

Appraising Diversity: Pornographic Contributions to an Inclusive Archival Record

By Julie M. Porterfield

ABSTRACT: Theories of appraisal and their practice have been a central element of archival discourse for nearly a century. While the importance of a diverse and inclusive archival record has been stressed in recent decades, pornography and sexually explicit materials have been excluded from these conversations. Although pornographic materials present additional privacy and access challenges, they are important records of human sexuality and the experiences of diverse communities that might not be documented elsewhere. This article highlights ways in which pornography can help archivists diversify the archival record.

Introduction

Archivists have long recognized the impossibility of collecting all created documentation and have spent nearly a century examining both the theory and the practice of appraisal. However, certain genres of documentation challenge these theories and practices. Pornography is one such type of documentation. The collecting of pornographic materials raises questions related to privacy, access restrictions, and propriety; however, such materials also provide invaluable documentation of cultural phenomena and human sexuality across a spectrum of experiences. This article aims to demonstrate the positive impact that collecting pornography can have on efforts to make archival collections more diverse and inclusive.

First and foremost, pornography is difficult to define. Each individual's threshold of obscenity differs, and some scholars argue that sexual explicitness does not even need to be present to constitute pornography.¹ The Society of American Archivists notably does not include a definition for the term in its *Dictionary of Archives Terminology*.² Alternatively, the American Library Association (ALA) defines *pornography* as “works depicting sexual conduct in an offensive way, and, in US law, found to appeal to the prurient interest and to be without serious value.”³ This definition does little to address questions of format, as “works” can refer to any number of media housed and distributed by libraries and archives.⁴ For this reason, it seems important to highlight that pornography, in the archival realm, exists across a spectrum of both explicitness and technology. Textual erotica, artifacts traditionally used for self-stimulation and pleasure, sexually themed photographs and audiovisual materials, and even new modes of self-published images taken for the purposes of sexting all fall within the ALA's definition of pornography. Likewise, the types of repositories where these items are actually collected vary in their institutional mission, collecting scope, and resources. The ALA's definition of pornography misses the mark after “works depicting sexual conduct in an offensive way.”⁵ Sexual explicitness does not necessarily constitute offensiveness,

and value, despite legal definitions, can exist alongside prurient interests. Because this article is primarily concerned with the ways that sexually explicit records can provide enduring scholarly value in archives, the working definition of pornography in this particular instance will focus exclusively on sexually explicit documentation, regardless of structure or format, moving discussions of value beyond offensiveness to the arena of archival appraisal.

Appraisal

Since Sir Hilary Jenkinson defined an archival record as “one which was drawn up or used in the course of an administrative or executive transaction” and deemed that archivists are the custodians of these records, rather than the arbiters of what is and is not collected, professional archivists have endeavored to reconsider and redefine the role of appraisal in a way that meets contemporary needs.⁶ Inspired by the new social historians and historians of women of his era, in 1975, F. Gerald Ham gave his seminal presidential address to the Society of American Archivists titled “The Archival Edge” in which he urged archivists to abandon their “objective” appraisal in favor of a new subjective method.⁷ He cited the growing concerns of social historians over the availability of archival documentation for their research and pointed to Howard Zinn’s suggestion that archivists “compile a whole new world of documentary material about the lives, desires and needs of ordinary people.”⁸ Later, in 2006, Rodney G. S. Carter coined the term “archival silence” to represent the places where the archival record is incomplete as a result of the exclusion of records that voice the experiences of marginalized groups.⁹ Of course, marginalized groups can represent a number of ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, and gendered populations, and their definition as such depends on the sociocultural context in which they appear. However, the marginalization of some groups, such as people of color, women, and LGBTQIA+ individuals has been historically systemic. Unfortunately, archives, as societal mirrors, reflect these imbalances of power.¹⁰ Although the profession has made an effort since the advent of the new social history in the 1960s to collect a wider variety of voices, it is, nevertheless, a profession whose foundation was built on collecting bureaucratic and state-generated records.¹¹

Archivists have become increasingly aware of the inherent power found in their institutions as reflections of the power structures found in their records. Whether the records found therein present a balanced representation of the historical record or not, the power of archival records remains the same.¹² Balanced or otherwise, archives house a society’s collective memory. As Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook write:

Archives have always been about power, whether it is the power of the state, the church, the corporation, the family, the public, or the individual. Archives have the power to privilege and to marginalize. They can be a tool of hegemony; they can be a tool of resistance. They both reflect and constitute power relations. They are a product of society’s need for information, and the abundance and circulation of documents reflects the importance placed on information in society. They

are the basis for and validation of the stories we tell ourselves, the story-telling narratives that give cohesion and meaning to individuals, groups, and societies.¹³

Thus, the archival profession has come to recognize that archival silences continue to exist to the degree that archivists and their institutions let them.

GVGK Tang's 2017 discussion of the challenges associated with processing and preserving pornography calls for further study on the appraisal of pornography.¹⁴ Although Carter and other appraisal theorists do not directly address pornography, if pornography does not document the "desires and needs" of a society, it is hard to imagine what would.¹⁵ Archivists regularly collect nonsexual, explicit materials. KKK relics and Holocaust records are examples of the violent and shocking pieces of documentation that archivists collect.¹⁶ Archivists recognize these records' enduring value for scholars of social history, despite the graphic and uncomfortable reminder of social phenomena that they represent. Why does this logic not extend to pornography?

While archivists have made strides in recognizing that subjectivity in appraisal decisions can be a positive force for diversifying the archival record, this makes appraisal decisions regarding pornography even more difficult, because it requires archivists to make subjective, conscious decisions that particular groups of sexually explicit documentation are important and should be collected and stewarded.¹⁷ An element of public declaration exists here that would make many individual archivists and administrators uncomfortable. Issues of funding and privacy further complicate stigma around pornographic materials. Budget administrators at repositories that receive public funds are held accountable both legally and in the court of public opinion for their spending, including resources used to acquire and steward pornographic records and artifacts. Donors, creators, and those featured in pornographic materials also have rights to privacy, confidentiality, and safety that must be addressed. Nevertheless, archival pornography holds enduring scholarly value, and privacy challenges are not insurmountable. Approaches to addressing privacy considerations for other types of archival records, such as restricting access for a period of time or including trigger warnings, are possible solutions that can be applied to pornographic materials.¹⁸

"He's-at-Home," But Not in the Archives . . .

This contradiction between recognizing what is important documentation for scholars of social experiences and the socially conditioned reaction of embarrassment to sexually explicit materials inspired this article. More specifically, this article draws inspiration from Ben Shattuck's 2015 *Lit Hub* essay, "There Once Was a Dildo in Nantucket: On the Wives of Whalers and Their Dildos, AKA 'He's-at-Homes.'"¹⁹ While a human interest piece on an item of sexual ephemera might not initially seem relevant to pornography's role in archives, the essay paints a perfect picture of both what happens when documentation of sexual behavior in a specific cultural context is not collected and why this occurrence appears as a cyclical pattern. Shattuck's work is largely framed as an interview with Connie Congdon, the eighty-year-old Nantucket, Massachusetts,

woman who discovered in a walled-off chimney in her home a tangible instance of the legendary “he’s-at-homes.” “He’s-at-homes” are said to be dildos used by the wives of whalers while the whalers were at sea.²⁰ The essay indicates that the “he’s-at-home” lore is a pervasive one by citing multiple published histories of Nantucket that include it. Yet, Shattuck was only able to locate Congdon’s example, even after a visit to the Nantucket Historical Association Research Library.²¹ Much of the essay is spent debating the authenticity of Congdon’s relic and its contextual place in the larger historical narrative. Is the “he’s-at-home” a rumor, and if so, how can one account for the proof found in Congdon’s home?

The truth is that Shattuck cannot prove, or disprove, the “he’s-at-home” legend as a part of Nantucket’s social history because a significant gap exists in the historical record of the sexual behavior and norms of nineteenth-century women on Nantucket. Shattuck’s failed quest leads him to make poignant observations about what is considered ephemeral when an individual passes away:

Often, in death, you exit in a rush, with your things scattered about, your life exposed, your desk drawers a mess. That will be the case for all of us—leaving behind more than what we’ve accounted for. The valuables and debris of your life reach equal status at death. They are simply everything that’s left behind. Everything that was once yours. You will have thought of money, jewelry, maybe car or house, but you will not have thought of your toothbrush, your old slippers, letters from your first girlfriend you could never bring yourself to throw away, a favorite book, your child’s baby teeth. These items will be found, puzzled over, and either tossed out or kept in the back of a drawer to follow the next generation and maybe the one after that. There will also be those items you always intended to throw out but which your death will have safeguarded.²²

Although his conclusions ring true, whether pornographic materials get discarded because they are considered ephemeral, or because they are considered scandalous, is debatable. Items, such as “old slippers,” do not make the cut when descendants are combing through belongings, because their value seems fleeting.²³ However, the “he’s-at-home” found by Congdon survived because it was hidden in a walled-off chimney, not because it was ephemeral. In fact, one might argue that the item would be long gone along with any other examples of “he’s-at-homes” if it had been discovered by children or grandchildren.

This points to the cyclical nature of documentation gaps in sexual histories. Even those who appear to consider this type of documentation important still fall victim to the socialized need to distance themselves from it. Throughout most of Shattuck’s essay, readers find themselves championing Congdon for her willingness to speak out about the “he’s-at-home,” even when others thought it obscene and ephemeral, and the Nantucket Historical Association rejected it as an acquisition to its collections. Surely this has to be a woman who understands the historical significance of the item that she possesses; however, in the closing lines of the essay, she says:

After the docent rejected it for the collection, we kept it in a safety deposit box. But when Tom passed away, I went to the bank and took it out and put it in the pink box and stored it in the pantry. When both parents die, you know, the safety deposit box is opened at the bank in front of everyone. We didn't want the he's-at-home to be with our belongings. What would people think when they found it?²⁴

Once again, a socialized need to deny involvement with the sexual artifact outweighs Congdon's rational understanding of its historical importance.

Reading Shattuck's piece from the perspective of an archivist yields many additional questions. First, how many other gaps exist in the sexual, historical record? The "he's-at-homes" are obviously a very specific and microlevel example. Even so, there must be larger, discursive trends in the missing documentation of sexual norms, and, if so, what demographics are most impacted by these disparities? Moreover, what academic disciplines suffer from not having primary documentation of subsets of sexual culture? How does the history of archival appraisal theories and practices contribute to the problem, and how might archivists and the creators of archival records take steps to remedy it?

Impact of Pornography Silences on Researchers

How do archival silences impact pornographic materials? Shattuck's essay is a reminder of how easily archival silences can occur, more specifically pornography silences. Connie Congdon's resistance to a situation in which she could be the perceived owner of the "he's-at-home" is a result of the societal shame that still seems to linger around owning or utilizing pornographic materials. However, the root of the issue is power. What makes the "he's-at-home" scandalous is that it is a tangible artifact used for the sexual pleasure of women, and it documents their sexual behavior. Pornography is already likely to slip between the archival cracks because of its explicitness, but the addition of evidence of the sexual behaviors of an oppressed group makes it a double threat. Therefore, the pervasiveness of pornography silences is not only a question of explicitness, but also of diversity and inclusion.

In the contemporary, digital age, pornography appears to be so ubiquitous that it is hard to imagine it being rare in the archival context. However, accelerated production and accessibility of pornographic materials are not unique to the internet. In fact, historically, "pornography appears when the masses gain access to new technology," and, still, the percentage of pornographic materials in archives relative to general holdings is small.²⁵ While a formal survey of pornographic materials in archives has never been done by professional archivists, in Dean et al.'s *Porn Archives*, only thirty-eight repositories are listed in the bibliographic appendix of archival resources for pornography.²⁶ Archival professionals recognize this as partially an optical illusion. There are repositories, such as those listed in Dean et al.'s bibliography, including the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction; the Institute for the Advanced Study of Human Sexuality; and the Human Sexuality Collection at Cornell

University Library, whose collecting mission is directly tied to documenting the history of human sexuality. Other repositories, for which collecting around these research areas has not been an area of expertise, still collect pornography, but in a less direct way. Pornographic materials are often hidden throughout collections as underdescribed extras found among other types of records. Collections represent documentation generated over creators' lifetimes, and this includes sexually explicit materials that they consume or produce. These materials do not necessarily belong in repositories specializing in sexuality, as they would have to be taken out of context. Maintaining their provenance and context gives a much more authentic representation of the role of pornographic materials in daily life and is consistent with archival principles and practices. However, the result is a pornographic archival record that is not particularly well described or discoverable.

In this way, the current state of pornography in archives can be compared to the quest to find women in archives that took place in the early 1970s in America. Though women made up half of the population, the new women's historians of the era found it difficult to access primary sources regarding the experiences of women. In 1973, Eva Moseley declared in *American Archivist*, "neglect of women has not only meant little or no space given to them in historical writings, but it has also meant little or no space given to women's papers in manuscript repositories and little or no effort to acquire these materials."²⁷ Eventually, with the help of grant funding to pay for a large-scale survey, *Women's History Sources: A Guide to Archives and Manuscripts Collections in the United States* was published in two volumes in 1979. The guide not only helped point historians to the resources that they needed, it also raised awareness among archivists about the women's voices that were silenced in the archives or hidden within the bureaucratic and personal papers of men.²⁸ Perhaps the most interesting part of this anecdote is that it was not archivists who initially uncovered this archival silence and documentation gap, but scholars, whose fledgling discipline relied on sufficient access to archival sources that were missing. Currently, scholars of porn studies are making the same effort. Porn studies emerged as a discipline from a graduate seminar offered in the film studies program at the University of California at Berkeley in 1998 and 2001 and the subsequent publication of research completed for the course in 2004.²⁹ In 2014, the academic journal *Porn Studies* was launched to support the discipline's scholarship. It continues to be published by Taylor and Francis with the support of an editorial board comprised of scholars from twenty-six international institutions situated within a variety of academic departments.³⁰ While Dean et al.'s short bibliography of resources was completed on a much smaller scale than the *Women's History Sources Guide*, it is accompanied by a six-part anthology of essays written by their colleagues in porn studies on the relationship between pornography and archives. The root of its message is the same, as Linda Williams, a leader in the field of porn studies, summarizes: "Contributing immensely to this problem is the fact of the missing archive, a crucial element necessary for the cultivation of a scholarly field. The lack of preservation of pornographic heritage is appalling, and we cannot count on the hit-or-miss salvages of the Internet to do the job."³¹ According to Williams, this is why porn studies "is always on the brink of emerging, but that never quite arrives."³² If the archival profession's

recent encounter with historians of women is any indication, archivists should answer the distress call from their colleagues in porn studies and recognize the pornography silences in their own repositories.

Porn studies is not the only discipline impacted by pornography silences. While its scholars are leading the way in uncovering the lack of pornographic materials in archives, an awareness that the issue is an interdisciplinary one also exists. As previously mentioned, examining pornography silences in archives is also an issue of representation. It is not only about how much pornographic materials make their way into archival repositories, but also whose experiences are reflected in what is collected. Any discipline that studies these communities is affected. Like archival silences in any other type of documentation, pornography silences are created when marginalized groups are not represented. Pornography as a whole can be considered marginalized, because its sexual explicitness often makes it taboo; however, there are shades of social deviance within the genre, and the less powerful the group, the less likely its pornography is to appear in archives. For example, *Playboy*, which can be considered one of the most mainstream pornographic publications in the United States, is available in many libraries. In fact, a search of WorldCat in June 2021 returned 355 active entries for varying print runs of the magazine. While this is quantitatively pornography in libraries and archives, additional documentation of male, heteronormative sexuality does not exactly give voice to an archival silence. As Tim Dean says of the digitization of *Playboy's* full run, “as a record of mainstream erotic tastes made available for profit, iPlayboy.com hardly constitutes a counterarchive.”³³

This negatively impacts interdisciplinary scholars in fields that address women, people of color, sexual and gender minorities, and other underrepresented groups. The pornography created and consumed by these groups is part of their shared cultural heritage and memory. If it is not preserved, it will not be available to scholars in archival repositories. Dean summarizes this by saying,

Certainly, this is a major source of pornography’s significance for those whose desires depart from social norms—as many of the chapters collected here attest. By preserving traces of nonnormative pleasures, porn facilitates not only the tracking but also the reactivation of these pleasures; and it may do so without requiring imaginary identification to experience them. Porn archives are important not least because sexual minorities use them as a form of cultural memory.³⁴

For those marginalized by pornography silences, the missing documentation is not only a scholarly problem, but also a personal one. What they see missing in archives is themselves. For example, in his chapter in the *Porn Archives* anthology, Nguyen Tan Hoang writes about his own exploration of historical gay male culture through pornography: “As a gay man who grew up and came out in the age of AIDS, the 1970s holds a mythic status in my sexual imagination. The only visual access I have to what it must have been like is through gay 1970s porn, seen on bad VHS dubs.”³⁵ Even repositories whose collecting scope and mission emphasize both sexuality and diversity,

such as the Lesbian Herstory Archives, are not immune to perpetuating pornography silences with descriptive efforts and boxes labeled “unprocessed ‘porn’?” and several snapshots.”³⁶

Conclusion

How might archivists prevent the sexual histories of underrepresented groups from being lost like the sexual culture of whalers’ wives in nineteenth-century Nantucket? The key to preventing any kind of archival silence is appraisal that actively seeks to fill identified gaps in the archival record. This means that archivists need to recognize the communities whose sexuality and sexual culture are not represented in collections at their repositories, but it also means selecting pornographic records and artifacts for acquisition that fit with local collecting scopes and practices. For example, to advance its mission to collect the full spectrum of women’s experiences, the Arthur and Elizabeth Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University collects materials from opponents of pornography as well as women who create and perform in pornography.³⁷ Additionally, preventing these archival silences requires examining the academic programs and research happening at academic repositories that may benefit from the sociocultural documentation that pornography provides. An excellent example of this type of collecting is the Sexuality Archives at Widener University, which has been intentionally curated to support its human sexuality department. The collection includes materials traditionally thought of as scholarly, such as faculty papers and medical pamphlets, but it also includes tangible artifacts that are not so different from the “he’s-at-home” example. With an active instruction program and a social media following, the collection not only fills a gap in the archival record but has also proven to be fertile ground for outreach and engagement.³⁸ Finally, archivists must also consider the ethical implications of acquiring pornography. Like other genres of documentation, pornography is not always created or acquired through ethical means. Just as archivists should avoid collections with questionable provenance that may be stolen, they should also avoid collecting pornography that does not demonstrate consent from its participants.

Another important party in the production of pornography silences is records creators. Regardless of appraisal practices, the principal organizing factor for archives is still provenance. An individual’s papers are made up of the documents generated throughout their lifetime. Typically, this may include materials such as correspondence, legal records, financial records, and scrapbooks, but seeing a series of pornographic materials listed in a finding aid is unusual. Much like Connie Congdon, most individuals, or their descendants, do not want the supposed dirty laundry of pornography to besmirch posterity’s memory of them. Unfortunately, this also impacts posterity’s memory of larger sexual norms. Moreover, pornography is sometimes hidden among other types of records in personal papers. The creator might doodle sexually explicit images among the text in their journals, or boudoir photographs of lovers might be tucked away in their correspondence. Records creators who organize and steward their own records,

whether they suspect that those records will one day make it to an archival institution or not, simply are not aware of the impact that their pornographic materials might have on scholarly discourse. To the creators or collectors, it is, more often than not, simply embarrassing. Therefore, it is important to engage with records creators to discuss pornography silences, so that they might consider how their pornographic possessions might have a positive impact on the historical record of human sexuality.

With Shattuck's cautionary tale in mind, professional archivists and records creators should revisit their appraisal decisions when it comes to pornography. Though social change comes slowly, it is important to consider how disposing of pornographic materials affects the historical record. Do the challenges of acquiring pornography outweigh the costs, particularly for women, LGBTQIA+, and other groups for whom these materials help to document their shared sexual history? Archivists must acknowledge that not collecting pornography is inconsistent with contemporary appraisal theory. More specifically, failing to include pornography in archival repositories conflicts with the Society of American Archivists' core value of diversity and current efforts toward cultivating inclusive collections.³⁹ It is detrimental to scholars who need pornographic materials to complete their research, and it creates archival silences. The profession must work with its porn studies and interdisciplinary colleagues to give voice to those silences through appraisal decisions that privilege equity, diversity, and inclusion over comfort and pride.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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NOTES

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4. *Ibid.*, 271–72.
5. *Ibid.*, 196.

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35. Ibid., 70.
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