

Sexing the Archive: Queer Porn and Subcultural Histories*

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Abstract

Pornography's tricky ontology, one that hovers between registers of documentary and fantasy, poses challenges to its use as a source in the writing of queer histories. That, combined with the genre's explicit content and ongoing cultural debates on the political and material conditions of its production, circulation and consumption, has tended to make historians reluctant to trust it when writing queer pasts. In this essay we address some of those concerns. Given the central role pornography has historically played in queer politics, sexual subjectification and embodiment, leaving it out of queer historiographical work risks reproducing some of the very logics of exclusion that have marked queer lives and archives. We therefore offer some methodological considerations on how to remediate the absent presence of the genre in queer historiographies.

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Despite being a widely consumed genre of visual culture, pornography remains a touchy subject in contemporary queer historiography. Queer archives overflow with it, but queer histories don't. Historically associated with low culture and distrusted by value systems that have tended to privilege the "high" faculties of reason to the detriment of the "base" materiality of the body, its affects and appetites, porn is too rarely approached as a legitimate source with which to think cultural, affective, intellectual, and sexual histories. In this reflective essay we draw from porn studies and queer historiographies in order to draw some methodological considerations about the value, benefits and challenges posed by porn archives to the writing of queer subcultural histories. Rather than trying to solve porn's double ontological status as both documentary and fantasy, we locate in that defining feature of the genre porn's value as a historical source. Simultaneously a document of sex cultures and of the edges of morality, and a historically and culturally situated speculation on what bodies and sex may become, porn offers both cultural critics and historians a rich archive for deepening their knowledge of the intersections of culture, morality, pleasure, community, embodiment and the politics of belonging.

Pornography and the archive are twin children of modernity. While explicit words and images, and the practice of collecting itself, predate the advent of what has come to be known as modernity, the formalization of *pornography* as a taxonomical category in visual culture is inseparable from the development of modern archival practices.^[1] As Walter Kendrick has shown, the simultaneous birth of *pornography* and the archive as modern phenomena—or the birth of pornography as a matter of concern for modern archiving—can be traced back to the discoveries of Herculaneum (1738) and Pompeii (1748) and the “lascivious” frescoes unearthed during those archaeological excavations.^[2] These raised a problem at a moment and in a place in which the history of European antiquity seemed to reveal itself as a

“compelling spectacle of an unmediated vision.”^[3] If the uniqueness and thus archaeological value of these artifacts warranted their preservation, their “lascivious” content raised questions familiar to anyone working at an archive today: what can and should be displayed? What ought instead to be kept out of public sight and public histories? Emerging as a problem not only of archiving but also of visibility and its limits, these images demanded a new taxonomy: the term *pornographers* was eventually used a century later by Karl Otfried Müller in reference to the creators of these kinds of ancient relics.^[4] *Pornography*, previously used in relation to literary or visual depictions of sex workers, became, by the mid-19th century, a category for “obscene” content.^[5] Importantly, the new taxonomy had more to do with access than suppression. Rather than being used to keep those artifacts out of sight, it regulated who could examine them and under what conditions.^[6] Pornography was not only a matter of content but also, given its perceived threat to the social body - from 19th-century moral panics to today’s discourse about “porn addiction” - a matter of public concern. This would eventually lead to the formalization of the concept in legal discourse and, consequently, to its criminal and juridical oversight.^[7] In being constituted through selection, classification, and regulated access, both pornography and the archive were born synchronously and politically as forms of that administration of the visible and the invisible that Jacques Rancière called the “distribution of the sensible.”^[8]

Interestingly, negotiating (in)visibility also defines porn itself as a mature visual genre. As Linda Williams argues, in being guided by a principle of maximum visibility—that is, by seeking to make visible pleasure itself—pornography is forced to hit against the limits

of its form. It is because it operates as an index for a pleasure that cannot be seen that the so-called “money shot” became the narrative climax of a pornographic sequence,^[9] while in gay male porn produced during the AIDS crisis and before the development and normalization of antiretroviral therapies for management and prophylaxis of HIV, that same negotiation of (in)visibility also fuelled the ways in which visible semen started standing in for invisible HIV.^[10] Porn is not straightforwardly a documentary record of how people have or have had sex. Nor is it merely a fiction about sex, a simple source to write histories of how societies and different actors within them have *imagined* sex. We argue that it is due to its complicated ontology “oscillating [between] registers of hyperbole and authenticity,”^[11] that porn is a difficult but potentially rewarding primary source for historians.

Despite porn’s centrality to sexuality, when it comes to queer scholarship scholars too often avoid writing about it. Outside of critical histories of pornography such as Walter Kendrick’s, Lynn Hunt’s, Linda Williams’s, or Susan Stryker’s, porn too seldom appears as a source in historical work primarily focused on other, adjacent, objects of study.^[12] More than 35 years since Gayle Rubin declared that “the time has come to think about sex,”^[13] and more than 25 years since Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick named “the exact, contingent space of indeterminacy [...] between the political and the sexual” as “the most fertile space of ideological formation,”^[14] too many queer historians still remain reluctant to look at pornography to make these links explicit. Such reluctance can be at least partially explained by attending to the embrace of respectability politics in both LGBTQ+ lobbying and scholarship.^[15]

Yet, ignoring the porn in the archive threatens queer history by writing the industry and its outputs out of it. Social and political histories of queerness are inseparable from the histories of queer sex and queer porn. Both sex and porn have been crucial to the processes of identification and recognition that brought queers together as a collective with political agency. Pornography itself has been an important tool in the pedagogy of queer bodies, pleasures and desires.^[16] “Porn,” Richard Dyer writes, “involves us bodily in that education [of desire].”^[17] Queer porn is “a tool to educate and validate our lives,” says adult performer Jiz Lee, calling it “one of the few mediums that can explicitly tell our stories.”^[18] Queer porn, just like queer sex, does not merely document worlds; it is “world-making.”^[19]

Two case studies from recent scholarship illustrate two seemingly different but in fact related queer historiographical approaches to the pornographic content that makes up so much of existing queer archives, whether private or institutionalized. Jim Downs’s *Stand By Me* sheds light on often-observed ideological debates between activists, and it is an admirable step away from some teleological histories in which promiscuity led *ipso facto* to the AIDS epidemic. Still, Downs makes the somewhat perplexing move of ignoring sex, on purpose. In the book’s opening pages, he describes attending an early screening of Joseph Lovett’s *Gay Sex in the 70s* and developing discomfort at the “film’s narrative, [in which] gay liberation was the liberation of gay men’s sexual urges.”^[20] He uses this discomfort to frame his goal: “to correct the hypersexual caricature” of gay liberation.^[21] One particular observation—Downs’s reaction to an ad for a masturbation machine placed next to an article about the Wages for Housework campaign in a September 1976 edition of the Canadian gay liberation

newspaper *The Body Politic*—reveals the limitations of his approach. Noting the placement of the ad next to the article, Downs writes, “On a foundation of ads that promoted sex and sex toys, *The Body Politic* covered a wide range of issues.”^[22] The implication is that, unlike the article, the ad had nothing to do with the paper’s politics. Yet, a masturbation machine, as recent materialist feminist, ecocritical, and sexological theory can attest, is intimately related to the questions of labor (social, emotional, and sexual) around which Wages For Housework campaigners, and other socialist feminists, were organizing, even if in ways those activists could not always themselves apprehend. For example, Paul B. Preciado’s analysis of “the materiality of gender technologies,” proposes sex toys as “[techniques] for fabricating sexuality;” a dildo (like a book, or an idea) is “a sexual body’s assisted cultural technology of modification.”^[23] The machine is as related to the political work of the article as the sexual and bodily practices of gay liberation activists were to their political work. To his credit, Downs briefly concedes, in the book’s conclusion, that “sex shaped, informed, and mattered to gay people” throughout the 1970s, claiming to want to avoid “sanitizing” the history of gay liberation despite decentering sex in his narrative. Yet, his analytic frame inaccurately unsexes the politics of sexuality.^[24]

In contrast, David K. Johnson’s *Buying Gay* centers exchanges of and interactions with physique photography in gay male cultural life in the midcentury United States, convincingly arguing that that consumer culture was critical to the creation of affective communities of gay men. He makes a powerful case that physique consumers were not passive but active creators of sexual communities, and that their confrontation with both postal and criminal authorities represented “an act of political resistance—a confrontation with [...] censorship efforts.”^[25] He is, however, less convincing when seemingly arguing

for an uncritical celebration of physique consumer cultures and indeed of the way in which capitalism “aided and abetted” the development of gay identities.^[26] Whereas Martin

Meeker’s monograph on communication technologies and the development of gay identities and subcultures is happy to dismiss physique entrepreneurs as “publishers of pornography,”^[27] and play down the magazines’ circulation numbers, Johnson seems eager to uncritically argue for their worth.

If Downs upholds an axiomatic difference between sex and politics which obscures the symbiotic relationship between sexuality, embodiment, and political activity at gay liberation’s heart, then Johnson, who admirably aims for a “breakdown of the binary opposition...between the ‘commercial’ and the ‘political’” in studies of US gay liberation, seems too eager to praise gay male commercial aspirations and assign them positive political value.^[28] They *both* occlude the way in which, in the words of Emily Hobson, gay

liberation activists “saw sexual liberation and radical solidarity [...] constituted within each other,” *and* avoid a detailed critical study of the pornography that is at issue in both texts.^[29]

American capitalism is also racial capitalism, and Johnson’s rebuttals of critiques of physique magazines’ overwhelming whiteness are unconvincing: a more critical engagement with the images might have produced a deeper account of the cult of white Hellenism promoted in the pages of physique magazines.^[30]

To a certain extent, such reluctance to engage with pornography is understandable. Pornography is a bodily genre; it moves the body, arouses it, and triggers embodied modes of knowing.^[31] When watching porn, our bodies resonate affectively—pre-cognitively—with

the bodies in the pictures.^[32] As such, it is perhaps no surprise that pornography continues to be overlooked in a phallogocentric culture that continues to assume a disembodied mind as the privileged site of the highest, most valuable, kinds of knowledge. Yet, according to Roland Barthes, photography itself also has a bodily dimension to it, one of the order of "an affective intentionality, a view of the object [...] immediately steeped in desire, repulsion, nostalgia, euphoria."^[33] The affective charge of pornography, just like the affective charge of photography are not, in this way, that dissimilar from the affective charge of any other archival object. As Pete Sigal, Zeb Tortorici, and Neil Whitehead argue, the work of historians—just like that of ethnographers or anthropologists—is erotic; it is led by a “deep-seated desire to penetrate the other.”^[34] Their work is driven by the erotic lure of the archive itself.^[35]

Another source of scholarly reluctance vis-à-vis pornography is the tendency, illustrated by Meeker’s work, to dismiss it due to how its perceived exceptionality as an industry will make its outputs a tricky historiographical source. Porn has been seen as exceptional expression of power: a source of sexism, harmful to young people, and exploitative of workers.^[36] Yet, as Alan McKee argues, the exceptionality of porn can only be maintained by ignoring the sexism, potential harm, and forms of exploitation within other creative industries.^[37] In a sexist heteropatriarchal capitalist culture, porn is a scapegoat that can prevent us from dealing with important broader structural questions. As scholars have argued for decades now, no archive—whether a state archive, a porn archive, or a museum—is inseparable from the power relations that sustained its creation and survival.^[38] That has

not prevented us from using them—critically—even if, when it comes to feminist and queer scholars, that engagement with “bodies, achievements, and/or bonds [that] are not the stuff of official histories” has often involved “the mobilization of techniques frowned on by ‘proper historians’.” [39]

What we need is a way of approaching images in general—and pornography in particular—that, in the words of W. J. T. Mitchell, “opens up the actual dialectics of power and desire in our relations with pictures,”^[40] allowing us to develop “an idea of visuality adequate to their ontology.”^[41] Emphasizing desire and the social nature of the visual reveals that “vision is as important as language in mediating social relations, and it is not reducible to language, to the “sign,” or to discourse.”^[42] Echoing Mitchell, Jennifer Evans has argued for the historiographic value of thinking erotic images in a deeper and more interdisciplinary way, noting that “intimacy, pleasure, and desire, while fundamental to personhood and experience, remain overlooked in most historical analyses.”^[43] She claims that, as subcultural archives of affects and desires, erotic photographs “do not passively mirror historical change but actively constitute claims to representation,” being thus inseparable from the construction of sexuality and the modern self.^[44] Viewing erotic photography as “an intellectual as well as subjective act of reclamation and discovery” can help historians “recognize desire as a fundamental feature of historical self-knowledge.”^[45]

Like many other visual sources, these documents are and will remain “volatile, contentious, and highly fraught.”^[46] However, the correspondence and ephemera that serve

as the source base for more traditional queer histories—never mind official state archives that serve as the basis for the most traditional histories of all—are also volatile, contentious, and highly fraught artifacts. Dealing with this is part of the job. The task of any history is to apprehend change over time, and to engage critically with the practices of archiving and commemoration undergirding the discipline. As Andrew Zimmerman notes, methodological conservatism has no internal logic other than to be systematically deployed against the people—“most of us”—whom traditional methods have failed.^[47] As Evans reminds us, queer history should “render historical categories strange instead of assuming they apply more or less uniformly across time, to all people” and “draw on a wide array of conceptual tools—often from other disciplines—to lay bare common assumptions about the world in which our subjects lived.”^[48]

It is this kind of work that a queer history *inclusive* of pornography could accomplish. Rather than bemoaning porn’s double ontology as *both* documentary *and* fantasy, historians could lean into that doubleness. Building on Mitchell’s question “what do pictures want?”,^[49] the one thing pornographic pictures want from historians is an historiography that is adequate to porn’s ontology: How did desires correspond (or not) with political questions? How did fantasies illuminate (or not) political and communal horizons of intimacy? Acknowledging and moving through the historically-contingent barriers between pornographic and non-pornographic sources could bring historiographic analysis closer to what Zimmerman described, in reference to the intimate relationship between the archive and the histories we write, as the “*ars erotica* of the practice” of history.^[50] His reflections on “the desire we imagined through the past, dreamed fulfilled in the present” describe the effect of porn archives on contemporary historians, both as fixed sources and as still-powerful

erotic objects that call us into relation.^[51] The ways in which historians are not only interpellated but also implicated by the pornographic object can be the jumping-off-point for the kind of analysis we are advocating.

In *Time Binds*, Elizabeth Freeman uses the phrase “erotohistoriography” to describe the practice of using the body “as a tool to effect, prefigure, or perform” an encounter with the archive, to access a counter history of history itself—a practice that embraces “bodily responses [to archival materials], even pleasurable ones, that are themselves a form of understanding.”^[52] Queer theory can help provide a guide for navigating the complex ethics of this kind of archival encounter: from reflections on maintaining seemingly outdated categories in community archives as a method of preserving the “archives of feeling”^[53] embedded within those categories, to arguments about the ethics and practice of queer oral history.^[54] In doing so, scholars must also remember the ways in which erotic and embodied relationships to archives have been “ethnopornographic”—exoticizing and racializing, using erotics as an engine to entrap others in discourses of inferiority and supposed backwardness.^[55]

It is precisely the affective allure of pornography—intimate and pre-cognitive—that makes it such a rich source for the analysis of the complex and often contradictory processes of queer identity formation. This is especially so when thought not alone as the creation of groups of heroic producers and consumers, but instead critically, in conversation with other political, institutional, and sexual trends. Rather than isolating pornography in histories that uncritically celebrate the people who made it, or shoving it under the rug as inconvenient or unrelated to political questions or queer and feminist archival practices, attending to the

pornographic body in the queer archive can illuminate the complex interfacing of desire, pleasure, consumption, media, identity, and politics that has historically sustained queer lives. If pornography and the archive are twin children of modernity, it is perhaps in the queer archive that their shared history is still very much alive.

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Notes

[1] See Dean, "Introduction."

[2] Kendrick, *The Secret Museum*, 5-6

[3] Kendrick, *The Secret Museum*, 6.

[4] Müller, *Handbuch der Archäologie der Kunst*, 602.

[5] Kendrick, *The Secret Museum*, 1-32; Clarke, "Before Pornography;" Hunt, "Introduction," 12-18.

[6] Kendrick, *The Secret Museum*, 6.

[7] Hunt, "Introduction;" Attwood, *Sex Media*; Sullivan and McKee, *Pornography*.

[8] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*.

[9] Williams, *Hard Core*, 94-95.

- [10] Aydemir, *Images of Bliss*; Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy*; Paasonen and Morris, "Risk and Utopia;" Florêncio "Breeding Futures;" Florêncio *Bareback Porn, Porous Masculinities, Queer Futures*.
- [11] Paasonen, *Carnal Resonance*, 191.
- [12] Kendrick, *The Secret Museum*; Hunt, "Introduction"; Williams, *Hard Core*; Stryker, *Queer Pulp*.
- [13] Rubin, "Thinking Sex," 137.
- [14] Sedgwick, *Between Men*, 15.
- [15] See Shepard, "The Queer/Gay Assimilationist Split;" Dean, "No Sex Please, We're American."
- [16] Paasonen, Nikunen and Saarenmaa, "Pornification and the Education of Desire;" Warner, *The Trouble With Normal*, 184–86.
- [17] Dyer, "Male gay porn." See also Burger, *One-Handed Histories*; Mercer, *Gay Pornography*.
- [18] Lee, "Uncategorized," 275. See also Pezzutto and Comella, "Trans Pornography."
- [19] Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*, 177.
- [20] Downs, *Stand By Me*, 3.
- [21] Downs, *Stand By Me*, 6.
- [22] Downs, *Stand By Me*, 124.
- [23] Preciado, *Countersexual Manifesto*, 21-22.
- [24] Downs, *Stand By Me*, 195.
- [25] Johnson, *Buying Gay*, 65.
- [26] Johnson, *Buying Gay*, xiv.
- [27] Meeker, *Contacts Desired*, 87.
- [28] Johnson, *Buying Gay*, xiii.
- [29] Hobson, *Lavender and Red*, 2.
- [30] Johnson, *Buying Gay*, 16. See also "The Grecian Guild," in *Buying Gay*. For a critique of whiteness in physique culture, see Morgan, *Pages of Whiteness*.
- [31] Williams, *Hard Core*.

- [32] Paasonen, *Carnal Resonance*.
- [33] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 21.
- [34] Sigal, Tortorici, and Whitehead, "Ethnopedagogy as Methodology and Critique," 2.
- [35] Reay, *Sex in the Archives*; McKinney, *Information Activism*.
- [36] Bronstein, *Battling Pornography*; Rubin, "Misguided, Dangerous, and Wrong"; Prause and Fong, "The Science and Politics of Sex Addiction Research."
- [37] McKee, "Pornography as a Creative Industry." See also: Heffernan, "Seen as a Business;" and Voss, "Trade Associations, Industry Legitimacy, and Corporate Responsibility in Pornography."
- [38] Davis, *Queer Beauty*; Jones and Silver, "Queer Feminist Art History, an Imperfect Genealogy"; Pollock, *Differencing the Canon*; Muñoz, *Disidentifications*; Reay, *Sex in the Archives*; Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts"; Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*; Williams, "Pornography, Porno, Porn."
- [39] Latimer, "Improper Objects," 94.
- [40] Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want?*, 34.
- [41] Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want?*, 47.
- [42] Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want?*, 47.
- [43] Evans, "Seeing Subjectivity," 433.
- [44] Evans, "Seeing Subjectivity," 435.
- [45] Evans, "Seeing Subjectivity," 436.
- [46] Evans, "Seeing Subjectivity," 433.
- [47] Zimmerman, "History, Theory, Poetry," 183.
- [48] Evans, "Introduction," 371.
- [49] Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 47.
- [50] Zimmerman, "History, Theory, and Poetry," 184. See also McKinney, *Information Activism*, 153–204.
- [51] Zimmerman, "History, Theory, and Poetry," 186.
- [52] Freeman, *Time Binds*, 95.
- [53] Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling*.

[54] McKinney, *Information Activism*, 163; Boyd, “Who is the Subject;” Boyd and Roque Ramirez, *Bodies of Evidence*; Blackman, “Affect, Performance, and Queer Subjectivities;” Gluck and Patai, *Women’s Words*; Srigley, Zembryzycki and Iacovetta, *Beyond Women’s Words*.

[55] Sigal, Tortorici, and Whitehead, “Ethnopedagogy as Methodology and Critique.”

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