(Re)memberance in Practice: 

Making Famous, Transforming the Legacies of Ill-fame

By Fionna Fahey

ABSTRACT. Recent legislation has increased scrutiny and vulnerability to sex worker communities. Sex work has been a highly contested issue in academia and politics, despite its long history. By centering works of thinkers from historically marginalized communities, this research will act intentionally in solidarity with sex workers most vulnerable to harm. Theorizers in Black and Indigenous Feminisms, Queer theory and Trans studies have crafted methodologies to (re)cover and (re)member histories lost to colonial structures of violence. This project centers the epistemologies of these communities in order to account for the variety of intersecting identities held by sex workers. Archival (re)search, oral history, and visual (re)mapping will be used to (re)member sex workers’ legacies in San Luis Obispo. As a predominantly white, and wealthy city, this project will give meaning to larger structures that enact this violence and silencing. This paper aims to highlight the unwavering resilience fostered within sex work communities by prioritizing the lived experiences of sex workers as experts in their own identities and experiences.

Situating the Project

Despite sex work’s common name as “the oldest profession” (Bailey and Sterling, 2017), academics and activists have had tensions in their stance on sex worker’s rights. The 2018 passing of the Stop Enabling Sex Trafficking Act (SESTA) and Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA), have put consensual sex workers in more dangerous and vulnerable positions by conflating sex work to sex trafficking (Chamberlain, 2019). These laws have aided in silencing and further marginalizing sex workers, by closing online platforms having detrimental effects to sex workers’ visibility and community ties (Stanger, 2018). Harmful political structures have actively erased sex workers’ political and legal autonomy and silenced the nuanced experiences of those involved in sex work (Jeffrey and Macdonald, 2016).

San Luis Obispo, situated on California’s Central Coast, in between San Francisco and Los Angeles, has been called “The Happiest City in America” due to its safe, pedestrian-friendly, college town nature (Oprah Show, 2011). The county is also almost three quarters white with the majority of families’ incomes over California’s median income, at $75,410 (San Luis Obispo Chamber of Commerce). San Luis Obispo county has been structured, both in appearance and spatially, superior to sex work, being that the closest strip club is in the next county south. The purpose of this research project is to (re)member and assert lived narratives of sex workers in San Luis Obispo, and analyzes the way in which dominant structures have encouraged the silencing of these voices.

The process of (re)membering comes from Black feminist author, Cynthia Dillard, who details the way in which colonial structures, including research practices, have functioned to silence and seduce the forgetting of Black womxn’s bodies and histories (Dillard, 2013). Similar to Dillard’s critiques of western structures of knowledge production, Indigenous scholars have called for decolonized methodologies that value and uplift narratives of folks at “spaces of marginalization” in order to transform into “become spaces of resistance and hope,” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012 p.4). Through the integration of historical analyses, archival research, and feminist studies this project centers the resiliency of sex workers in a society that continuously functions to silence, criminalize and stigmatize their communities.

This paper will aim to answer the following questions: What does it mean to prioritize the histories and voices of sex workers in San Luis Obispo? What are the experiences/ and repercussions of their erasure?
Positionality for Solidarity
In efforts to build long-standing relationships with reciprocity, it is important to be forefront in my position to ensure accountability. As a cis white person who has never done full service sex work (FSSW), I am most accountable to Black, Indigenous and trans* sex workers of color, that are most subject to violence, marginalization and criminalization.

Guiding Literature and Theoretical Framework
In order to be most intersectional and anti-racist in my analysis, alongside citation politics from the Digital Feminist Collective, I am centering the framework of my project off of work guided by Black, Indigenous, People of Color, queer, trans*, sex worker, and feminist epistemologies (2019). As often times sex work is a decision made by those with intersecting identities of marginalization, it is imperative to center this project along with discourse from these theorizing groups. Critical race, queer and feminist scholars have found avenues of knowledge production in asserting, what Linda Tuhiwai Smith calls, “contested histories” as avenues to discuss dominating structures at large and form space for resilience in these structures (2012, p. 34). This literature review will attempt to draw parallels and tensions between methodologies and epistemologies in order to further guide the work of this project.

History, Silence, and Reclamation
To understand experiences of folks with marginalized identities, standpoint theory has been employed to value the lived experience of those living on the margins but has still been problematic in the continual development. Standpoint theory, as exemplified by Cynthia Dillard is rooted in the “historical and contemporary contexts of oppressions and resistance for African ascendant women... [moving] away from the tradition of research as a recipe to fix a 'problem' to a metaphor that centers in/on reciprocity and relationship ... knowing, the production of knowledge, and its use,” (Dillard, 2012 p. 50). Chicana feminist ethnographer, Cindy Cruz, continues the need for disrupting larger hegemonic structures, in order to give these lived experiences validation and space for transformative action (Cruz, 2001).

The impacts of colonial structures of criminalization and silencing on sex workers can be understood in reference to Dian Million’s Felt Theory. Million articulates how the lived experiences and feelings of Indigenous womxn “creates a context for a more complex ‘telling’ one that illuminates the deeper meaning of their education,” (p.54). Based of Million’s “Felt Theory” and “Felt Analysis”, sex workers’ (re)covered histories and lived emotions are invaluable to articulate the dominant structures of silencing and erasure. Reclaiming the histories with testimony, as Linda Tuhiwai Smith points out, can lead for the production of “alternative knowledges” and be transformative and “powerful form of resistance,” (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 36).

Archival (re)search has been a common practice for scholars of color and queer scholars in order to assert narratives through lenses that disrupt dominant history. Dismantling historical archives through queer reading can allow for room to discern larger structures of transphobia, heteronormativity, colonial, etc. (Zepeda, 2018). Zepeda furthers the need for a more intersectional approach to archival work that utilizes a queer of color lens, in order to be fully transformative in archival processes. Another thoughtful and guiding approach to archival work comes from Saidaya Hartman who stories the lives of Black womxn and girls in order to celebrate the ”radical thinkers who tirelessly imagined other ways to live and never failed to consider how the world might be otherwise,” (Hartman, 2019 p.xv). Her work creatively amplifies the voices of those left voiceless to traditional archives, through Black feminist praxis.

The ways in which colonial structures have orchestrated spatial and physical displacement of bodies and communities has pushed for the examination of the politics of space. Space can be
used as a juncture for critiques of colonialism and disruptive measures (Puar, 2002). Looking at space through a sex work affirming, feminist lens can draw on resilience under larger structural oppressions. A 2018 study conducted by several researchers from social work, health and sexuality studies sex workers collaboratively mapped their own strategies and spatial awareness that guard them from violence, stigma, and wellbeing (Orchard et al, 2018).

**Voicing, Gathering, and (Re)imagination**

Feminist and Indigenous scholars have devised similar methodologies for voicing and practicing research with historically silenced communities. As Leslie Ann Jeffrey and Gayle Macdonald assert, sex workers have been the muse of research for decades, but have not always been uplifted to a position of authority along with researchers (2006, p.2). Wendy Rickard combats this trend with her concept of "shared authority" that allows for relationships, collective building, and rich oral history gathering with sex workers (2003). These methods intersect with Indigenous methodologies that allow for folks to “talk back” under structures that have historically silenced them (Tuiwai Smith, 2012) and concepts of relationality (Wilson, 2018). Relationality requires participants to “develop [their] own relationship with ideas and to therefore form their own conclusions.” (p.94). Congruency in these praxes have shaped the methodologies of this project in order to assemble a more robust understanding of sex workers’ resiliency through stories of their oppressions.

**Tensions in Literature**

Although Indigenous paradigms can align with research paradigms that affirm the lived experiences of sex workers, there are tensions that arise between Indigenous scholars and sex work. Indigenous feminist and activist for Missing Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, Robyn Bourgeois, calls for the abolition of sex work for its connection to white supremacy that perpetuates violence against Indigenous folks. This abolitionist framework is constant in feminist literature, but often alludes to more carceral options, that won’t attack colonization and white supremacy at its roots.

Sarah Hunt, an Indigenous feminist attends to these notions but insists that “the voices and experiences of sex workers must be recognized along with their particular histories, which could include victimization ... while respecting their decisions, agency, and resilience,” (Hunt, 2013, p.96). Hunt’s prioritizing of sex workers’ own self determination and resilience differs from sex work exclusionary feminist rhetoric which see the criminalization of sex work as a means to ending white supremacy. Sex work exists and functions off of colonial, capitalistic structures that perpetuate violence; however, addressing sex work with more criminalization is violent to folks engaging in sex work, often with intersecting identities of oppression. Hunt and Sayers conclude their argument towards sex worker exclusionary feminists by asserting that “sex workers are persons who are worthy of freedom, respect and love (2015). It is important to critique the violence perpetuated by these systems, while also affirming folks living on the margins and partaking in these systems for their livelihood. By using methodologies set forth by the listed scholars, history and alternate histories can enlighten the interworking of these systems and potentially work towards transforming them.

**Methodologies and Timeline**

The primary steps of this project use depth archival research in order to look at San Luis Obispo historical archives through an intersectional lens. As Zepeda portrays, looking at archival works through an alternative lens, specifically a queer of color reading can be transformative in the knowledge that is produced (Zepeda, 2018). By (re)covering the histories of sex workers in SLO
with an intersectional lens and contextualizing the archives with concurrent histories of institutional power, we can be transformative in their (re)memberence.

The preliminary archival findings for this project utilized the archives from Cal Poly and digital archives for local newspapers and mapping. Key words such as “ill-fame [sic]”, “prostitute [sic]”, “brothel-keepers [sic]”, “red-light”. In excavating history from San Luis Obispo’s 1915-1924 Jail Register, womxn were arrested for crimes of “vagrancy”, “insanity”, “false pretense obtaining goods”, and most of their occupations listed “housewife”. The findings from this project, entail further recovery through a longer period of time, to fully construct holistic narratives of sex work in the early 20th century.

Due to time limitations this project narrows in on a biographical case study of one historical figure of sex work in San Luis Obispo, Nancy Emeline Call. This work serves as the first step in larger research analyzing the foundations of anti-sex work narratives, policies, and stigma.

**Archive as Method of (Re)memberence**

The violence against folks who have taken a part in sex work, is intertwined with larger, colonial, and carceral structures that continue to control dominant narratives, erasing the lives of sex workers. Visual images, art, and media can be powerful tools of storytelling that privilege counter stories and a method for (re)membering (Zepeda, 2014). This project uncovers roots of institutional violence and sex worker’s meaningful resiliency through the examination of visual and archival artifacts.

Archives and Special Collections are typically held under institutional control and provide a means of understanding history, while warranting critiques of whose lives are prioritized to be (re)membered in the archive. As feminist epistemologies continue to evolve, the archive has transcended in to “a site and practice integral to knowledge making, cultural production, and activism,” (Eichorn, 2013 p.3). Michelle Caswell deepens the role of an archivist and the archive through “feminist standpoint appraisal”, a methodology that values reflexivity and epistemologies of the archivist as a “situated agent who centers ways of being and knowing from the margins,” (Caswell, 2019 p.7). Archival research on sex work, has further tensions around autonomy, structural violence and cultural norms (Gilfoyle, 2014). In this project, feminist archival (re)memberence work will be used in order to create memorials of resiliency. This process necessitates reading between the blank spaces, to piece together segmented histories to “yield a richer picture,” (Hartman, 2019).

**Institutionalized Control**

Nancy Emeline Call (Figure 1.1) was a mother and influential womxn to sex workers’ lives in the early 1900’s. During the 1870’s and 1880’s, Call enacted a series of “female boarding houses”, between Morro St and Palm St, near downtown SLO (Figure 1.2). Her knowledge and involvement in this work was regularly ridiculed. During her life she was arrested two times for providing spaces for this work (Historic Resources Group,2014). These collective buildings were originally recorded on the Sanborn Maps, but were erased, revised, or, gleaned by the 1909 Sanborn Maps (Figure 1.3). This exemplifies the erasure, and institutional erasure of sex work that continues today.
Figure 1.1 Nancy Emiline Call, circa 1860’s to late 1800’s. Courtesy of the History Center of San Luis Obispo County

The San Luis Obispo Historical Statement contextualizes SLO by mentioning Nancy E. Call and her number of “female boarding houses” located on Palm St. and Moro St. (Figure 1.2) (Historic Resources Group, 2014). As evident by the 1888 Sanborn maps, multiple houses were located at the intersection.

Figure 1.2 The 1888 Sanborn maps of San Luis Obispo, Sheet 3, retrieved from the Library of Congress, zoomed in for accessibility, “female boarding houses” indicated in pink.

The Sanborn maps were revised in 1891 to reflect new developments in downtown San Luis Obispo. The published maps for 1891, 1903, 1905 reflected fewer numbers of “female boarding houses”; however, by 1909, the maps were revised to exclude these structures (Figure 1.3).
The erasure of the structures from the Sanborn maps show the intentional erasure of sex work in San Luis Obispo. During this time the Progressive movement, was rapidly moving to close brothels as opposition in the Anti-vice missions (Matsubara, 2006). Moreover, this war was ignited, by the “[specific] sexual narrative of the white slavery panic”, “[that was] born in the same context of the post-emancipation era,” (Matsubara, 2006 p.57). The White Slave Traffic or Mann Act of 1910 has been weaponized to further white supremacy, by criminalizing the transport of womxn for “‘immoral purposes,’ with an emphasis on prostitution,” (Gaskew, 2012). This federal legislation has structured the fight against sex trafficking (Gaskew, 2012), by giving legal legitimacy to anti sex work narratives. This enactment of these laws show the ways structural violence against sex workers and public stigma have continued to be institutionalized into society.

**Lasting Narratives**
A report on the anti-vice crusade in 1919 mentioned that San Luis Obispo had about ten houses of “ill-fame” near downtown (San Luis Obispo Daily Telegram, 1919), showing that sex work continued in San Luis Obispo regardless of the legislation and erasure from the Sanborn maps. The article continued to project the need for saving women involved in sex work (Figure 1.4), focusing on the morality of sex work. This shows the framework that continues to control narratives and visibility of sex workers. The same strategies are used today by anti-sex trafficking organizations, such as Shared Hope International, a religious organization that does advocacy and anti-sex trafficking policies. On their webpage defining sex trafficking, Shared Hope international asserts, “Society may call it prostitution but federal law calls it sex trafficking, victims need help not judgement or punishment.” (2019). This type of narrative completely disregards the autonomy, agency, and resiliency of sex workers, and works to enforce colonial stereotypes of respectability, morality, and gender roles.
Figure 1.4 Clipping from San Luis Obispo Daily Telegram from June 2, 1919 retrieved from NewsBank

Mother to Many Generations
In Nancy Emeline Call’s online memorial, she is only remembered for her historical residency in San Luis Obispo, and her familial connections. There is no mention of her activism and role within the sex worker community. This shows the way in which overarching systems dictate who and how we mourn. Nancy Emeline Call has only been able to be remembered as a mother and widow, but what if we (re)member her as a pivotal activist, and leader for sex worker/feminist movements? She can be (re)membered as a mother (Figure 1.5) in a multitude of ways to the sex workers of her time and future generations because of her foundational rejection to hegemonic structures.

Figure 1.5 Nancy Emeline Call’s gravestone, courtesy of JDKille, retrieved from findagrave.com

The conscious excluding of sex workers’ involvement and legacy in San Luis Obispo in the early 20th century reflects the media violence weaponized against sex workers, that perpetuate stereotypes, stigma, and marginalization that continues today. When sex workers’ deaths are discussed in media outlets, there is often a heightened meaning placed on their criminal record, and
little recognition of the institutionalized violence harming sex workers (Luna, 2018). This harmful news coverage is similar to the way missing and murdered Indigenous womxn and girls are underreported, racialized, and fail to represent the severity of the institutionalized violence (Gilchrist, 2010). The way social stigmas translate into news coverage discussed by Gilchrist, parallels coverage of sex workers’ violence. In a society that doesn’t value the lives of sex workers, it is important to posit their lives and legacies as acts of solidarity and mourning for their persistent resiliency.

Every detail excavated about sex workers’ resiliency that counters dominant discourse acts as a flower on their grave, a candle held in the air at their vigil, a framed picture at an altar, and a poetic eulogy. This archival work, as Alexis Pauline Gumbs deems “queer ecology”, allows for magical findings of the spirit, love, and wisdom of folks not published or archived in traditional institutions (2011).

**Conclusion**
Due to the current legislation and acts of silencing that continues to affect the livelihood of sex workers, this project is necessary to uncover rich histories of sex workers in San Luis Obispo and statements of the larger structures that erased these histories. By centering works of thinkers from historically marginalized communities, this research will act intentionally in solidarity with sex workers most vulnerable to harm. Although, this project is grounded in the historical context of San Luis Obispo, the guiding motivation of (re)membering sex workers for their resilience should be adopted in policy recommendations. Affirmations of sex workers’ lives could not come at a more vital time in our current society that actively silences, marginalizes, and perpetuates lethal violence towards their communities.

**Further Research**
The preliminary findings in this part of the project, pose the necessity for further research and investigation into outside archive sources and dialogue from active and former sex workers. Further research will be conducted in the archive as well as in the collection of oral histories. The archival research shows space and historical tools of mapping have institutionalized erasure against sex workers, posing the potentiality for (re)mapping with interlocutors.

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