

## Preserving Pornographic Media

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In my response, I'd like to reflect on the connections among archiving, ephemera, ephemerality, and historical research. To that end, I'll focus on three overlapping intuitions I have about these connections. First, the problem of ephemerality is intrinsic to *all* historical research. Second, ephemerality is a historical process that produces conditions of both archival scarcity *and* abundance. If pornography scholars want to rectify the former, we need to develop a body of scholarship that takes advantage of the latter, particularly archival materials, to help communicate to archivists that collecting pornographic media is worth the effort. Finally, it is worth foregrounding an analytical distinction between ephemera—materials created without longevity in mind—and ephemerality—a historical process that renders materials ephemeral.

- 1) So, to the first point: I think it's fair to say, even if not always acknowledged, that ephemerality is the central, unifying problematique for the discipline of history. As much as we historians disagree about who and/or what makes history, what is worth researching, and the relationships among the past, present, and future, the main thing we share is the goal of figuring out how to turn a hopelessly flawed, partial, and contingent body of material remnants, some but by no means all of which reside in manuscript libraries and archives, into plausible arguments about that past. When I was completing my dissertation, my friends researching alchemy in medieval Cracow, mints in the early modern British empire, and Tatar intellectuals in the USSR regularly reminded me that it is a rare exception for “dream sources,” the ones that you think can best reveal exactly what you want to know, to have survived and have made it into a repository that is easily identified. Almost all potential evidence from the past, including materials from yesterday, is ephemeral and can never be recovered. The central intellectual task for historians is to develop methods—mine have included broad approaches like considering the historical agency of sources themselves and specific ones like reading against the grain of police and court records—to grapple with the ephemerality of the past's remains.
- 2) The roundtable question prompts me to reflect back on the process of researching my (very recently completed!) dissertation on the business history of “porno chic” in the 1970s U.S. Throughout that process, I was focused on the problem of scarcity that results from ephemerality rather than the mirrored problem of abundance. As my colleagues on this roundtable know well, surviving business records from what was often self-described as the adult film industry are scarce and largely inaccessible to researchers. In this context, I recall the feeling of triumph when, after days of digging in records of the underground newspaper *NOLA Express* at Temple University, I found an invoice outlining how much a local adult movie theater had paid for advertising. Here was a scrap of evidence for the relative significance the pornography industry had for the radical underground press.

That scrap of evidence was available because an archivist working at Temple in the late-1960s believed that underground papers were important documents of contemporary

historical struggles and were thus worth preserving. Because of that, Temple's collections contain/include thousands of underground papers and manuscript materials documenting their publication.

Archives are not sacred. They are contingent institutions populated by historical actors whose priorities are shaped by historical circumstances. If we want materials related to pornographic media to be preserved by archives, I think we need to make use of the resources that *are there* to demonstrate that there is interest, and furthermore that it would be a worthwhile collecting priority.

Indeed, it is not as though all materials related to pornographic media have been doomed to ephemerality. There are *thousands* of linear feet of boxes of catalogs, junk mail, advertising and order forms for pornographic films and books in collections at Cornell, the Kinsey Institute, the ONE Archives in Los Angeles, the New York Public Library, the Gay Center Archives in New York City, UCLA's Young library, the list goes on and on. These materials beg for systematic analysis, for researchers to think through how to exploit these abundant materials and to think about what their abundance means. They represent so much potential scholarship that could show archivists and librarians that this material matters to researchers.

- 3) One way we might take advantage of these abundant sources is to reflect on the role of archives as sites for the production of ephemerality and its opposite. Something that has stuck with me from my dissertation research is just how many gay rights activists kept pornographic junk mail in their folders of correspondence. There are a number of questions that follow from this archival fact: Why did they keep this pornographic ephemera? What did it mean to them? What can that tell us about the political meanings of pornography? Similarly, we might consider what these kinds of abundant ephemera tell us about the social life of pornographic media. What kinds of pornographic media were most ubiquitous at different moments in time? Which media did actors incorporate into their lives, and which ones represented more ephemeral experiences? How much did going to the movies matter to the people whose records are preserved in archives? Was preserving the ephemera related to porn industry intentional? Amidst partial collections of imperfect sources, questions like these represent a promising line of inquiry for analyzing the history of pornography and understanding its place in American life.