

# A Precarious Archive: Lesbian Pornography at the Lesbian Herstory Archives

*Desirae Embree, Texas A&M University*

In this position paper I would like to offer some tentative thoughts about one of the questions offered in the call: “what theoretical frameworks are needed to facilitate work on pornography that is missing from the archive and is potentially lost?” In addressing this question, I will draw upon my own experience at the Lesbian Herstory Archives in New York City where I was given access to an uncatalogued box of pornographic photos. My account of the photos’ significance will be necessarily partial, but I hope that it will provide a foundation for thinking about the specific problems that this pre-video era lesbian pornography poses for any discussion of preservation and archivization.

The box of photos in question is something of a mystery. According to the photo collections coordinator at the LHA, it simply showed up one day; nothing is known about its provenance. While the box has been kept, it has never been catalogued, and so it does not appear in searches of their holdings. As I pursued the box, I was assured that it would “tell me nothing” about either lesbian sexuality or lesbian pornography. Furthermore, I was told that the box had not been catalogued because without knowing its provenance it was impossible to tell whether the photos either belonged to or were of lesbians. “For all we know,” I was told, “it could be some guy’s collection.”

The photos range from the mundane (candid photos of women around the house) to the explicit (photos of women displaying their vulvas and masturbating with vibrators, dildos, or other implements). There is a pattern to the inscriptions on the back of the photographs which suggest that these are not “some guy’s collection” but rather the collection of at least one—but perhaps two—lesbians who amassed the vibrant, varied porn archive through correspondence most likely established through personal ads or lesbian letter services.

Ironically, the box that was to “tell me nothing”—and which has no official home within the world’s largest archive of lesbian history and culture—tells me not only about lesbian sexuality but also about lesbian media cultures. For one thing, it suggests that lesbians and other queer women were producing and circulating visual pornography among themselves as early as the 1970s, well ahead of the more formal production of lesbian/feminist pornography in the mid ‘80s. It is true that the box is only one piece of data and that, as a result, it is not a suitable basis for generalizations about lesbian pornographic media practices. Yet, the diversity of the collection, as well as its span of around fifteen years, is enough for us to consider it not as an outlier in lesbian sexual media culture but rather as one of the few extant examples of it.

The box has a lot to tell us, but what interests me here is its misrecognition by LHA archivists. That these photos were recognized as pornography but not recognized as

lesbian (or as queer) points to the persistence of gendered assumptions about the mediation of sexuality—namely, that this kind of collection of visual masturbatory aids or sexual trophy-keeping is a predominantly masculine phenomenon. Also at stake here are the contradictions of recuperative historical projects driven by identity politics. In its drive to “save” lesbian material culture from the dustbin of history, the LHA has to circumscribe the “lesbian” for reasons both political and pragmatic. For the LHA staff, lesbian pornography is determined by its proximity to a known identity. Because nothing was known about the box of photos, it couldn’t clearly be brought within the scope of the archive’s collections. As a result, the box sits uncatalogued in the basement, in danger of being damaged or discarded.

However, the box also poses another problem for discussions about the preservation of pornography, namely how to approach the preservation of texts that have been decontextualized and, as a result, appear to lack definite identity and, by extension, definite historical value. Preservational efforts that are built around texts that can be contextualized within either a formal industry or a known sexual culture are not going to capture texts like this box of photographs, which stand to broaden our understanding not only of pornographic media cultures but also how these are shaped by social precarity. In the context of lesbian pornography, we must consider how gay women’s lack of access to male economic/cultural capital via romantic or sexual connections and their increased susceptibility to homophobic allegations of obscenity determined the authorship, production, and circulation of pornographic texts among themselves. So, what theoretical frameworks are needed to facilitate work on pornography that is missing from the archive and is potentially lost? I’m afraid that I have no positive answer, as the problem is doubly fraught. On the one hand, what Laura Doan has called “identity knowledge projects” are ill-suited to the recovery of pornographic media, which are often unruly, overflowing and exceeding the categories that we would use to contain them. At the same time, preservationist discourses that privilege 20th century film will, inevitably, result in an archive with a masculinist bias. Now that pornography studies has found purchase—however partial or tentative—within the scope of academic research and knowledge production, we must be vigilant to build a preservational agenda from margin to center in order to capture more precarious archives before they are lost.