The Porn Archives. Edited by Tim Dean, Steven Ruszczycky, and David Squires (Duke University Press, 2015)

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Pornography After Sex: or, the Archival Turn in Porn(ography) Studies

The review’s bereft form cannot easily relay the edited collection’s vastness and variety, but it can reasonably hope to paint the picture in broad strokes. Hereafter, I draw out the pressing discursive questions that orient the recent volume The Porn Archives and enumerate its most efficacious interventions. I then suggest what this book can tell us about the current state of pornography scholarship. In many ways, the attempt to review The Porn Archives mirrors a problem that cuts across the volume itself: how to account for an object whose very composition relies structurally on a resistance to capture. Spear-headed by editors Tim Dean, Steven Ruszczycky, and David Squires, The Porn Archives (Duke Press, 2015) comes in at a staggering 503 pages, and in its prodigious size promises to offer something for everyone, but it is not the size that counts here—all writing on pornography requires double entendres, which Dean’s introduction excels at producing. No, the most striking feature to this volume is its theoretical redirection. The framework that Dean et al marshal asks that we think pornography not first through sexuality or sex acts, but rather through its material sequestration in order to conceptually grapple with its evolving and expanding meanings.

Duke Press has played the good steward to the development of pornography scholarship in recent years. In 2004, the press published Linda Williams’s indispensable volume Porn Studies, which helped to solidify the field of pornography studies as a legitimate epistemological project. Looking briefly to this earlier volume offers us some perspective to The Porn Archives. In Williams’s volume, pornography was not just positioned as a film genre, as Williams herself had popularized in Hard Core, but was crucially understood as a form of culture. That volume’s chapters largely derived from this line of reasoning, but other notable interventions deserve mention, too. Porn Studies championed Williams’s useful neologism “on/scenity,” a critical term capturing pornography’s vexed position as a cultural object that is at once omnipresent (demanding visibility) yet illicit (requiring concealment). This term posits the cultural status of pornography as one of tension and paradox. In its capacity to develop underrepresented discourses, Porn Studies provided much needed attention to representations of gay and lesbian sexuality as well as to integral but underrepresented categories like race and class, lines of thought that were impoverished in earlier pornography scholarship. Porn Studies also made the case, through Williams’s
introduction, that pornography’s pedagogical quality was no longer a question of possibility but rather a question of critical navigation and urgency. Williams found in the undergraduate classes she taught that the study of pornography had to move beyond the feminist debates on pornography and toward “a springboard for discussion and demystification of the sex acts and sexualities we always seem to talk around in other contexts” (20). In this regard, Porn Studies used pornography as a manner to think sex itself, drawing the two closely together.

So what does Porn Studies tell us about The Porn Archives? For one thing, The Porn Archives instantiates an inward turn back to the pornographic object itself and to the conditions of possibility that make that object’s knowing possible. Put somewhat schematically: Williams’s field forming book Hard Core asked us to think pornography narratively; Porn Studies called us to think pornography culturally; and The Porn Archives invites us to think pornography materially, which is also to say to think pornography technologically. Additionally, The Porn Archives foregrounds and questions the methodology of pornography scholarship in a way that Porn Studies could only gesture toward, asking its reader to consider the field discursively with both a past to be reckoned with and a future to be charted. If Porn Studies showed us that scholarship on pornography could be done, and done well, then The Porn Archives reflectively asks what epistemological structures have been made possible—and in certain instances, limited—by such scholarship and how we might sustain and enrich its flourishing.

This discursiveness springs from a seemingly straightforward question that Dean poses in his introduction: Is there a porn archive? While the archival turn is certainly de rigueur among humanistic discourses, its uptake here reads as an exigent matter. In Williams’s contribution to this volume, she even goes so far as to call pornography studies a “weedy field,” suggesting its development has not always borne fruit. The editors’ intervention builds from a sense of pornography studies’ institutional limitations and the attempt to address them. To refer back to the question “Is there a porn archive?” one need only look to the plural archives of the book’s title to guess at the volume’s sense that the singular has been replaced by the multiple. Pornographies’ (plural) archives (plural) are understood both materially and conceptually, and there are as many ideations as there are essays in this collection. Like a kōan to be meditated on, if not straightforwardly grappled with, the chapters within ask how it is that scholars know the pornography they seek to study, and how pornography’s very understanding as a category relies upon some kind of sequestration. Dean writes of the many ways that pornography may be thought to archive feelings, affects, sensations, and information, arguing that:

an individual scholar’s assemblage of various sources, just as much as an amateur’s stash of comics or porn, may be regarded as an archive. The term now encompasses private as well as public collections and, indeed, spans cultural dimensions, ranging from the most modest, disordered groupings of material to the macro level of discursive systems (à la Foucault) (10).
The explosion of meanings for the archive parallels the explosion of pornographies into niche realms, and the imbrication of the two can lead to surprising insights, as we see later in Eugenie Brinkema’s chapter.

The earlier volume Porn Studies could only have answered Dean’s question about the existence of a porn archive with a tepid yes. The 2004 volume did include an appendix of pornographic archives, but this inclusion offered slim pickings, as they say, and the chapters themselves left the archives largely out of the picture, to remain only as paratextual afterthoughts. The new volume carries a far more capacious appendix with rich annotations to assist the curious scholar, but the broader point is that archives are not merely ancillary to the essays herein. The question “Is there a porn archive?” presents the opportunity to ask institutional, technological, and materialist questions like: what does the development of institutional pornographic archives mean and what problems arise from the existence, collection, categorization, preservation, and access to, as well as the structural circumscriptions, agitations, lacunae, and limitations of porn archives? Like the 2004 volume before it, questions of overt censorship remain secondary if not wholly replaced by questions of exclusion and sequestration, which operate themselves as nefarious modes of censorship.

In terms of a shared politics—or more accurately, shared aversion—in neither volume does the centrifugal force of the feminist sex wars dominate the pornography scholarship as it once did. Dean explains the paucity of this tract of feminism as a “reframing [of] those debates in queer terms by acknowledging that gender is only one factor, not necessarily the most important one, when considering sexuality and its manifestations” (12). Whether the continued avoidance of the (other) F-word will be fruitful to porn studies or not remains to be seen, but its absence remains felt and intentional. Queerness, understood here as a project in deviance and anti-normativity, becomes the strong lens for the volume—appearing not under a single section heading but as a general guidepost. It is as if the volume were to ask: What would porn studies look like in the hands of queer theory?

Since one of the pressing questions the archive asks us to address is the politics of categorization, the ordering and classification of essays in this volume deserves note. Dean, Ruszczycky, and Squires organize the volume into six sections: pedagogical archives, historical archives, image archives, rough archives, transnational archives, and archives of excess. Rough and excess’ archives are less overtly legible and subsequently more striking section headings, but even within the more recognizable categories, what one finds are their limitations to conceptually frame their constitutive essays. Additional archives could easily have grouped essays in this volume, such as: literary archives, queer archives, or library archives, to name just three. Their unrealized potential but nonetheless spectral presence and the sometimes wanting nature of the headings that do organize the volume speaks to the paradox of pornography’s simultaneous over- and under-valuation in the cultural imaginary. Since the editors seek to question the systems that bestow meaning upon pornographic objects by the very acts of inclusion and exclusion, the volume’s own categorical slippages might contribute to such a methodological critique, but they might just as easily render the category of pornography an empty signifier. Dean seems concerned
that pornography scholarship has rested too comfortably within the discourses of film and media, so one critical intervention to this volume is its extension beyond and between these and other discourses. The sometimes-untidy incorporation of art history, philosophy, information studies, ethnic studies, and literary discourses into a framework for thinking porn archivally dismantles any essentializing idea of a uniform pornography, an overdue intervention in and of itself. The only exception to this disruption comes when Dean promotes a definition of pornography that might seem to work toward narrowing the field. More on that below.

Three contributions beyond Dean’s salient introduction deserve mention here, which unfortunately shortchange several other valuable chapters. These particular texts offer new and pressing contributions that alter the landscape of pornography studies as a field and a discipline. The first is Linda Williams's chapter “Pornography, Porno, Porn: Thoughts on a Weedy Field,” which Dean himself refers to as a supplemental introduction to the volume, and which provides in many instances productive tension alongside Dean’s introduction. Unsurprisingly, Williams demonstrates her indispensability to the field that she ushered in two-and-a-half decades ago. This essay in particular sounds the warning call that there is not yet, in fact, a suitable porn archive. By this, Williams means that pornography as a critical object remains precarious and endangered, rarely collected—or when collected is poorly cataloged and poorly preserved—and that little work is being done to change these materialist facts, despite the expanded addendum in this volume that might suggest otherwise. Williams calls for the creation of porn archives, whereas Dean seems more technotopian in his outlook and hopeful that the Internet may serve as just that repository.

Williams’ critique of the field even extends to its naming. Williams makes the case that scholars of pornography should refuse the moniker “porn studies,” which she interprets as unserious and diminishing of the work scholars do on pornography, at the same time that she appears resigned to the fact that such a semantic recalibration will not likely happen. Utilizing the aforementioned Porn Studies to assess the field she helped to establish, Williams notes a tendency to skew the sense of mainstream pornography, focusing instead on the outer edges of what might be considered pornographic (in her volume, for instance, The Starr Report became a site for thinking pornography). One gets the sense that Williams regrets the elasticity with which pornography was treated, in this case. In challenging the very necessity of sex to define pornography, and in focusing on either non-sexual (war porn) or modern day limit-cases of pornography (foreskin fetishes, rough sex, child porn, amputee porn), The Porn Archives risks the very same skewing of the pornographic, choosing the spectacular or the non-sexual over the normative and mundane. Following Williams, I would ask, what do we gain from seeking out pornography’s outer limits, or what does that tell us about our own desires, as scholars, and what would a more serious and sustained critique of mainstream pornography look like today?

The chapter “Pornography as a Utilitarian Social Structure: A Conversation with Frances Ferguson” does recuperative work, offering us a reconsideration of the book Pornography, The Theory (2004). Dean characterizes Ferguson’s text as an underutilized asset for pornography scholarship, and promotes her writing for its alternative
understanding of pornography abstracted into a grammar. Here, then, we see that as materially-driven as this volume hopes to be, one of its most pressing concerns remains loftily conceptual. Ferguson’s project tries “to distinguish pornography from obscenity,” by turning our attention to “the social representational systems and individuals,” and perhaps most surprisingly, she regards pornography sans sexuality, or as relational to explicit representations at best (44). From her perspective, the social situation of inequality becomes the criteria to determine if something is pornographic. This argument will become critical to some of the later essays in the volume, and does echo back to the feminist sex wars, but its invocation of the Benthamite classroom can, in this format, remain opaque.

The refusal of sex as a precondition for pornography presents a challenge to Williams’ 2004 volume, which positioned pornography as an invitation to explore just that. While an intriguing reconsideration of pornography as a concept, the conversational format can at times do a disservice to the arguments at hand. One student asks Ferguson to elaborate on the novel connection between “boredom and pornography,” which Ferguson appears eager to answer before turning her attention to a tangential line of thought about cattle (55). Keeping in mind the specificity of form—and there are fascinating musings in this conversation about a pornographic consideration based from an alternative genealogy in Literature—it is quite possible that had Ferguson’s contribution been an essay instead of a transcribed conversation, some of the confusions that punctuate the nonetheless robust conversation would have been alleviated. Even if this preview of Ferguson’s original theory of pornography does not shift conceptualizations of pornography wholesale, it nonetheless unsettles essentialized notions we may have concerning pornography, and opens the door for further queries.

In the chapter titled “Rough Sex,” Eugenie Brinkema offers a challenging contribution that utilizes pornography’s rough sex as a tool to think through pornography’s rough archives. Roughness here comes to hold formalist, domineering, erotic, and institutional connotations, and ultimately leads Brinkema to critique the field’s desire for “smooth” archives, which are proper, complete, categorical, parseable, and preservationist-oriented. In its styling, rigor, and provocation for the theorization of pornography’s archives, Brinkema’s essay may very well prove to be this volume’s breakout text. No other essay so forcefully interrogates the questions put forth by Dean’s introduction and then goes on to integrate those questions through nuanced readings of pornographic texts as this one. Brinkema takes the occasion of the controversial pornographic film Forced Entry to think formally through what a rough archive would mean for pornography studies, ultimately arriving at the conclusion that finitude and incompletion are not causes for panic or an ailment in need of remedy but rather might be embraced for their structural importance to our understanding of pornography. In other words, loss and ephemerality are critical to understanding pornography’s meaning.

Tension is also not always in need of relief, and there is a primary structural tension to The Porn Archives. On the one hand, materiality and medium specificity become critical means for thinking pornography. On the other hand, Dean seems
to want a new working definition of pornography, one that is more conceptual and capacious, but which moves us beyond earlier such attempts. The result often displaces sex as the key focus of pornography, and replaces it with something we might reductively call power disequilibrium. Of course this distinction is murky, at best, since sex cannot happen without power, and power itself operates with its own sexual undertow. The result of the new working definition that we get is that certain essays in the volume move their focus to the farthest reaches of what might still hold legibility as pornography, such as nonetheless compelling chapters on so-called “war porn.” While the fungible migration of “pornography” as a term to less or non-sexual realms is increasingly a cultural phenomenon, and one that has been taken up very fruitfully in other places, it deserves further scrutiny in a volume of this nature, especially given what Williams notes is a general aversion toward mainstream, heterosexual pornography. Certainly, as a prime site of heteronormative power, mainstream pornography (often easily deemed problematic, boring, etc.) still deserves attention, but why it is no longer the central focus of pornography scholarship is anyone’s guess: exhaustion with the feminist sex wars, queer theory’s investment in the radical potential of subaltern sexual practices, or the difficulty in isolating what counts as normative pornography anymore. Whatever the reason, this volume follows suit with this trend, and it invites the question: can pornography studies sustain itself as a field if pornography loses its affiliation with sex, or if it only looks at “new,” liminal, and deviant sex?

More questions arise than answers when reading *Porn Archives*, which is testament to its complexity. Volumes are, themselves, archives, but what might their prominence in pornography studies reveal? There are already several volumes on the topic of pornography, so where exactly does *The Porn Archives* bring us? Volumes are smorgasbords that expand the boundaries of a field, but they are also peepholes into the academic climate in any given moment. That this volume turns its attention inward to pornography studies’ very capacity to thrive and flourish in the future—to the question of futurity—suggests that the field is still experiencing growing pains, and to envision a future, this volume reroutes our attention to the question of pornography’s material essence astride its conceptual meaning. The editors here demand that materiality and conceptualism be considered in tandem, which necessitates a deeper consideration of the complexity of archives that are themselves not uniform. Archival thinking asks how cultural memory forms but also more acutely how it might yet form. *The Porn Archives* is not prescriptive but offers an approach to pornography where sex does not always come first, but rather, when it does come, appears unexpectedly and through complex intersections. The richness of thought here will prove provocative to pornography scholars who want to maintain the field’s vibrancy and rigor through a deeper consideration of the systems that delimit its very knowledge production.

1 In this regard, the volume’s strong progenitor is Walter Kendrick’s *The Secret Museum* and the notion that pornography’s mutable definition finds stability through an emphasis on the hegemonic class’ limitation to and concealment of its circulation.
2 Notably, Williams first introduced the idea of “on/scenities” in an epilogue added to Hard-Core upon its re-issue in 1999 (280-315), but she made it the introduction and framework to her edited collection. It was even the preferred title to the volume at one point, before becoming Porn Studies.

3 “Rough” here comes to capture heterosexual pornographies that deviate from normative representations of sex and instead intersect with manifestations of violence and domination, whereas “excess” denotes a related deviation toward limit cases including foreskin fetishes, pedophilia, and stumping. While sex in these sections is on the agenda, it always pushes toward the subaltern.

4 This line of questioning arises from an engagement with what Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth Wilson have proposed as a “queer theory without ant-normativity” in Differences (Vol 26.1) (May 2015).

5 Justice Potter Stewart’s amorphous definition of obscenity in Jacobellis vs. Ohio (1964), “I know it when I see it,” gives one example. Robin Morgan’s claim that “Pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice” provides a second.

6 Helen Hester’s recent book Beyond Explicit takes up precisely the evacuation of sex from cultural phenomena that nonetheless are termed “pornographic”, such as torture porn, grief porn, poverty porn, misery porn, war porn etc. Notably missing from this list are food porn and kitten porn.


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