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Tagging for activist ends and strategic ephemerality: creating the Sex Work Database as an activist digital archive

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ABSTRACT

The Sex Work Database project is an interdisciplinary collaboration, currently based in Canada, to research and design digital activist archives of “born digital” and digitized academic research, print and visual media, grassroots activism, and commemorative responses related to missing and murdered women and sex work. This paper discusses the project's development over its first few years, and discusses the complexities of organizing and representing digital/digitized information using a feminist anti-violence framework. In doing so, we introduce and examine two challenges we have encountered to date: designing a tagging system that expresses the activist frame of the Sex Work Database, and the ethics and efficacy of strategic ephemerality for materials produced by sex worker activists.

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The Sex Work Database is the working title for an interdisciplinary research initiative to develop a digital activist archive using feminist anti-oppressive and participatory design processes with groups whose materials are to be archived. The Sex Work Database is one of three digital activist archives being developed by the Digital Archives and Marginalized Communities project (DAMC) at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg, Canada. Where permissions and/or copyright processes allow, the Sex Work Database will combine “born digital” and digitized community activist materials (including ephemera), academic research, legal materials, government documents (including transcripts of hearings and parliamentary discussions of related law and policy), and print and visual media. Overarching objectives for the Digital Archives and Marginalized Communities project are to create and mobilize—via multiple forms of digital media—knowledge that contests and re-envision conceptions of violence against certain people as normal, and where possible, to actively engage in decolonization.¹ The Digital Archives and Marginalized Communities project also challenges standard archival practices, and works to build bridges and dialogue between academic and non-academic communities. In doing so, we set out to create community-based activist digital archives that preserve relevant materials and histories in a way that “resonates with community understandings and knowledge” (Kate Shilton and Ramesh Srinivasan 2007, 96). Ongoing consultations with community members continue to refine specific objectives for

the Sex Work Database. Currently, the database exists to preserve the voices and work of politicized sex workers—first here in Canada, then internationally; to translate between community members by facilitating communication and resource-sharing that usefully expands and enhances work undertaken by these groups; and to encourage much-needed critical engagement and information literacy skills—in and outside of the academy—concerning sex work and sex workers.

Intended audiences for the Sex Work Database include sex worker activists, academics and students working in anti-violence inquiry, journalists reporting on sex work-related issues and events, and members of the general public.² As noted above, the Sex Work Database includes both “born digital” and digitized primary and secondary materials produced by any or all of these groups. Materials we have already collected include:

- organizations’ websites, Facebook pages, blogs, and digital photos (including video);
- print and online ephemera such as pamphlets and posters;
- relevant print and online news items, including press releases by activists as well as government and police;
- policy documents, government reports and proceedings (including transcripts from public hearings); and
- legal briefs and judgements.

As we discuss in more detail below, in terms of the activist documents we have gathered, the Sex Work Database will primarily include items of public record.

This paper begins with a brief overview of the Digital Archives and Marginalized Communities project team and methods. We then examine two major theoretical and methodological challenges encountered over the past three-and-a-half years of work on the Sex Work Database, situating these challenges in the contexts of radical and digital³ activist archives. We discuss the challenges of developing a tagging system in the Sex Work Database that draws disparate records together so that community-produced records might “speak back” to hegemonic messaging about sex work and sex workers. We also outline our permissions process and explore the potential advantages and ramifications of strategic ephemerality (or deliberate transience of records) for marginalized activists. Each of these challenges has to be addressed on an ongoing basis, even as we work with and for work activist communities to develop and organize a digital reservoir that is accessible and consistently maintained.

Team members, tools, and project development

The DAMC project team consists of two co-principal investigators, Dr Kiera Ladner (Indigenous Political Studies) and Dr Shawna Ferris (Women’s and Gender Studies); a post-doctoral research fellow (currently Dr Danielle Allard, Library and Information Science); an archives development coordinator (ADC); and between three and four graduate research assistants at least two of whom are masters students in Archival Studies, with the other/s hired from among Ladner and Ferris’s graduate students. While the principal investigators remain constant,⁴ we have funding for two consecutive two-year post-doctoral researcher contracts.

Ladner and Ferris oversee the team, build relationships and consult with the communities whose materials the archives hold, attain permissions for and add materials to be catalogued in the Sex Work Database, and advise the ADC on any issues that develop in the

cataloguing process. Allard (the current post-doc) is assisting with community consultations and the design and implementation of archival architectures and methodologies. Allard is also developing her own complementary programme of research. In addition, Allard works with Ladner, Ferris, and the ADC to hire and train the research assistants. The ADC and research assistants work at least ten hours per week.

The ADC supervises the research assistants and, as relationships with community develop and trust is built, occasionally accompanies Ladner, Ferris, and Allard on consults with individual community members. To date, Ladner, Ferris, and Allard—the former ADC on the project—have also co-authored a number of conference papers and journal articles. The Archival Studies research assistants are primarily responsible for cataloguing archival materials using the tagging system developed by Ladner and Ferris, Allard, and the ADC in consultation with the communities whose materials we are archiving. Research assistants also have opportunities to co-author papers with Allard, the ADC, and/or Ladner and Ferris if they wish. In short, the Digital Archives and Marginalized Communities project team is designed to do three things simultaneously: to connect with communities whose materials may be archived; to catalogue and develop digital archives as communities advise us; and to train and professionalize all team members in a manner that best serves both the project and the individuals involved.

In doing so, we employ two forms of open-source digital archiving software: desktop record management tool Zotero, which is backed up by a cloud server in the US, and web-based digital archiving tool Omeka, which stores records on our own server located in Mamawipawin, Ladner's community research lab at the University of Manitoba. Both Zotero and Omeka are free, user-friendly, open-source, and developed by the Roy Rosenzweig Center for History and New Media at George Mason University. We chose Zotero and Omeka after extensive investigation of the digital archiving tools available to us three-and-a-half years ago. The Digital Archives and Marginalized Communities project generally, and the Sex Work Database in particular, required digital archiving tools that enable a reasonable amount of manipulation of front-end (the part visitors see and use) and back-end (the coding that creates and supports such visuals and utilities) design. We also required archival design that allowed for differing levels of access to records. Generally, we require tools that allow us to be led by the communities with whom we work to make digital archives that are accessible, reflect community needs and concerns, and enable communities to keep some records private/password-protected and others public.

We employ Zotero only as a transitional tool during the initial saving and cataloguing process. Sex Work Database records cannot remain in Zotero because of the server's location in the United States; all information stored in the US is subject to US law, including the Patriot Act, which enables, among other things, wide scale digital surveillance and record-keeping by US law enforcement of private individual and group digital materials. Community members whose records are included in the Sex Work Database have made very clear to us that investigation under the Patriot Act could be very damaging to them and is not something they wish to risk. Therefore, once records are catalogued, and community consultations have enabled us to design a layout and tagging system that reflect community needs and concerns, the Sex Work Database records are migrated from Zotero into Omeka, where they can be stored on our secure server here in Canada.

As may be clear to readers already, at the time of writing, the Sex Work Database is still in the design stage, and there is much to be done before the archive can be launched publicly.

We have an extensive collection of online and print media articles, activist produced web-based items, and government reports catalogued; and we have worked with a number of individual community consultants to develop a tagging vocabulary and system (discussed below) that reflects the activist politics framing this digital archive. A short while ago, in order to familiarize ourselves with Omeka and to ensure the smooth transfer of records from Zotero, we successfully soft-launched a private, password-protected, and very limited collection of the Sex Work Database records.

Over the next year, we will continue modifying and developing software to reflect rapidly changing computing capabilities and digital archival needs. We are, for example, working with partners to modify open-source code in order that we can search for and archive working copies of entire websites on our own servers.⁵ We are also monitoring systems development carefully to see what modifications, if any, will be needed to implement the politicized tagging system (discussed below) that “operationalizes” the activism of Digital Archives and Marginalized Communities collections. In addition, we will hold a series of consultations with sex worker activist groups across Canada. These consultations will enable us to develop a logo and layout for the Sex Work Database, and to hone the tagging system so that it functions in a way that sex worker activists approve. We will hard-launch a user-friendly, accessible, and politically inflected digital activist archive as soon as possible after the team has processed all requirements coming out of these consultations.

The Sex Work Database as activist archive

This project draws on feminist and sex worker anti-violence, anti-poverty, anti-colonial, and anti-stigma research and activism. This means that we cultivate horizontal and cooperative relationships with the communities involved. We also work to unsettle the colonial impulse to appropriate, codify, and claim voices, practices, or information that are not ours (George Sefa Dei 2000). We practise humility, and collaboration and an in-depth permissions process are absolutely central to our methodology.⁶ Resisting the colonial impulse to produce singular narratives or representations, we instead seek to bring into conversation multiple voices, images, and political positions.

This means that in constructing the Sex Work Database, we make no claims to objectivity; we argue instead for the necessity of complicating dominant cultural representations of sex workers; for more effective alliances with and support for the efforts of those who struggle to establish sex workers as persons worthy of dignity and respect; and the elimination of whore stigma and colonial racism that underlie the symbolic and literal marginalization of and violence against sex workers. To this end, we position our work within the framework of the activist archives. We embrace the conceptualization of the activist archives because it emphasizes that archives are socially constructed spaces where struggles over meaning making take place, and because it argues that they can and should be operationalized with particular social justice objectives in mind. An activist archives such as the Sex Work Database includes:

- a commitment to social justice that privileges marginalized perspectives and users;
- the building of collections focusing on under-represented and marginalized perspectives;
- the privileging of particular community interests such that it is developed in collaboration with said communities. (Verne Harris 2002, 2007)

As an activist archive, the Sex Work Database joins a growing body of mediated, contextualized—and often digital—archival projects. In organizing and describing the information contained within the Sex Work Database, we are actively and deliberately assembling an anti-colonial feminist argument that highlights marginalized voices, and embraces principles of social justice and reciprocity.

Rather than reinforcing patriarchy's social and sexual subordination of women (as earlier feminist anti-violence theorists such as Kathleen L. Barry [1995], Andrea Dworkin [1992], and Catharine A. MacKinnon [1993], argued), sex work can operate in a variety of ways—often counter-hegemonically—within culture. Responding to work of second-wave feminists in the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s, researchers and theorists have started to take politically active sex workers' concerns seriously (Melissa Hope Ditmore, Antonia Levy, and Alys Willman 2010; Jill Nagle 1997; Frances Shaver 2005). Currently, a number of researchers and transnationally-connected grassroots organizations argue that sex workers—particularly those working in the lowest paid and most visible areas of the sex industry (the street-involved or outdoor trade, for example)—deserve laws that protect rather than criminalize and fine them, or violate their civil and human rights (Sarah Hunt 2013; ICRSE 2005; Michael Rekart 2005; Maryam Shahmanesh, Vikram Patel, David Mabey, and Frances Cowan 2008).

In dominant North American society, the special disgust reserved for sex workers—especially those perceived to be willing participants in the sex industry—reflects more than two thousand years of patriarchal Judeo-Christian investment in the regulation of women's bodies and the social enforcement of monogamous heterosexuality. Gail Pheterson (1996) refers to this repugnance as “whore stigma,” a conflation of sex for sale as “selfhood” for sale (11). As Shawna Ferris argues, “the selling of sexual services connotes perpetuation of and participation—willing or no—in an especially abhorrent form of slavery” (2015). Many researchers and activists—ourselves included—struggle to resist whore stigma, emphasizing, as Elya M. Durisin (2009–2010) contends, that “[i]n analyses of sex work, [...] a distinction between the commodification of labour power and the commodification of the body in its entirety, as in slavery, should be maintained.” Durisin explains, “Sex work exists within the gambit of wage relations, whereas slavery is premised on property relations and is the ‘legal ownership of one human being by another’” (130). Nonetheless, sex workers and their feminist allies identify whore stigma as “one of the central issues, and major burdens, for people working in the sex trade” (Leslie Ann Jeffrey and Gayle MacDonald 2006, 136). Many sex worker activists and their allies around the world thus push for the decriminalization of sex workers and their clients, arguing that the removal of laws that criminalize the buying or selling of sex constitutes an important step toward addressing whore stigma and the violence to which stigma leads (CASWLR 2015; DMSC 2015; ICRSE 2005; Pivot Legal Society 2004; SWOP 2015; WHO 2005).

Canadian legislation and public policies relating to prostitution are currently in flux; and now is, therefore, a politically volatile but important time to examine these issues. Sex worker activists in the central Canadian province of Ontario recently won a case before the Supreme Court of Canada that overturned key segments of *Canadian Criminal Code* on the basis that certain laws violate sex workers' rights under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (Ontario 2010, 2012; Canada 2013). Representatives on both sides of this pivotal case employ UN, World Health Organization, and other trans/international human rights policies and research. In doing so, they foreground Canada's relationship on the international stage to countries such as the United States, often considered the birthplace of North American sex

worker activism, whose cultural influence is difficult to underestimate in Canada, and whose differing state-by-state approaches to prostitution we thus note with great interest; Australia and New Zealand, sister-countries to Canada in the Commonwealth where prostitution has been at least partly decriminalized⁷; and a number of Nordic countries, including Sweden, whose controversial “zero tolerance” prostitution laws criminalize clients, or those who buy sexual services, instead of those who sell them. It is beyond the scope of this paper to inter-rogate prostitution laws on the national or international scale. The above details are included instead to provide context for the Sex Work Database project.

Relationships between Indigenous de-colonization, feminist anti-violence, and human rights activism, policy, and research on an inter/transnational scale are similarly complex. This is the case especially in the contexts of violence colonized Indigenous women experience in and outside of sex work. Some Indigenous and sex worker anti-violence groups remain deeply divided on the issue of how exactly to modify or employ legislation to prevent violence against vulnerable populations. Researchers and advocates for almost a thousand confirmed missing and murdered Indigenous women⁸ in Canada point to the negative conflation of Indigenous womanhood and sexual availability in Euro–North American cultures (Kim Anderson 2000; Fay Faraday and Janine Benedict 2011; NWAC 2010; Andrea Smith 2005). Given the extreme racialized and sexualized violence such a conflation facilitates, Indigenous sex workers cannot necessarily operate from the same labour activist standpoint that some non-Indigenous sex workers claim. The Sex Work Database project nonetheless understands urban poverty and violence against Indigenous women and sex workers as *symptoms*, not causes, of the ideological work that gender, race, and class perform in securing a particular social and colonial order. Under this order, certain bodies absorb violence while/so that others remain unscathed (Sherene Razack 2002).

We assemble the Sex Work Database, therefore, with the awareness that, as archivist Verne Harris (2002) wrote over a decade ago, “the archive is a crucible of human experience, a battleground for meaning and significance, a babel of stories, a place and a space of complex and ever-shifting power-plays” (86). Archival processes, however well intended, can reify and further entrench status quo structures of domination and marginalization. Even the most technical of archival procedures may be viewed as “on a side,” as projecting a point of view. We train our team to be cognizant of the responsibility this entails. In translating our activist intentions into tangible and consistent results, we have encountered some challenges with the Sex Work Database tagging system, and we have had to consider the political effects of record retention versus loss/deletion.

Tagging as activism in the Sex Work Database

As noted previously, we are developing a tagging system that is designed to draw records into conversation with one another in ways that privilege sex worker activist messaging. We use the term tagging to describe the community-produced controlled vocabulary of terms used to describe each record within the DAMC (Danielle Allard, Greg Bak, and Shawna Ferris 2014; Danielle Allard and Shawna Ferris 2015). The objective is to marginalize the centre, if only for the space of the Sex Work Database, and thus to support activists who are struggling to speak back to dominant representations of themselves. We ally, then, to de-stigmatize/humanize sex workers, and to call attention to the legitimacy and necessity of their causes—in most cases the education of a wider public about what it is sex workers actually do; the

cultivation of community among their often widely-dispersed members; and the decriminalization of their work to the point that the extreme violence that they too often suffer can be addressed meaningfully by police as well as the general public. Most often represented in dominant media in relation to violence, crime, and “neighbourhood harm” (Ferris 2015; Helga Kristen Hallgrimsdottir, Rachel Phillips, and Cecilia Benoit 2006; Helga Kristen Hallgrimsdottir, Rachel Phillips, Cecilia Benoit, and Kevin Walby 2008), sex work/er representation in such contexts is generally stereotyped and dehumanizing. Such approaches reflect, express, and facilitate whore stigma, even when well-meaning reporters set out to bring attention to violence (Ferris 2015), sex trafficking (Hunt 2013), or socio-cultural vulnerability (Susan Strega, Caitlin Janzen, Jeannie Morgan, Leslie Brown, Robina Thomas, and Jeannine Carrière 2014).

We try in the Sex Work Database to employ tags in a manner that enables activist-produced materials to be retrieved alongside dominant media reports. Through this process, we foreground activists’ ongoing work to speak back to and critique dominant representations of themselves as either criminals or not-so-innocent victims. We also support ongoing struggles to have sex workers recognized more widely as complex, multi-faceted, knowledgeable, and socially valuable human beings. Depending on permissions to republish, this could mean, for example, that clicking the tag “prostitute” could connect visitors to an article by *Calgary Herald* reporter Karen Kleiss, entitled “Witnesses Link Victim with Accused Prostitute Killer” (April 8, 2008), and to an introductory essay of a US-based blog called *The Honest Courtesan*, by a woman whose pen name is Maggie McNeill (2015). Close analysis of Kleiss’s article is beyond the scope of this paper; we suggest, however, that the article does what the language in its title suggests: objectifies murdered sex workers, perpetuates stigma-laden messages about them, and directs reader attention to the man who killed them.⁹ The only sentence Kleiss’s article dedicates exclusively to the women in question reads, “Both women were prostitutes struggling with addictions to crack cocaine.”

McNeill’s introduction details her thoughts about her job, which she introduces via an anecdote in which she playfully lists many of the titles applied to her profession—“A prostitute. A call girl. A harlot, a lady of the evening, a hooker, a strumpet, a doxy, a fille de joie. A demimondaine, a woman of questionable virtue.” She then refuses to apologize for the work she does, and says she writes in an “attempt to give [her] reader a new perspective on how some women make a living, and perhaps show [said reader] that we’re not so different from any other women you might know” (About: Introduction).

It is easy to see how such disparate records might “speak” to one another. McNeill’s blog humanizes where Kleiss’s article dehumanizes sex workers; Kleiss’s article panders to public fascination with serial killers, perpetuates victim blaming (the subtext of any reference to illegal addictions and prostitution being that these women must share at least some of the blame for their own violent murders—as though murder is somehow less reprehensible when prostitutes are victims), and includes no consideration for the suffering of the murdered women’s friends and family, who may read (perhaps even subscribe to) the *Calgary Herald*. McNeill introduces her blog as a “podium” from which she can, among other things, “point out the bias built into nearly every mainstream article about prostitutes.” The “prostitute” tag could, in this example, make Kleiss’s article an illustrative example for McNeill’s critique.

The “could” in the preceding sentence is what gives us pause. After all, we have added the “prostitute” tag to many records,¹⁰ and the current tagging system offers no way to control which records appear next to or even near one another in the collection accessed by a click

of the “prostitute” tag. Is it enough to facilitate the potential juxtaposition of such records, or must we take further design steps to ensure the foregrounding of activist messaging and/or a critique of stigma-laden records? As Kate Eichhorn argues,

Digital archives should enable us, once and for all, to overcome the limitations imposed on us by the archive itself, with its rules of one box or even one folder at a time. I want to suggest, however, that how we interact with archival materials in digital archives may be even more restrictive—most notably because so many of these collections direct us or limit us to engaging with singular collections, one image at a time. (2014, 231)

But the Sex Work Database is not one of the institutional collections to which Eichhorn refers. We employ open-source software and operate outside of traditional archival institutions and practices.¹¹ We also have access to software writers who we trust to modify code to our specifications. Nonetheless, we ask, with Eichhorn, “How do we then create archival proximity in the space of digital archives? Is it even possible?” (2014, 231).

We have reason to hope it is; our team and technicians continue to investigate how we can draw records into useful conversation with one another, where the word “useful” means “in a matter that promotes our activist agenda.” In doing so, we investigate how to ensure that we foreground community knowledges such that the power of dominant narratives/frames is, in the Sex Work Database, undercut and undermined. As researchers and educators, we want (and need) complete media records to track and critique stigma, to applaud and support positive change, and to encourage critical media literacy for our students. As activists, we cannot knowingly hurt or detract from the causes to which we are very deeply dedicated.

We were initially enthusiastic about compiling and making public the Sex Work Database records. However, we have come to consider the consequences of preserving and making public even small sections of (especially) mainstream news items because the bias McNeill references seems so all-encompassing. Thus, while we continue to examine the questions noted in the preceding paragraph, it has become necessary for us to consider whether there is value in loss, change, or erasure of records, especially—as we discuss below—because the perpetuation of whore stigma is so directly linked with extreme violence against sex workers.

Strategic ephemerality: the politics of perpetual representation for sex worker activists

As noted previously, we consult widely and work closely with our community partners to think through what should (or can) be included in the archives, and how we might best work to include and organize content in ways that are meaningful and respectful to all. Issues of ownership of and control over materials resonate in particularly powerful ways in the Sex Work Database. Shilton and Srinivasan (2007) call for participatory processes to facilitate “the preservation of representative, empowered narratives” (90). To date, we have established partnerships with activists and academics in a number of urban centres here in Canada. In consultation with all of these partners—a process that includes paid consultant positions as well as computer hardware and relevant software training, where necessary—we are developing a permissions process that provides options in terms of the public availability of anything groups or individuals choose to include in an archive. We approach activist groups to request permission, for example, to include only items that circulate or have circulated in the public realm. Unless we are invited to do otherwise, we do not archive organizations’ minutes, or group members’ personal materials and stories.

Many of the groups and individuals we work with are intensely and negatively scrutinized (by police, and by journalists and politicians, for example). We want to respect the choices they have made in the details they make public.

In addition to control over how and where their information is framed in the archives, options for participants/donors' information currently range from password protection/private access only to unrestricted public/open access. Hence, we work to ensure that each partner gets as much as they give to the archives, and has access to resources that are of use to them.

As the permissions process has developed, however, we have begun to consider whether some activist-produced materials might need to be strategically ephemeral, or be allowed to "disappear"/be forgotten/drop out of public circulation. If this is the case, we have started, in consultation with groups whose materials we hope to archive, to think about whether the content producers of such materials might be politically contravened by the permanent placement of their materials in the Sex Work Database. Such questions, of course, are not new to activist digital archives. Scholars and activists working in this field regularly express caution regarding digital moral economies that reproduce non-digital historical inequalities and their accompanying symbolic and literal exclusions (Megan Boler 2008; Lyell Davies and Elena Razlogova 2013; Eichhorn 2014; Vernadette V. Gonzalez and Robyn Magalit Rodiriguez 2003; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri 2000; Ananda Mitra 2001; Mark Warschauer 2003). It is generally acknowledged that an activist archive, particularly one that documents a marginalized community, can constitute "a deep political intervention" via "the act of rewriting through collecting and disseminating the evidence of 'what isn't there but was'" (Ajamu X, Topher Campbell, and Mary Stevens 2009, 281 and 271; see also Davies and Razlogova 2013; Kate Eichhorn 2010, 2014; Timothy J. Gilfoyle 1994; Randall C. Jimerson 2009; Sally Roesch Wagner 1989). The decision not to digitize—or to digitize such collections selectively—is equally important and often deeply political (Davies and Razlogova 2013; Eichhorn 2014).

The Sex Work Database operates in a socio-political climate that is largely hostile to sex work and sex workers. Despite the essential legality of the selling of sexual services for remuneration in Canada, for example, where stigma and existing prostitution-related laws that criminalize the purchase of said services as well as other activities relating to this exchange make it risky (even dangerous, in some cases) for people to "come out" publicly as sex workers. In addition, despite the fact that many sex workers and sex worker activists are women, feminist communities are not always safe spaces for sex workers. Those who identify as sex workers in these communities regularly criticize prohibitionist feminists (i.e., feminists who seek to eradicate prostitution) for appropriating their negative work stories for use as evidence that sex work must be eradicated, even if the sex workers involved are not prohibitionist themselves (Jane Doe 2013; Faraday and Benedict 2011). While some sex worker groups and individuals continue to speak out despite their subaltern status in these communities (SPOC 2013), others refrain from further public disclosure (rahbth 2013).

Andy Sorfleet, administrator of the website for the Sex Workers Alliance of Vancouver (SWAV), a group whose website details ten years of sex worker activism, addressed the risks of "outedness" in his farewell message to SWAV supporters. This message appeared briefly on the SWAV homepage following the group's March 2005 announcement that they were disbanding. Sorfleet writes,

We have talked in our discussions recently about the high cost of being a public figure—often personal costs which include barriers to advancement in other aspects of our lives. The most

obvious example is career change. It's no easy task trying to figure out what the hell to do after a career in prostitution. I have known personally several people who have found it impossible. (Andy Sorfleet 2005, para.2)

In addition to the inability to exit the industry, the far-reaching effects of whore stigma too often result in those who identify or have been identified as sex workers having their children taken away by state services; losing or being refused housing; being treated poorly by health practitioners or being unable to access appropriate health services; and being refused assistance by police when they have suffered assault, rape, or other forms of violence (Fireweed 1999; Lisa Lazarus and Kathleen N. Deering 2012; Kate Shannon, Vicky Bright, Shari Allinott, and Debbie Alexson 2007; Kate Shannon, Thomas Kerr, Shari Allinott, Jill Chettiar, Jean Shoveller, and Mark W. Tyndall 2008). The Sex Work Database team, therefore, have developed permissions request processes that allow for a variety of responses from sex worker activist groups; and we accept that some content producers will choose not to donate some or all of their materials to the archive.

While we have yet to have our permission requests rejected outright,¹² for example, one group responded positively but refused permission for certain photographs that appeared in historical versions of their website. The group noted that one member pictured had passed away and could not grant permission for their image to be reproduced. The other members pictured had moved away from sex worker politics and were unwilling—for many of the reasons outlined above—to have their activist histories recorded in perpetuity. While redactions like these result in complicated technological challenges for our development of software for archiving full website histories, we have come to consider such archival lacunae not as failures, but as strategic silences (Rodney Carter 2006) on the part of the disenfranchised, who enact agency by controlling access to their histories and records.

Each of these examples illustrates the necessity of our adhering to ethical practices for work with marginalized groups (Geoffrey C. Bowker and Susan Leigh Star 2000; Leslie Brown and Susan Strega 2005a; Willie Ermine, Raven Sinclair, and Bonnie Jeffery 2004; Riyad A. Shahjahan 2005; Shaver 2003; Shilton and Srinivasan 2007; Clay Spinuzzi 2005; Jessica Yee 2011), as well as the feminist anti-violence methodology driving the Sex Work Database project. We must find a way to balance the academic impulse to archive and save everything with the interests of those whose inclusion or representation in the Sex Work Database could, as a matter of perpetual (and potentially) public record, continue or facilitate their abjection, or enforce a form of political and personal stasis, preventing their moving on from a politically volatile statement or identity, or a specific moment of political engagement.

Next steps in the research and development of the Sex Work Database

As noted above, over the next year, in addition to modifying and developing software to reflect rapidly changing computing capabilities and digital archival needs, we will hold a series of consultations with sex worker activist groups across Canada. At the time of writing, we are working with community consultants to develop wider scale consultation plans—a not insubstantial challenge, given the breadth and distribution of sex worker activist communities across the country. Once these details are confirmed, Ferris, Allard, and a research assistant will travel for four community consultations as advised/directed by our community consultants. At each consultation team members will share preliminary Sex Work Database organization and contents, and work with community members to further develop the

collection's objectives, including the tagging system. We will also work with politicized sex working communities to develop a visual design and layout for each section of the Sex Work Database. We will return from these consults to continue development—with, we hope, an additional group of paid community consultants ready to advise—according to community direction/s.

Our adherence to participatory design means that any part of these plans could change at any time. Currently, we anticipate the hard launch of the Sex Work Database portions for which permissions have been secured and design finalized will happen within a year to eighteen months after final community consultation. Thereafter, we will continue to add to and maintain the Sex Work Database, and community consultants will be encouraged to participate in collaborative projects, including the curation and creation of online exhibits. We anticipate—and hope, and trust—that the Sex Work Database will encourage and facilitate further related community-based and academic initiatives.

Notes

1. In the Canadian context, decolonization describes the unlearning and stripping away of the powerful ideological structures from more than five hundred years of white settler colonialism imposed on many Indigenous nations via socio-cultural, economic, legal, educational, and political norms. In addition to the stealing of Indigenous lands through a series of treaties—most of which have not been honoured—and the establishment of a land Reserve system still in operation today, Canada's Indian Act was a particularly effective element of the national colonial project. Established shortly after Canada's official formation as a country, the act instituted a Residential School system that removed children as young as four years old from their communities and effectively incarcerated them in Residential Schools. Recently recognized by the United Nations as a form of cultural genocide, Indian Residential Schools (IRS) operated with the express goal of "training the Indian out of the child." As the recently-concluded Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission findings make clear, the IRS indoctrinated children in colonial patriarchy and internalized racism; staff at the schools also enacted widespread physical and emotional abuse, as well as sexual violence (TRC 2015a). Begun in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, the last Residential School closed in 1996 in the province of Saskatchewan. Indigenous and non-Indigenous persons and groups have long resisted the violent colonial project. As we discuss in more detail later in this paper, decolonization names these processes of recognition, cooperation, and resistance—of recognizing and attempting to remedy the effects of such long-term colonial violence.
2. As the project proceeds, consultation and collaboration with community could significantly alter availability of materials to some or all of these audiences.
3. We use the term "digital archives" to refer to DAMC collections and to other collections of "born digital" and digitized materials available online via public, institutional, and personal sites. Recognizing that "[s]o-called digital archives have their own materiality and are often closely linked to physical repositories" (Eichhorn 2014, 236, n2), we nonetheless employ "digital archives" to differentiate DAMC work from archives housed solely in physical spaces.
4. In fact, both Ferris and Ladner anticipate that the DAMC project will be career-long. While the project is currently funded externally and we will continue to apply for further grants, community interest, existing infrastructure, and our use of free open-source software offer the potential to continue regardless. What this means in the short term is that we are using current funds to establish both the digital and methodological architecture of all three of DAMC archives, including plans for worst case (no more external funds) and best case (continued multi-year funding) scenarios. Ultimately, we trust that DAMC archives will belong to the community and be maintained via a form of crowd-sourcing, or wider community engagement. This is why we are consulting widely with all communities involved, and will be working to build capacity

among community members over the next few years. That said, as long as Ladner, Ferris, and Allard work in academia, we will be able to maintain and upgrade servers as needed, train at least one student each per year to support community in archival maintenance, and mentor new academics for this ongoing activist project. In addition, two of the DAMC archives—Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Database and Post-Apology Indian Residential School Database—may fit the mandate of the National Research Centre on Indian Residential Schools (TRC 2015b) that is housed here at the University of Manitoba. We are cultivating partnerships with this centre that may result in more formal support or maintenance of DAMC archives.

5. Before we found Heratrix, the open-source code we are modifying, we worked for two years taking multiple screenshots of activist websites and saving them as high-resolution pdfs—a process that was fraught with frustration in part because it was impossible to reproduce the interactivity of the website visitor's experience. Since the early days of the DAMC project, not only have websites become much more complex and extensive (making our original cataloguing records near impossible to do comprehensively, even for a single site), digital archiving tools such as Archive It have been developed to enable the saving of entire websites in their original forms/layouts. Because the institutional version of Archive It—which our own institution's archives employ—requires that records be saved on US servers, we are working with partners to modify Heratrix, key source code from Archive It, such that we may save such interactive copies of websites on our server/s.
6. Canadian researchers are governed by the 2014 Tri-Council Policy Statement for ethical research with human subjects. Tri-Council policy encourages collaboration between researchers and community partners, advocates elaborate consultation with those involved in research (TCPS 2014, article 4.7, 53), and notes "Building reciprocal, trusting relationships will take time," when working with Indigenous communities (TCPS 2 2014, ch. 9, 105). We argue that such attention to relationship building benefits researchers working with any marginalized communities, especially those who have been mistreated and exploited by researchers in the past. For more on anti-oppressive and anti-colonial research methods, see Kalawant Bhopal's "Gender, Identity and Experience: Researching Marginalised Groups" (2010), Leslie Brown and Susan Strega's *Research as Resistance: Critical, Indigenous, & Anti-oppressive Approaches* (2005b), Elizabeth Kendall, Naomi Sunderland, Leda Barnett, Glenda Nalder, and Christopher Matthews' "Beyond the Rhetoric of Participatory Research in Indigenous Communities" (2011), Shilton and Srinivasan's "Counterpoint: Participatory Appraisal and Arrangement for Multicultural Archival Collections" (2007), Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing Methodologies* (2012), Emily Van der Meulen's "Action Research with Sex Workers: Dismantling Barriers and Building Bridges" (2011), and Shawn Wilson's *Research is Ceremony* (2008).
7. Decriminalization of prostitution eliminates any laws that criminalize sex workers and their clients (WHO 2005).
8. See It Starts With Us (2015), NMS (2015), and Maryanne Pearce (2013).
9. Kleiss's April 8, 2008 article is part of a series of articles Kleiss wrote about an Edmonton, Canada-based serial killer whose surname appears in a significant portion of associated headlines. The headlines alone suggest a preoccupation with the killer. For more analysis of sex work-related news reporting, see chapters 1 and 2 of Ferris's book, *Street Sex Work and Canadian Cities* (2015), Hallgrimsdottir et al.'s "Sporting Girls, Streetwalkers, and Inmates of Houses of Ill Repute: Media Narratives and the Historical Mutability of Prostitution Stigmas" (2008), Yasmin Jiwani and Mary Lynn Young's "Missing and Murdered Women: Reproducing Marginality in News Discourses" (2006), and Strega et al.'s "Never Innocent Victims: Street Sex Workers in Canadian Print Media" (2014).
10. As an activist archive, we employ only terms that have been vetted by the activist communities we support. It is important to note that "prostitute" is not a term the activists with whom we ally use to describe themselves. However, because "prostitute" is a legal term and one that students and journalists—audiences we hope will use the Sex Work Database—regularly employ, our community consultants have given us the go-ahead to use it.
11. One of this paper's blind reviewers asked that we consider whether we are in fact developing a new form of collection, not a digital archive. We are intrigued by this question but do not

have a direct answer now. However, we thank the reviewer for flagging this part of the project for us. What we can say, currently, is that while non-academic community members accept the project for what it is—i.e., a means of supporting and disseminating community activism—the interdisciplinarity of the project continues to create both excitement and discomfort in academic audiences. The project has never fit comfortably in Archival Studies, but our discussions of process and development have been equally awkward to place elsewhere given their engagement with Archival Studies and Information Science Literature.

12. In fact, to date every sex worker activist group we have approached for materials has been enthusiastic about both the Sex Work Database project and the opportunity to donate.

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