaking for herself.

Acknowledgments

LAURA REBECCA MURRAY,
ESTHER TEIXEIRA, AND MEG WEEKS

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Introduction

LAURA REBECCA MURRAY,
ESTHER TEIXEIRA, AND MEG WEEKS

From Otília Silva Leite to Gabriela

Introducing Gabriela Leite's memoir to the English-speaking world is a task we undertook with great care and joy. In the pages that follow, we offer the broader context in which she lived and worked for readers less familiar with Brazil, its attendant cultural references, and the broader sex-worker movement. That said, while our goal is to elucidate her social and political milieu, we also wish for the text to stand on its own as the unvarnished life story of an iconoclast, a pioneer, and a provocateur.

Born Otília Silva Leite in São Paulo in 1951 to an indigenous farmworker mother and a casino-worker father, Gabriela experienced a sheltered middle-class childhood. While her early years were steeped in conservative Catholicism and parental discipline, she nursed from a young age a voracious intellectual appetite and a rebellious spirit. After being exposed as a teenager to great masters of history and literature such as Sérgio Buarque de Holanda and Machado de Assis, she sought broader horizons as a philosophy student at the University of São Paulo, Brazil's most prestigious university, eventually opting for a sociology degree after her first year.

Gabriela began her university studies at the height of Brazil's military dictatorship, which, after coming to power in a coup in 1964, had entered its most repressive phase by 1968. She balanced her coursework with a part-time job as a secretary at a large company, but was increasingly drawn to more visceral, authentic experiences, as she had grown tired of the pretensions and hypocrisies of her peers and the traditional Left. Fueling Gabriela's decision to embrace a new identity as a prostitute were her frustrations at what she perceived to be the false moralism of middle-class society and her own desire to live differently. In the early 1970s, she began her career in prostitution, first in an upscale nightclub and later in a working-class brothel in São Paulo's bohemian Boca do Lixo neighborhood. She even took on a new name, "Gabriela,"

inspired by the seductive and free-spirited protagonist of Jorge Amado's 1958 novel *Gabriela, cravo e canela* (*Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon*).

At the time, São Paulo was home to a counterculture that was striving to preserve itself in the nation's tense political climate, yet artists and intellectuals continued to flock to Boca do Lixo's storied bars, clubs, and cinemas. While at first Gabriela struggled to adapt, she eventually embraced the work of prostitution and soon found herself reveling in the human richness and raw social energy of her newfound environment. Throughout her career, Gabriela took pride in providing companionship, advice, comfort, and friendship to her clients, often likening the prostitute to the psychoanalyst and confidante. Observing and participating in a diverse range of sexual practices satisfied the profound curiosity toward sex and the human condition she had nurtured since her adolescence. Over the next two decades, Gabriela would also become a community organizer, health-policy adviser to the federal government, and nonprofit director, all the while ardently defending her community, one of the most stigmatized and neglected groups in Brazilian society.

Gabriela consistently asserted that she enjoyed working as a prostitute, while noting that her life was not free from violence and exploitation. Much of this abuse, according to her and many other sex-worker activists, stems from the precarious legal standing of the profession. In Brazil, neither selling nor buying sex is a crime, as long as both the sex worker and client are over eighteen. However, as Gabriela explains in her memoir, Brazil's 1940 Penal Code (which is still in effect today) criminalizes third parties who profit from prostitution, either through the running of a brothel or "living off the earnings" of prostitution, rendering commercial sex establishments ripe for exploitation, corruption, and violence, inflicted by the police in particular.[1] The complete decriminalization of adult prostitution would be a primary demand of the Brazilian sex workers' movement during Gabriela's lifetime, although, as of the publication of this book, it has yet to come to fruition.

Always quick to recognize the structural roots of violence, Gabriela was one of the leaders of the first cohort of grassroots activists to protest police brutality targeting sex workers and homosexuals in São Paulo in 1979 and 1980. At first energized by these initial shows of collective action, she was dismayed when her colleagues seemed uninterested in organizing a more enduring movement to protest the injustices they suffered. Their reluctance, however, was justified. Since 1964, Brazilians had lived under the iron fist of a socially conservative military regime, which had seized power from a

1 Blanchette, Mitchell, and Murray, "Discretionary Policing."

2 Murray, Teixeira, and Weeks

democratically elected, left-leaning government to forestall what the political establishment feared was the country's descent into Cuban-style socialism. Supported by the US government in its global campaign to thwart the spread of communism, the Brazilian military dictatorship proceeded to suspend elections; arrest, imprison, and torture political dissidents; and censor the press. This repression manifested itself in law enforcement as well, with local police employing harsh measures to purge city streets of what it perceived as unsightly and morally offensive activities, specifically persecuting gay men, *travestis*, and sex workers.[2] An uptick in police brutality in the late 1970s catalyzed the first organized actions of Brazilian prostitutes, introducing them to gay activists, Afro-Brazilian groups, and feminists, all of whom were clamoring for regime change and an overhaul of their country's calcified social order. This moment coincided with the acceleration of what historians call Brazil's "political opening," which, marked by the passage of the Amnesty Law in 1979 that allowed political dissidents to return from exile, inaugurated a period of great social and political effervescence.[3]

In the early 1980s, Gabriela left São Paulo and spent several years living and working in the Zona Boêmia of Belo Horizonte, Brazil's sixth-largest city and the capital of the state of Minas Gerais. While the city was smaller and more provincial than her hometown of São Paulo, Gabriela recalls how she enjoyed the traditional glamour of its prostitution trade, reputed to be one of the most lucrative in the country. Originally planned as a brief vacation from the brisk pace in Belo Horizonte, a trip to Rio de Janeiro in 1983 turned into a permanent relocation. Immediately upon arrival in Rio, Gabriela became enamored with the city's colorful charm, breathtaking scenery, and spirit of *malandragem*, the playful trickery historically attributed to the city's samba musicians and petty criminals. In no time, she established herself in Vila Mimosa, Rio's working-class red-light district and the successor to Mangue, a storied region of brothels frequented by some of Brazil's most illustrious artists and intellectuals since the nineteenth century. The defiant and irreverent spirit of Mangue, which had, after many attempts to resist displacement, been razed by the city government in the late 1970s to make way for the con-

2 *Travesti* is a Brazilian Portuguese word that refers to someone who identifies with the female gender but does not necessarily identify as a woman or seek to change their anatomy. The term, previously highly stigmatized and frequently associated with prostitution, has been appropriated and resignified by the trans movement and has a strongly political connotation.

3 Fausto, *Concise History of Brazil*, 306.

struction of a new City Hall complex and subway system, was kept alive in Vila Mimosa, where the city's prostitution establishments remained until the mid-1990s. While Vila Mimosa bore little of the charm and renown of the districts in São Paulo and Belo Horizonte, the space maintained what Gabriela reverently called the "two great mysteries inscribed on the profession over time: seduction and the mysterious climate of the red lights."[4] It was only once she was ensconced in Vila Mimosa that she was finally able to organize a local and later national movement of prostitutes demanding decriminalization, an end to the stigma that had long marked their community, and comprehensive human rights.

On the national stage, Gabriela's early years in Rio were a time of great political mobilization. By the early 1980s, the military generals who presided over the federal government in Brasília had indicated that they were amenable to a return to civilian rule and, in 1982, had allowed for the resumption of multiparty direct elections for all offices except the presidency. The following year, Gabriela received an invitation from the country's first Black city councilwoman, Benedita da Silva, to participate in the first Meeting of Women from the Favelas and Urban Periphery. The meeting, which brought together domestic workers with community leaders and other grassroots activists, would forever change the course of Gabriela's life. It was there that she first publicly identified herself as a prostitute, a move that both shocked and enchanted the crowd and led to a groundswell of media attention.

Concurrently, Brazil's feminist movement was gaining momentum and would later achieve important milestones in the Constitution of 1988, the crowning achievement of the transition to democracy that was ratified three years after Brazil formally restored civilian governance. And while Black feminists have criticized the mainstream feminist movement for its middle-class sensibilities and Eurocentric tendencies, Gabriela was quick to associate her political demands as a sex worker seeking civil rights with the demands of poor women with little schooling.[5] It was within this renewal of grassroots politics and civil society that Brazil's sex-worker movement began to take shape alongside other sectors mobilizing on the Left.

In 1984, one year after Benedita da Silva's invitation, a second gathering, this time organized by the Catholic Church, would prove to be another important catalyst for Brazil's national sex-worker movement, particularly through the lifelong partnership that would develop between Gabriela and fellow ac-

4 Gabriela Leite, Coluna da Gabi, *Beijo da rua*, May 1994.

5 Carneiro, "Mulheres em movimento," 117–33.

Figure I.1. Archival photograph of Gabriela Leite. Source: Davida—Prostitution, Civil Rights and Health Archive at the Public Archive of the State of Rio de Janeiro (APERJ).

tivist Lourdes Barreto. The previous decade, progressive clergy from the Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil had founded the Pastoral da Mulher Marginalizada (Ministry for Marginalized Women, or PMM), a program to develop the self-esteem of prostitutes deeply informed by a Latin American tradition of liberation theology. Despite the crucial platform that the ministry provided, the relationship between the PMM and the Brazilian prostitutes' movement to which it would give rise became conflictual once Gabriela began attending meetings in the mid-1980s. The crux of their disagreement lay in the fact that the Catholic Church and its radical feminist allies espoused a neoabolitionist view of prostitution, contending that commercial sex represented the apogee of patriarchal exploitation and advocating for its eventual abolition. Lourdes and Gabriela quickly recognized in each other a shared rejection of the notion that prostitutes were necessarily victims of said exploitation, a realization that led them to break away from the PMM and form an autonomous movement of sex workers in 1987.

Brazil's Sex Workers' Movement Grows and Gains International Traction

The previous decade, when the prospect of an independent movement of sex workers in Brazil was still merely a dream of Gabriela's, an international

Figure I.2. Photograph of Gabriela Leite with Lourdes Barreto. Rio de Janeiro, 1995. Photograph by Flavio Lenz. Source: Lourdes Barreto's personal archive.

movement of sex workers was quickly gaining ground. In 1975, a group of French prostitutes had gone on strike and occupied several churches across France, catalyzing a broader European struggle for the decriminalization of prostitution and sex workers' rights. Two years prior, in the United States, Margo St. James, a charismatic and media-savvy sex worker from California, had founded COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics), a group that staged playful and flamboyant social events as well as advocated for decriminalization and the notion of prostitution as legitimate work. By the late 1970s, San Francisco had become a hub for sex-worker organizing, with St. James working closely with activists such as Annie Sprinkle, Priscilla Alexander, and Carol Leigh. Leigh, who coined the term *sex work* during that period, authored a beautiful foreword to this book shortly before she passed away in 2022.

In 1985, St. James, feminist academic and activist Gail Pheterson, and representatives of the Dutch prostitutes' organization the Red Thread collaborated to plan and host the First World Whores' Congress, held in Amsterdam. At the Congress, sex-worker participants formed the International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights (ICPR) and released a charter outlining their demands for comprehensive labor rights, health care, and education for sex workers. The ICPR convened a second international meeting the following year in Brussels, and another in 1989 in San Francisco, which Gabriela attended as a representative of Brazil's burgeoning sex-worker movement. At the 1989 meeting, which Carol Leigh remembers in her foreword, women from the Global South such as Gabriela shared visions of political and economic emancipation informed by their nations' legacies of militarism, colonial and neocolonial extraction, and global geopolitical stratification. In doing so, they pushed the ICPR to articulate a more nuanced view of labor and sex under late capitalism, yet, as Gabriela insisted, one that left room for discussions of pleasure, joy, and agency.

Two years earlier, in 1987, Gabriela and Lourdes had organized a national meeting of Brazilian sex workers in Rio de Janeiro, an event that marked the founding of the Brazilian Network of Prostitutes, or RBP. At that time, the fast-spreading HIV epidemic was starting to provoke fear and panic in the country, and the Ministry of Health quickly categorized sex workers as a "risk group." The advent of AIDS greatly colored the event's proceedings, and activists expanded their initial focus on fighting police violence and defending their right to work to include a discussion of the rampant stigma by which prostitutes were held to be vectors of disease.

The following years brought many changes for Gabriela. She increasingly dedicated herself to activism and her work at the Institute for Religious Studies (ISER), a nongovernmental ecumenical organization that, like the PMM, was influenced by leftist ideals of liberation theology. In 1989, the recently established National AIDS Program invited Gabriela and Lourdes to participate in the development of the first HIV prevention program for sex workers in Brazil. It was the beginning of a long relationship between the Ministry of Health and the sex-worker movement that would be both fruitful and fraught with conflict. Gabriela and Lourdes's insistence on associating pleasure with prevention, in addition to drawing attention to the central role of stigma in increasing sex workers' vulnerability to HIV, provided a platform for the development of some of the world's most progressive and provocative approaches to HIV prevention.

Figure I.3. Sex-worker leaders at the First National Meeting of Prostitutes, Fala, mulher da vida (Speak, woman of the life), held in Rio de Janeiro in 1987. Source: Davida—Prostitution, Civil Rights and Health Archive at the Public Archive of the State of Rio de Janeiro (APERJ).

Figure I.4. Still of Gabriela Leite from the film *Amores da rua* (Street love), directed by Eunice Gutman, with photography by Inês Magalhães. Source: Davida—Prostitution, Civil Rights and Health Archive at the Public Archive of the State of Rio de Janeiro (APERJ).

Figure I.5. The first HIV-prevention brochure produced for sex workers in Brazil in 1989, titled *Fala, mulher da vida* (Speak, woman of the life), written by Flavio Lenz and produced by ISER in a project coordinated by Gabriela Leite. This material, which was drawn from interviews with prostitutes, reads (*left column, top to bottom*): "Everyone has their own tastes, sexually. The problem is that some guys have hang-ups. So that's when a woman needs to help them: talk to them, caress them, and touch. . . . We say that we just have sex for money, but sometimes a workplace accident happens, which is when we orgasm." Source: Davida—Prostitution, Civil Rights and Health Archive at the Public Archive of the State Rio de Janeiro (APERJ).

In 1988, the movement launched *Beijo da rua*, a newspaper edited by Flavio Lenz, a journalist and ISER employee who would go on to be Gabriela's partner until her death in 2013.[6] *Beijo da rua* was the first print journal in Brazil created by and for sex workers, founded in order to express a collective "political voice" for the community, which saw itself portrayed in traditional media "either as victims . . . degenerates and sluts, or as vectors of disease."[7] The first edition, which affirmed that "prostitution isn't a police matter," contained poetry, interviews, and news from the *zonas*, or red-light districts, of Brazil. For twenty-five years, Gabriela published her Coluna da Gabi (Gabi's column), in which she reflected on various topics including prostitution, sexuality, health, philosophy, and politics in Brazil. In her inaugural column, Gabriela makes clear that her goal in launching the paper was to demonstrate that prostitution was an integral part of her country's social fabric and, as such, should not be treated as a problem to be solved: "The prostitute is not a slut or the result of savage capitalism, but rather an expression of a society that is scared to death of facing its sexuality and consequently feels deeply threatened when the prostitute shows her face."[8]

Over the next decade, the Brazilian sex-worker movement expanded, with activists founding dozens of organizations across the country, many with funding from the Ministry of Health and the direct involvement and support of Gabriela and Lourdes. In Vila Mimosa, Eurídice Coelho founded the first sex-worker organization in Rio de Janeiro, the Association of Prostitutes of the State of Rio de Janeiro. Gabriela participated in the founding of that organization and, several years later, in 1992, would publish her first autobiography, *Eu, mulher da vida* (I, woman of the life); become a grandmother; and launch Davida—Prostitution, Civil Rights and Health, the organization she led until her death. Davida would soon grow into one of the most important prostitutes' rights organizations in Brazil, widely recognized as a vanguard for its unequivocal rejection of the discourse of victimhood, its use of cultural idioms such as theater and music in HIV-prevention projects, and its strong defense of prostitution not only as work but also as a platform for advancing broader sexual and human rights in partnership with other social movements, artists, and academics.

6 A full run of *Beijo da rua* is available for consultation at Rio's Biblioteca Nacional.

7 Lenz Cesar, Pereira de Andrade, and Aquino, "*Beijo da rua*, um jornal com a voz das prostitutas," 2015.

8 Gabriela Leite, Coluna da Gabi, *Beijo da rua,* December 1988.

Figure I.6. Gabriela and Flavio at the Club Gloria in São Paulo before a Daspu fashion show, July 16, 2006. Photo by Roberta Valerio.

Figure I.7. The first cover of the newspaper *Beijo da rua*, 1988. *Translation of right column*: "Prostitution isn't a matter for the police • The girls' sex • New life in Recife • God and the devil in the Zona do Mangue • Poetry • Prostitutes don't go in crowds to the polls." Source: Public Archive of the State of Rio de Janeiro (APERJ).

Figure I.8. Eurídice Coelho in the entryway of Vila Mimosa before it relocated in the mid-1990s. Source: Rio de Janeiro Association of Prostitutes Archive at the Public Archive of the State of Rio de Janeiro (APERJ).

Figure I.9. Launch of Gabriela's first book, *Eu, mulher da vida* (I, woman of the life). Davida founding member and sex-worker activist Doroth de Castro is next to Gabriela, and Flavio Lenz is kneeling on the floor. Source: Davida—Prostitution, Civil Rights and Health Archive at the Public Archive of the State Rio de Janeiro (APERJ).

Figure I.10. Gabriela autographing her first book with Rafael Cesar, Flavio Lenz's son—her "almost-son," as she affectionately called him. Photograph by Flavio Lenz.

Figure I.11. Gabriela with her granddaughter, Tatiany, and her daughter Alessandra, Rio de Janeiro, 1992. Photograph by Flavio Lenz.

Figure I.12. Davida members at the organization's founding meeting in July 1992 at the Mirim Samba School in the Estácio neighborhood of Rio de Janeiro. *Pictured, from left to right*: Gabriela Leite, Waldo Cesar (president of Davida from its founding until his death in 2007), Felipe Cesar (Flavio Lenz's brother), Maria Luiza Cesar (Flavio's mother), Doroth de Castro, and Regina Leite (Gabriela's sister). Photo by Flavio Lenz. Source: Davida—Prostitution, Civil Rights and Health Archive at the Public Archive of the State of Rio de Janeiro (APERJ).

By the early 2000s, officials at the Ministry of Labor and Employment were well aware of the Ministry of Health's successful HIV campaigns in partnership with sex-worker organizations. Thus, in 2002, the former invited Gabriela, along with other representatives of the Brazilian Network of Prostitutes, to participate in a workshop to formalize *profissionais do sexo* (literally, sex professionals) as an official profession within the Brazilian Classification of Occupations (CBO). The CBO designates which professions qualify for federal government benefits such as pensions and financial assistance in case of illness, and, as such, the inclusion of sex workers in the database was considered a tremendous achievement for the movement. Another watershed event in 2002 on the national stage was the election of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva as Brazil's president. A charismatic former labor union organizer and cofounder of the left-wing Workers' Party with an unmatched talent for political strategy, Lula grew up in Brazil's impoverished Northeast and never finished secondary school. The Workers' Party candidate was a symbol of resistance for Brazil's

Figure I.13. Gabriela Leite with sex-worker leaders at the 1994 National Meeting of Sex Workers, organized by Davida and held in Rio de Janeiro. Davida leader Doroth de Castro is at Gabriela's *right*, and Lourdes Barreto is at the *far right*. Source: Davida—Prostitution, Civil Rights and Health Archive at the Public Archive of the State of Rio de Janeiro (APERJ).

popular classes, and his election ushered in an era of hope among those who had supported him since his early days organizing against the dictatorship.

Lula's first term coincided with an event that had a profound symbolic effect on sex-worker activism and HIV prevention around the world. In 2003, as part of President George W. Bush's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), the US government introduced a contractual clause stipulating that all entities receiving US government funds adopt a statute explicitly opposing prostitution. At the time, the Brazilian Ministry of Health was negotiating the terms of a large grant that would benefit local NGOs, eventually including Davida. As the very legality of the clause was being challenged, and US organizations were not obligated, at the time, to sign what would come to be known as the "anti-prostitution pledge," the Ministry of Health arranged for the first installment of funding to be paid through an international organization.[9]

9 In 2005, the Alliance for Open Society International questioned the constitutionality of the USAID (United States Agency for International Development) policy, claiming it was a violation of First Amendment rights (*Agency for Int'l Development v. Alliance for Open Society Int'l, Inc.*). Other international NGOs mobilized around the case, and in 2013, the US Supreme Court ruled the policy was an unconstitutional restriction of the rights of US-based organizations.

Intense negotiations between the Ministry of Health, USAID, international NGOs, and Brazil's well-established HIV/AIDS and sex-worker movements ensued in a variety of settings, including national-level meetings over the next few years. As is characteristic of high-profile negotiations involving myriad interests, unequal power dynamics, and large amounts of money, the precise details of these negotiations are remembered differently by different actors. Ultimately, they culminated in Brazil's HIV/AIDS program taking a strong stance and refusing to implement the mandate, eventually rejecting nearly forty million dollars in HIV-prevention funds that had been allocated to the country. The final decision, made in partnership with Davida, the Brazilian Network of Prostitutes, and the broader HIV/AIDS movement, was heralded by the international community and applauded by sex-worker activists globally as an act of defiance vis-à-vis neoimperial foreign policy.

That same year, the creation of Daspu, a clothing line for sex workers, would also contribute to both Gabriela and Davida's national and international fame. Much of the media attention the line received stemmed from a lawsuit brought by the luxury São Paulo clothing store Daslu for copyright infringement and defamation. Many actors and media personalities came out in favor of Daspu, publicly positioning themselves against the high-end retailer, which came to symbolize conspicuous consumption and Brazil's extreme inequality. By featuring both sex-worker and non-sex-worker models on its catwalks, Daspu created a space of safety, ambiguity, and obfuscation that led many sex workers who might not otherwise have been willing to come forward, walk the runway, and confront the prejudices that surround prostitution. Daspu collections designed in partnership with professional designers played on the cultural symbols of sex and prostitution, always featuring cheeky and provocative T-shirts with phrases like "We're Bad But We Could Be Worse." With Daspu, as Gabriela states in her memoir, "Beauty triumphs over hypocrisy."

While Daspu brought an injection of energy and funding to Davida, Brazil's broader political context would become increasingly hostile and repressive toward issues at the core of the prostitutes' movement. Gabriela, always a prescient observer of national politics, noted as she was penning this memoir in the late 2000s that she felt that things were "moving backward" with regard

Non-US organizations, however, still had to sign the "anti-prostitution pledge." The constitutionality of applying the policy to foreign organizations was subsequently challenged, yet in 2020 the Supreme Court ruled, in a majority decision written by Justice Brett Kavanaugh, that foreign organizations operating abroad "possess no rights under the US Constitution" (see https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/19pdf/19-177_b97c.pdf).

Figure I.14. Gabriela celebrating Davida's birthday and the founding of Daspu at Davida's headquarters in Rio de Janeiro, July 15, 2005. Behind Gabriela is a reprint of the cover of the *Fala, mulher da vida* (Speak, woman of the life) educational material. Photograph by Flavio Lenz.

to prostitution. In 2010, disheartened and disappointed with the movement's dynamics with the government, Gabriela decided to run for the lower house of Congress representing the Green Party. True to her rebellious spirit, Gabriela's campaign centered on issues many politicians avoided, such as HIV/AIDS, abortion, and prostitution. While her bid was not successful, she made history as the first public sex worker to run for federal office in Brazil.

In the years before her death, Gabriela increasingly focused on sexual rights and the need to treat the issue of prostitution beyond the limited and often stigmatizing scope of public health. In 2011, at the Brazilian Network of Prostitutes' regional conference in Belém, activists made a decision to no longer apply for federal funding for AIDS projects. In their statement, leaders expressed their sense that the "risk group" framework they had fought so vehemently against in the late 1980s had returned. In 2013, the extent to which the Ministry of Health's approach to HIV prevention had changed became even clearer when the government censored a public information campaign developed for International Sex Workers' Rights Day (June 2).

Figure I.15. Jane Eloy models the Daspu wedding dress at the 27th São Paulo Biennial in 2006. Characteristic of Daspu's humorous and playful approach to its designs, the wedding dress, a collaboration between Davida and artist Tadej Pogačar, is made of sheets and pillowcases from Rio de Janeiro sex motels and accessorized with a necklace and veil made from condoms.

Figure I.16. Gabriela Leite at her 2010 campaign launch. Still from the documentary *A Kiss for Gabriela*, directed by Laura Rebecca Murray.

Sex-worker organizations responded with public protests and strong statements of condemnation, and Gabriela coauthored an article with Flavio Lenz and Laura Murray expressing her sharp critique of the Ministry of Health.[10]

Throughout her life, Gabriela strove to identify and uncover hypocrisies and veiled prejudices surrounding prostitution, gender, and sexuality. Gabriela's indignation at the injustices she witnessed fostered many of her life's most consequential decisions, and this attitude is evidenced in many of the experiences she shares in this memoir. In particular, Gabriela's ardent defense of the word *puta* and her preference for the unvarnished *prostitute* over the more politically palatable and de rigueur *sex worker* are exemplary of her personal philosophy. For her, the word *puta* represented an attitude toward life and a way of doing politics, unapologetically and irreverently so. Her penchant for the term, which is traditionally used as a slur in Portuguese, was rooted in her disdain for attempts to sanitize and make more respectable the profession of the whore. Moreover, she bristled at its use in the common derogatory expression *filho da puta* (literally, "son of a whore," though roughly equivalent to the English expression "son of a bitch"). Gabriela believed it unfair that the children of her colleagues—whom she considered to be devoted mothers, differently from how she saw herself—represented one of the worst epithets in the Portuguese language.[11] She believed that reclaiming and resignifying the word *puta* disrupted the effects of stigma by forcing people to see whores as mothers, protectors, feminists, and workers while defending prostitution within a framework of sexual rights, specifically the right to deviate from normative expressions of gender and sexuality.

The movement's insistence on foregrounding sexuality, pleasure, and combating stigma in all spheres of its activism has been its greatest strength in weathering political upheaval and economic crises over the past four decades. This animating ethos, however, has also been one of its greatest challenges in sustaining funding, particularly as the political climate in Brazil became increasingly conservative and real estate prices in Rio de Janeiro soared as the city prepared for the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Summer Olympic Games. In 2010, Davida decided to move its offices to the Hotel Paris, a building used for prostitution in downtown Rio. Gabriela had always dreamed of Davida having offices in the *zona*, yet the relocation was short lived, as the hotel was sold

10 Leite, Murray, and Lenz. "Peer and Non-peer," 7–25.

11 Um Beijo para Gabriela, "Why Gabriela Likes the Word *Puta*," YouTube video, June 12, 2013, 3:52, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CvKkGPiXv0o.

Figure I.17. Gabriela at the theatrical presentation of *Daughter, Mother, Grandmother, and Whore* at the Brazilian AIDS Conference in São Paulo, 2012. Still from video shot by Angela Donini.

to a French company, which promptly evicted its occupants. As a result, Davida transitioned to operating online and from activists' homes. Facilitating the organization's ongoing activities were institutional partnerships such as those with the Observatório da Prostituição / Prostitution Policy Watch (an initiative bringing together Davida activists and researchers from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro), the Brazilian Interdisciplinary AIDS Association (ABIA), the Brazilian Network of Prostitutes, and the Public Archive of the State of Rio de Janeiro (APERJ), to which Gabriela donated Davida's extensive textual and audiovisual archive in 2013.

Gabriela passed away from lung cancer in October of 2013, approximately a year following her diagnosis. Over the following years, Davida underwent a series of organizational restructurings, continuing to operate online and through its institutional partnerships, even without a physical headquarters in Rio de Janeiro. The group started collaborating more directly with CasaNem, an LGBTQIA+ shelter and radical sociocultural education project founded by Indianarae Siqueira, a self-described "travestigênere puta" activist who has also run for public office. As Gabriela notes in her first memoir, *Eu, mulher da vida*, published in 1992, Brazil's sex-worker movement was largely focused on cisgender women, an orientation that continued throughout her

Figure I.18. The cover of the June 2014 *Beijo da rua* issue produced in honor of Gabriela. The artwork, by Davida member Sylvio Oliveira (who designed many of Daspu's T-shirts), states, "I'm not here to fool around."

lifetime, making this more recent collaboration especially significant.[12] In the 2010s, Daspu also continued its activities, putting on fashion shows throughout Brazil. Davida was particularly active and vocal around the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympic Games, publishing editions of *Beijo da rua*, still edited by Flavio Lenz, about both "megaevents" that denounced both police violence and displacements and produced counternarratives to the moral panic surrounding prostitution at the time. Shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in Brazil, Davida activists held a meeting at the CasaNem and decided to restructure the organization as a collective, changing its name to Coletivo Puta Davida.

In 2022, the Brazilian Network of Prostitutes celebrated thirty-five years of activism. Lourdes Barreto continues to be a leader and an international

12 Leite, *Eu, mulher da vida*, 151.

Figure I.19. Sex workers and allies after a Daspu fashion show at the 2018 Women of the World (WOW) conference in Rio de Janeiro, 2018. Indianarae Siqueira, wearing a white dress, sits in the first row, and Lourdes Barreto is seated in a wheelchair, also in the first row. Photograph by Gabi Carrera.

icon of sex-worker activism, publishing a memoir herself in 2023.[13] In the years following Gabriela's death, sex-worker activists in Brazil also formed two additional national networks, the Unified Sex Workers' Central (CUTS) and the National Association of Sex Professionals (ANPROSEX). During the COVID-19 pandemic, all three networks provided essential supplies, information, and support to their communities across Brazil. These activities drew on long-standing practices of mutual aid; in fact, activists and allies who lived through both the HIV/AIDS epidemic and COVID-19 in Brazil frequently compared the central role sex workers played in both health crises. In contrast to its actions during the HIV epidemic, however, the federal government did not pursue partnerships with social movements during the COVID-19 pandemic. In response, sex workers and their allies widely denounced the egregious negligence of far-right president Jair Bolsonaro, elected in 2018 amid a groundswell of social conservatism in the country.[14]

13 Barreto, *Lourdes Barreto*.

14 Santos et al., *Sex Work*.

The Ten Commandments: How to Be a Professional Puta

Drawn from a series of interviews that were conducted and edited by the Brazilian journalist Marcia Zanelatto, Gabriela's memoir tells the story of her deeply unorthodox life, from the middle-class neighborhoods and Catholic schools of São Paulo to the brothels and samba schools of Rio and later to major international stages. Interspersed throughout the book's two hundred pages is a subversive parody of the Ten Commandments, which Gabriela appropriates to provide advice to prostitutes drawn from her arsenal of professional wisdom. Rather than focus on divulging intimate details about her relationships with clients, Gabriela chooses instead to situate herself and her fellow prostitutes within the complex fabric of Brazilian politics, culture, and society.

In straightforward prose, Gabriela's memoir identifies sex workers as active participants in their country's political and cultural opening of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, a process that resulted in an overhaul of Brazil's fundamental legal order and a reconfiguration of civil society. For Gabriela and her colleagues, this struggle continued into the 2000s and 2010s, as there was still much work to do to ensure that Brazil became meaningfully—not just nominally—democratic. In addition to narrating her life trajectory, Gabriela paints a rich portrait of marginal spaces and people in São Paulo, Belo Horizonte, and Rio de Janeiro, a bohemian underworld shunned by middle-class society but cherished and lovingly portrayed in the pages that follow. This bohemia became crucial to Gabriela's philosophy of sex and politics, a physical as well as metaphorical space on the margins of society from which she and her colleagues could critique the falsities and moralism of the bourgeois mainstream.

Throughout her career, Gabriela spoke with frankness and pride about her profession in an attempt to confront and dispel age-old prejudices surrounding sex work, female sexuality, and sexual practices that were not monogamous, procreative, or strictly heterosexual. And while other grassroots mobilizations in Brazil sought proximity to the federal government via labor organizing and unionization, the sex-worker movement, led by Gabriela and her colleague Lourdes, would always remain somewhat wary of the state as a vehicle for social, economic, and political mobility. To this day, Brazilian prostitutes continue to question the meaning of democracy in a nation in which many racist, classist, and patriarchal power structures from the colonial period have remained intact, even after the end of the dictatorship nearly forty years ago. With her characteristic irreverent humor and sharp political critique, Gabriela, a true organic intellectual, recounts a lifetime of political

Figure I.20. Gabriela speaking at an event at Praça Tiradentes, one of Rio de Janeiro's red-light districts, December 4, 2008. Photograph by Flavio Lenz.

militancy against a backdrop of massive social upheaval as Brazil grappled with the legacies not only of authoritarianism and state violence, but also of slavery, patriarchy, and Catholic social conservatism.

Looking Back while Looking Ahead: Activist Scholarship

As scholars from three different disciplines—anthropology, history, and literature—we wanted this introduction to highlight the memoir's importance to diverse bodies of knowledge. We believe that Gabriela's memoir has unique merit as a historical account of a rapidly shifting period in Brazilian politics and society, a beautifully rendered example of testimonial literature, and a portrait of complex cultural and sociological dynamics against the backdrop of the international AIDS epidemic and the burgeoning sex-workers' rights movement. While Laura knew Gabriela personally and worked with her closely for nearly a decade, Esther and Meg came to know her through their own scholarly research and the conversations with her daughters, Alessandra and Evelin, and her partner, Flavio, that were critical to bringing the publication of this translation to fruition. We hope that our different relationships to the protagonist of this story provide a variety of epistemic and

personal points of entry through which readers can approach the text. Moreover, we chose to join forces on this project due to a shared commitment to bring together scholarship and political activism, a marriage that has a long and fruitful history in Gabriela's life and work, albeit not always a frictionless one. In fact, partnering with allies from a variety of fields and backgrounds was always a priority for Gabriela. The social movement she helped build advocated not only for human rights but also for valuing sex workers as writers, artists, cultural critics, and researchers, as producers of knowledge who also deserve a place in the canon of feminist thought.

Furthermore, we hope that her work, together with this introduction, may help shed light on Brazil's long-standing patterns of social conservatism and far-right extremism that gained new life with Bolsonaro's election in 2018. Never defeatist, Gabriela would surely want her memoir to be seen, as Carol Leigh suggests in her foreword, as an elucidation of the strategies that may be most effective in resisting closed-mindedness, bigotry, and oppression. On a more uplifting and final note, one of the most moving experiences of the process of bringing Gabriela's work to an English readership was working with Carol Leigh on her poignant foreword, which was the last piece of writing Carol authored before her death in November 2022. As Carol wrote so eloquently, this book offers a "whore's-eye view" of the absurdities of commonly held attitudes toward sex, gender, and work—a unique perspective that may just unlock the type of radical critique we need most at this critical juncture.

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