

Indexing Desire

The Gay Male Pornographic Video Collection as Affective Archive

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All male fuck films become instant classics because sex is enduring and classic.

—Anonymous quote from the porn magazine *Skinflicks*

Buried within the Human Sexuality Collection at Cornell University's Division of Rare and Manuscripts Collections, the Gay Male Pornographic Video Collection, 1978–1992, consists of several thousand bootlegged films on several hundred extra-high-grade TDK VHS tapes, held in sixteen archival boxes. To the best of my knowledge, no scholar has ever cited the collection, at least by name. Few appear to have so much as utilized it since its acquisition in 1992. "Videotapes are temporarily restricted," dauntingly declares the minimalist finding aid; as a scholar visiting on a Zwickler fellowship in 2009 specifically to study gay porn, I was initially denied access before finagling my way to the tapes.¹

Even once accessed, the tapes offer less than they once might have. Although locating a copy of Fred Halsted's orphaned art-porn opus

Sextool (1975) once felt like a major find due to its extremely limited VHS distribution, as of the writing of this essay, it can be downloaded or purchased as a bootleg DVD with the click of a button. In this digital era where even once-difficult-to-obtain historical porn films circulate online through torrents and streaming, and the only collector interest in the VHS format privileges official releases that bear original labels and artwork, the archival video collection would seem to be almost entirely obsolete.

Yet tucked into the oversize boxes that store the collection are two tattered three-ring binders, bearing stunningly extensive, even obsessive, indexes, notes, and commentaries on the collection by its anonymous compiler and donor (Figure 5.1). While the tapes themselves may have turned to technological relics, the binders invite a reading of the collection itself as an affective archive, a laborious work of love undertaken over the course of several years from the late 1980s into the early 1990s. In this essay, I propose to read the Gay Male Pornographic Video Collection as constituting an erotic index of desire in the historically significant plague years of the U.S. HIV/AIDS epidemic. As much as a midwife's diary from the late eighteenth century or the erotic diaries of a nineteenth-century

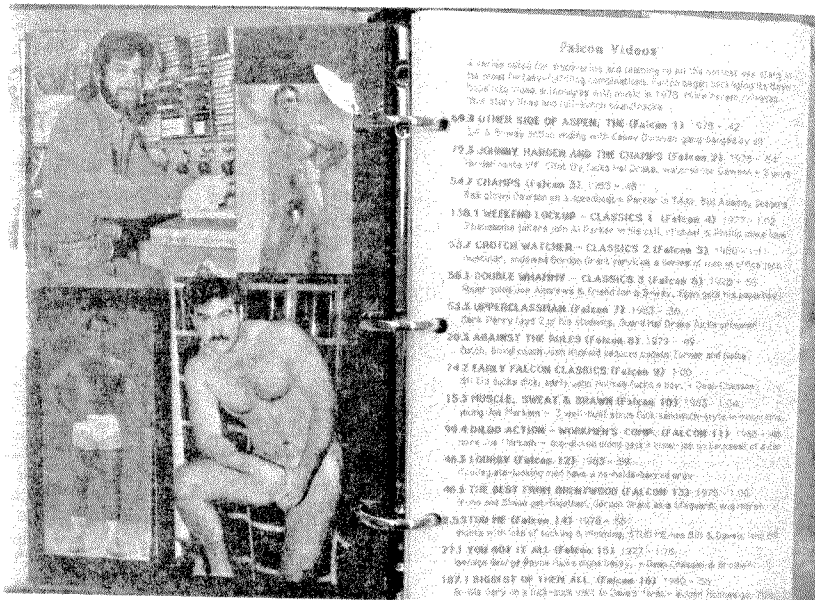


FIGURE 5.1. Picture of the binders that index the porn tapes, photograph in color. Gay male pornographic video collection, #7563. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

sailor help us reconstruct the sexual cosmos of the past, the descriptive indexes of one impassioned collector housed in this collection help situate the meanings of gay pornography at a particularly dire moment in twentieth-century queer U.S. history.²

"All male fuck films become instant classics because sex is enduring and classic," insists a glued-in quote from the porn magazine *Skinflicks*³ (Figure 5.2). The pasted quote is part of a larger pastiche of typed and

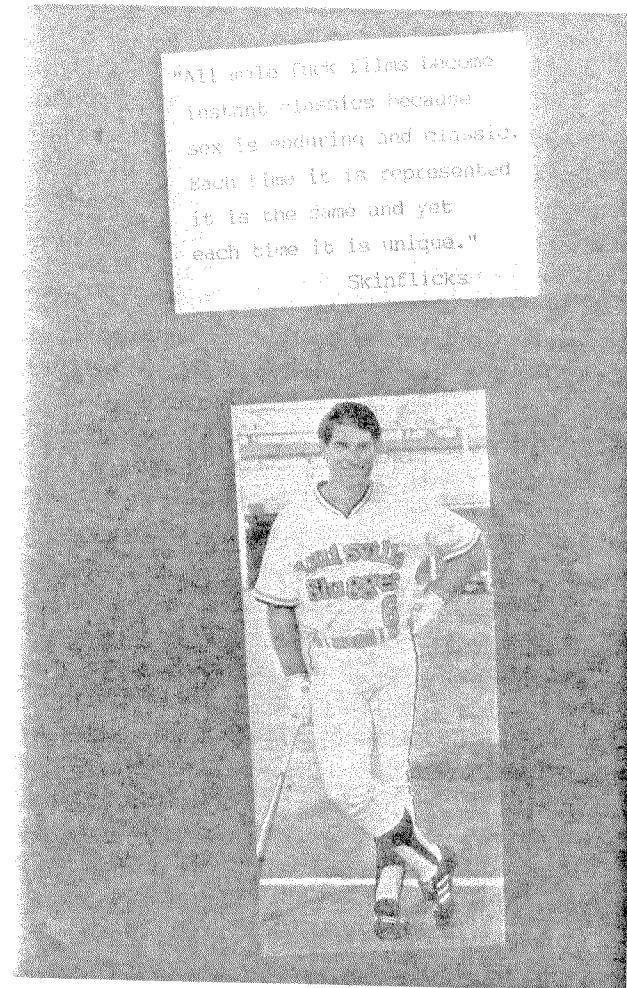


FIGURE 5.2. The Archivist's motto, with eroticized baseball player. Gay male pornographic video collection, #7563. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

handwritten notes, inserted images from pornographic magazines, and random nonpornographic photographs that range in content from famous baseball players to the popular country singer Kris Kristofferson. Though we cannot know the identity of the bootlegger (henceforth, I will name him the Archivist—as we will see, his interest was not just collecting, but especially *cataloging*), we can locate him within larger gay erotic imaginaries of the era, much as other historians have used personal collections of texts and cultural artifacts to render legible the worlds of both public and private figures, from Thomas Jefferson's book collection to the secret pornographic archive of Victorian "erotomaniac" Henry Spencer Ashbee—perhaps the closest analogue to our Archivist, given his propensity for cataloging and the quite evident pleasure he derived from it.⁴

The Archivist provides a revealing window into several private layers of meaning. From racial markers of difference ("Black Men in Tapes" gets its own index) to against-the-grain readings of straight porn films that locate them within orbits of queer signification, the binders show how dominant structures of meaning were both upheld and challenged. Awareness of the epidemic and its casualties, too, suffuses the commentary, with deaths sometimes noted alongside favorite sex scenes, showing with striking clarity how HIV/AIDS could take form and meaning concurrently with a persistent desire that resisted heteronormative narratives equating gay sex with death or immorality. Ultimately, I contend, this enormous, monumental, forgotten collection constitutes a valuable window into the private construction and organization of desire, as mediated by available technology, during some of the bleakest years of modern gay history, when even one of the most famous essays in what became known as queer theory began by positing that the "big secret about sex" was that "most people don't like it."⁵

Initially a private collection, the Gay Male Pornographic Video Collection resists some of the theorizations placed on the archive as a site for the production of knowledge. From Derrida's "archive fever" to Carolyn Steedman's observation that "the modern European public archive came into being in order to solidify and memorialize first monarchical and then state power," and further into the extensive and crucial postcolonial scholarship that has powerfully contested the imperial imperatives of archive formation, much emphasis has been placed on the solicitousness of the archive in affirming teleologies of power.⁶ But the Archivist was no *archon* in the Derridean sense, guarding state knowledge: gay porn in the 1980s, while nominally legal within the realpolitik of the era remained outlaw material by most prevailing standards. Yet while

tremendous strides have been made in recent years toward the recovery, highlighting, and valorization of queer archives, this particular collection has fallen through the scholarly cracks, perhaps in part due to its sheer logistical inaccessibility. In addition to requiring laborious cross-indexing of the tapes (stored offsite and thus inefficient to retrieve) to locate specific films, the collection in 2009 also required viewings in a cramped room where other researchers working on nonsexual material were easily distracted (leading me to collaborate with the library staff on a makeshift cardboard barrier to spare both passers-by and myself from distraction). Beyond this, the finding aid makes it impossible to even learn the content of the hundreds of tapes without first digging into the collection and discovering the indexes. The only researchers likely to utilize it, then, are those possessed of time and idle curiosity, or a particular commitment to porn on VHS.⁷

The maturation of porn studies as a field of inquiry, spurred by Linda Williams's 1989 book *Hard Core* as well as gay scholars such as Thomas Waugh and Richard Dyer, has also resulted in a resurgent interest in the archiving and preserving of smut.⁸ Yet with rare exceptions, pornography tends to be preserved as a set of discrete texts, of historical interest primarily unto themselves, rather than in the form of personal collections reflecting a collective, intertextual constellation of meaning.⁹ The Archivist offers one of the richer windows into the private arena where meaning was made of smut; we can know from the various polemics of the public sphere how pornography could or should be read, and we can know from the various experiments of psychology how minds and genitals may have responded in controlled settings, but extraordinarily few are the deep, sustained personal engagements with pornography that generated as extensive a paper trail as the Archivist's indexes. Beginning with short descriptive entries intended simply to keep track of his rapidly expanding collection, he quickly evolved into more substantive commentaries, as well as proliferating indexical organizations, broken down by studios, directors, themes, stars, and more. At a certain point, the act of indexing seemed to supersede the act of bootlegging, becoming a discursive pleasure unto itself (as discussed below).

Ann Cvetkovich has written of how archives of trauma are also archives of resistance and resilience, and argues for reading cultural texts as "repositories of feelings and emotions."¹⁰ There is no question that trauma undergirds the indexes, but the Gay Male Pornographic Video Collection adds another layer to Cvetkovich's hermeneutics of trauma: rather than the cultural texts themselves (here, gay porn movies), it is

their loving, arguably obsessive compiling, organizing, and annotation that provides the more interesting archive. In the Internet era, private experiences of pornography (on blogs, discussion boards, and comments) are so ubiquitous as to take on generic characteristics; for the period of the Archivist's project, we have drastically fewer resources, so the video collection gives us a valuable inside perspective on the creation of erotic meaning at a time of backlash, trauma, and an increasingly homonormative public face of LGBT life. In terms of the Archivist's credo, it shows one way that queer sex *endured*.

Dubbing an Archive

Though the Archivist's identity is unknown, we can make some reasonably well-founded assumptions about him. He was male. He was almost certainly white, since that category goes unmarked in his annotations and organization, as opposed to "Black," "Latino," and "Oriental." He was reasonably affluent, at least enough to own a luxury VCR, since his entire sprawling collection is presumably the result of two VCRs hooked up together to dub copies of rental tapes. Finally, I write about him in the past tense, as an historical subject—although he may, of course, still be alive.¹¹

Despite the collection's official name, the films in fact run back to the early 1970s (*Boys in the Sand*, from 1971, is among the earliest). The actual project of dubbing and organizing the collection took place from approximately 1988 to 1992, according to dates included in the indexes. Immediately, we can see the Archivist engaging with history, memory, and technology as he blends a gay past and then-present, mixing erotic representations that range from just after Stonewall to just after Reagan.

The technological aspect structures the entire collection, of course. Along with law and social mores, technology helped organize multiple regimes of pornographic gay counterpublics in the twentieth century.¹² The first, dating back to the late nineteenth century, relied on photography and written texts to circulate gay erotic artifacts. Thomas Waugh has most thoroughly documented this visual samizdat economy in his book *Hard to Imagine*, tracing an international gay underground of desire through the visual images of bodies, sex acts, and other pockets of erotic investment that resisted official attempts at suppression and demolition. Waugh highlights the political nature of "fuck photos": "consumption of erotica was without question political . . . an act of belonging to a community composed of producers, models, and, most important, other consumers."¹³

Alongside the camera, developing print media such as the mimeograph helped disseminate written gay erotica. At a time when publicly distributed representations of gay identity often forcibly remained obtuse, despondent, or couched in the language of science or sociology for fear of incurring censorship or criminal obscenity charges, midcentury men privately disregarded the law to pass around highly explicit stories. Handwritten stories described everything from a pit stop to pick up KY jelly after a Syracuse-Colgate football game in 1947 to "Suppressed Scenes from the Memoirs of Fanny Hill," while copies of the pornographic story *Seven in a Barn* circulated in handwritten and typed versions throughout the midcentury (before later appearing in official form as a booklet in the late 1960s and then even later a hardcore film).¹⁴

The rising tide of purported sexual revolution (assisted significantly by the efforts of men and women in the homophile movement), which coincided with new, Supreme Court—mandated restrictions on the scope of obscenity law, set the structural conditions for hardcore porn to enter the official public sphere.¹⁵ As Eric Schaefer has pointed out, technology also contributed significantly to this new formation, with increasingly accessible 16mm film lowering the barriers to entry for the small storefront theaters that proliferated across urban America in the early 1970s. Though less publicly remembered than the iconic heterosexual films *Deep Throat* (Gerard Damiano, 1972) and *The Devil in Miss Jones* (also Damiano, 1973), gay porn landmarks *Boys in the Sand* (Wakefield Poole, 1971) and *L.A. Plays Itself* (Fred Halsted, 1972) in fact laid important foundations for the "porno chic" moment, announcing themselves boldly and proudly as harbingers of gay liberation.¹⁶

The new porn-centered gay counterpublic of the 1970s was anything but underground. From West Hollywood to Times Square, with numerous smaller pockets of visibility in nearly every city in the nation (even conservative Memphis in 1971 reported a theater dedicated to gay male porn films), gay porn theaters served as sites of collective celebration of gay sexuality, both onscreen and in the aisles.¹⁷ Porn films themselves in turn reflexively commented on these developments, integrating scenes set in the very theaters where they were screened into their mise-en-scene, thus furthering a spiraling dialectic of unabashed desire.¹⁸

The early 1980s, however, witnessed a massive curtailing of this public sex culture. The antigay backlash politics of the New Right capitalized on the growing AIDS crisis to demonize homosexuality and particularly public sex.¹⁹ Also facilitating this erasure was the ascendance of neoliberal urban politics and its new enclosure movement, a relentless march toward

privatization in which porn theaters were seen by corporate-friendly city planners as obsolete relics that obstructed gentrification and the nebulously defined "growth." Zoning laws and other tools of redevelopment weighed heavily on the theaters. By the mid-1980s, porn theaters were increasingly at odds with "respectable" gay politics. Though sex radicals such as Samuel Delany continued to defend them, more mainstream gay writers such as novelist and essayist Andrew Holleran expressed greater ambivalence. Writing around middecade, Holleran found New York porn theaters "sad, delicious, and infinitely erotic," while also understanding them as relics of the past in a "city as cemetery." It is a vestigial comfort he finds in them, not a thrill; "dark and quiet and calm," they are "all that is left, it seems, of homosexuality."²⁰

Pornography, however, did not mourn; it reorganized. Again, technology facilitated a transformation that coincided with larger social shifts. Home video technology existed as early as the mid-1960s, but became a mass phenomenon only in the '80s, with the spread of the VCR (which defeated the superior, but less accessible, Betamax). As video historian Lucas Hilderbrand notes, only 5 percent of the American public owned VCRs in 1982, but such were the boom years of middecade that 50 percent had been surpassed by 1987, with a staggering 75 percent reporting ownership by 1992. Hilderbrand notes the "democratic participation enabled by technology" in the case of the VCR and VHS tape, which began as "time-shifting" devices for recording television but quickly expanded their terrain to include the watching (and illegal dubbing) of feature films.²¹ That participation ran the risk of industrial cooptation—fellow video historian Joshua Greenberg also argues that the VCR facilitated a "transformation in meaning," but one that reconfigured movies "from experiences into commodified goods"—though in the case of gay porn the disciplinary pressures of mass culture carried less salience than those of New Right political backlash and the AIDS epidemic.²²

Nonmarital, nonprocreative sex was under attack by the Right in the early '80s, from the curtailing of abortion rights and access to the grassroots antigay activism that led to numerous legal and political assaults on equality.²³ A complicit mainstream media joined in, signaled by *Time's* exploitation of fears centered on the herpes virus to declare the sexual revolution over in 1982.²⁴ In this sense, herpes provided a smaller test run for the narrativization of AIDS on the national level, in which a medical crisis was discursively supplanted by moral and political opportunism, channeled through the emerging New Right framework of "family values." Monogamous, procreative, married heterosexual families

claimed a monopoly on the term, thus limiting positive representations of nonnormative families and sex. While Ronald Reagan said nothing, his underlings and associates castigated gays for bringing the epidemic on themselves. The shortcomings of the privatized U.S. healthcare system became catastrophic: AIDS patients literally died in the streets.²⁵

Under the weight of this fear-mongering and obliviousness, and as mainstream media refused to report accurately and clearly on topics such as vectors of transmission for fear of offending their presumptively straight readership (known as "the general population"), sex could not but take on new social meaning.²⁶ Gay men and lesbians took the lead in inventing safer sex, pioneering new erotic investments in condoms, dental dams, and various new sex practices that rerouted pleasure away from internal ejaculations and other unsafe bodily fluids. Phone sex, masturbation clubs, and other new social formations responded to the AIDS crisis, keeping desire alive while adjusting to epidemiological realities. Awareness of the crisis infused gay sexuality during the '80s, often explicitly. As one correspondent wrote to bookseller George Fisher in 1983, "these days, with the AIDS scare, everybody is whacking his whang, and I'm working on mine right now." Like Holleran, the writer could not but mourn the past; "Before the health scare, I always went to the baths—what a feast!" Instead, now it was "jerk-off stuff that guys are into because there's no risk."²⁷

This was the world the Archivist inhabited. We can know nothing of his sex practices, but as he rented, dubbed, and cataloged his thousands of porn films, he frequently signaled awareness of these larger social tensions. Like many diarists, he writes with a combination of insularity and a sense of historicity presumably poised for an unacknowledged posterity. His undated catalog (later, he would add dates) begins with a short statement of purpose, under the header "A Collection of Male Pornography." "These tapes," he explains, "have become interrelated with each other and with the shorter material, such as trailers and video clips, mounted in with them in six-hour units," which he could achieve by recording at the lower-quality SLP speed that extended the duration of VHS tapes (in contrast to the two-hour SP speed that marked studio releases). "The thrill is knowing the whole tape and seeing its individual players," he continued. "For me, it's whose [sic] doing *what* and to *whom*, and how *enthusiastically*." With that, the first list begins, broken down by tape number and position—*Breakdown*, a 1978 film from Trophy, begins the collection as 1.1. Already, then, the Archivist sutures deep affective investments into his opening index.

At this early point in his archiving, the collector records terse descriptions, as if balancing a sexual ledger. For *Breakdown*, he merely notes, "Sex on the ceiling in a mirrored room, country 3-way with a business man." Other early entries remain similarly informational, taking brief note of favorite sex scenes (*Headwaiter*, 2.5: "John Kovacs does bondage act in a bar as Roy Garrett blows the bartender") or basic plotlines (*Dune Buddies*, 7.4: "Malo tries to escape Manhattan lifestyle of 'Too much sex' on Fire Island!"). Though precise dates for these early efforts are elusive, he appears to have begun his cataloging in 1988 (Figure 5.3).

Only gradually did the Archivist seem to shift the locus of his engagement from the pleasures of the filmic text to those of his own written text. By around the 350th tape, he had expanded his editorial voice and begun dating the index—we can see that he typed, or at least printed, the entries for tape 371 (containing six films) on March 2, 1990. He often blurs apparent ad copy with more personal response; of *Foxhole* (371.2), he writes that it "will certainly leave you 'standing at attention,'" almost surely taken from the video box, but adds his own observation that "in the sex scenes everybody keeps their khaki socks on, I guess

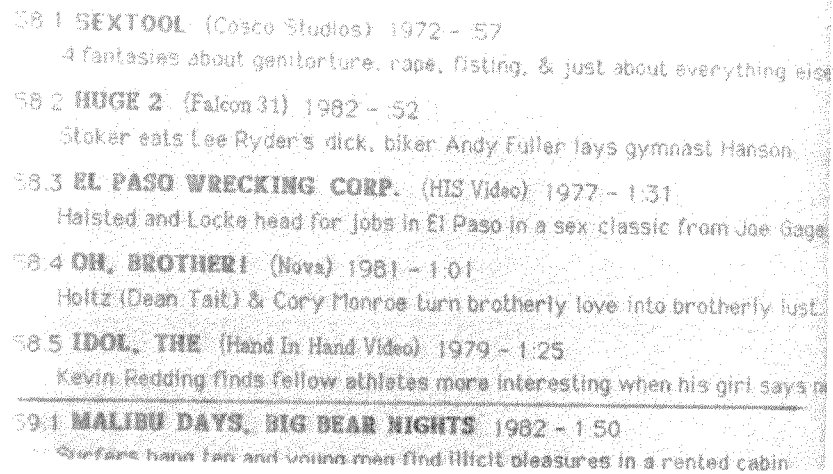


FIGURE 5.3. Early index notes typed in blue, tersely written; juxtaposition of perverse and "vanilla" porn in close proximity, photograph. Gay male pornographic video collection, #7563. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

because this is the army." By this point, the entries had grown from their initial one-line blurbs to thick paragraphs for many films. After just over 600 tapes (often containing six films per tape, for a conservative estimate of 3,200 total films), the indexes stop, in around late 1992 (the year the Archivist obtained a new printer).

Those are the facts that can be known about the Gay Male Pornographic Video Collection. We can assume that the Archivist was a heavy renter at one or more video stores, which must have been gay-friendly to carry such extensive holdings. He also must have purchased many commercially released videos and dubbed them into his collection, since the indexes are liberally illustrated with cutouts from magazines and video-box art. In the 1980s, tape-trading spearheaded community formations in several underground niches, from cult movie circles that circulated bootleg copies of legally unavailable foreign films by Jess Franco, Jean Rollin, and other exploitation auteurs to audiocassette mail swaps in the grindcore music scene. Perhaps the Archivist points toward a yet-undocumented gay porn tape-trading scene?

The Organizational Logics of Smut

What began as a simple, bare-bones descriptive index blossomed into a sprawling, labor-intensive project. If not quite as developed as Henry Spencer Ashbee's Victorian-era *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, which came bearing footnotes, translations, and extensive annotations, the Archivist's spiraling indexes are perhaps as close as the video-porn era comes. As the entries in the video index expanded from their one-line beginnings into full paragraphs—replete with annotations, with VCR counter numbers marking particular sex scenes designated as "hot," "great," or, frequently "WOW!," and with occasional random commentaries—the Archivist also began new, complementary indices. His black binder hosted the sequential video log, while in a red binder he broke the collection down along other lines: by star, director, studio, and specific features such as race. By examining his organizational logics, we can see the contours of a gay video imaginary outlined—one idiosyncratic to the Archivist, of course, but nonetheless valuable as a window into the larger collective interplay of video and desire in the AIDS era.

The Archivist showed little adherence to one specific regime of eroticism. He celebrated the more mainstream, "vanilla" sex of clone-pioneer Al Parker and such normatively masculine stars as Jack Wrangler

(both of whom earned numerous plaudits and “hot” classifications across the indexes), but he also enjoyed rougher, more transgressive films with BDSM themes and marginalized sex acts. Of *Born Bad* (1991), he found the “lots of kisses” to be “super hot” (447.6). But *Born to Raise Hell* (1975, though the Archivist misdated it as 1968), the notoriously violent film featuring rape, fisting, and watersports, he also found “pretty hot” (109.2).

By the late 1980s, porn marketing tended to segregate sexual interests, siphoning BDSM off into a distinct niche and thus “purifying” even pornographic gay sex, but the Archivist clearly resisted those imposed trends.²⁸ Indeed, he seemed not even to recognize or acknowledge the distinction. On tape 58, Fred Halsted’s kinky *Sextool* coexists with the proto-homonormative *The Idol*; on tape 64, Christopher Rage’s *Sleaze*, an extremely rough, grimy video in which “Dan spits in David’s mouth, a tough beauty slobbers beer down on a guy chewing on his dick,” and a “piss sequence” directs its spray “mostly into Dan Holt’s and Joe Ryder’s mouths,” is followed immediately by *Members Only*, directed by William Higgins, a pioneer in blond-California-surfer-boy porn. Without acknowledging any discontinuities between the two, the Archivist bestows generous “HOT”s on both.

At a time when antiporn feminism was calling into question the male gaze, the Archivist also projected the gay pornographic look well past smut, reflecting the pleasures of extending an often speculative prurience into the resistant straight world. Interspersed with his reflections, particularly in the more free-flowing lists of the red binder, are numerous episodes of pulling external figures into his matrix of smut and desire. The glued and taped images garnishing the indexes, for instance, come primarily from pornography, but regularly weave in outside figures—in addition to the aforementioned baseball players and Kristofferson, one memorable two-page spread features several naked, erect men, alongside straight martial-arts B-movie ham Steven Seagal. The effect differs wildly from the purported violence by way of objectification and dehumanization with which such antiporn feminists as Andrea Dworkin charged the male pornographic lens; instead, at a time of retrenchment and homophobia, the Archivist showed how irrepressible gay desire remained. As the public sphere contracted under New Right sexual politics and neoliberal shrinkage, desire itself persisted, absorbing anything and everything into its field of vision.

The Archivist refused to distinguish porn from other cultural texts, including “Mainstream Films of Gay Interest” alongside the smut in his red index. Thus *The Times of Harvey Milk*, *Maurice*, *Parting Glances*, and

the films of Derek Jarman coexisted with Halsted and Higgins and Rage, as did the Village People’s *Can’t Stop the Music* and even the science fiction cheesefest *Yor, the Hunter from the Future*, resplendent in its shimmering beefcake shots. The Archivist even delved into “Straight Tape Males” to find hetero-smut scenes of interest, taking pleasure in knowing that straight studs like Buck Adams and Peter North maintained sideline gay porn careers (the latter under the name Matt Ramsey).

This fascination with privileged knowledge appeared in other guises as well. “Straight Pornography with Gay Input” received its own list, including heterosexual porn films by gay directors Steve Scott and Michael Zen, as well as more relishing of Peter North’s gay alter ego. Zen’s *The Filthy Rich*, the Archivist notes, features “3 men active in gay films,” clearly adding a layer of spectatorial pleasure lost on straight viewers, as heterosexual sex scenes are absorbed (or queered) into otherwise unrealized modalities of viewing. The Archivist also repurposed straight porn in other ways, taking note of scenes with “more than one guy with a girl,” which frequently contained inadvertent male-male contact.²⁹ While “queering” is often imparted as a theoretical exercise by scholars combing textual interstices, the Archivist engaged in a more practical form of it—and indeed, was far from alone in the pursuit. Another, much smaller collection at Cornell, the Collection of Gay Male and Pornographic DVDs, was also donated by a gay man with a particular interest in scenes of “more than one man having sex with one woman,” suggesting a greater and more expansive lineage of gay engagement with hetero smut that remains otherwise difficult to historically document.³⁰

Finally, he seemed to relish gossip that would situate public figures as gay, at one point dubbing an interview with independent film director John Sayles and wondering whether Sayles had “moonlight[ed] a jackoff film in his youth,” including a segment from the solo-scene collection *Bullet 9* next to the interview on the tape as “evidence”—“see for yourself,” he wrote (20.7). An episode of the Manhattan cable access show (perhaps pointing toward the Archivist’s general location) *Closet Case Show* pops up on tape 371, with a scene featuring then-still-closeted diver Greg Louganis, in whom the Archivist took interest; when Louganis appeared in *Playgirl*, the Archivist bemoaned that “modestly his dick is concealed by a towel, dammit.”

If the Archivist might be said to engage in a gay-smut *ars erotica* with his reconfiguration of anything and everything into porn fodder, he also pursued the *scientia sexualis* outlined by Foucault and imported by Linda Williams to porn studies.³¹ From Sayles to Louganis to the

“boys of Venice” so lovingly depicted in William Higgins’s films, many of these erotic investments partook of normative white masculinity. The Archivist was capable of stepping outside these confines, as when he gave the 1985 film *Passage Thru Pamela*, starring a transwoman (“not quite a girl yet” was how her identity registered to him), an emphatic “HOT!” Yet, pointing toward the Archivist’s almost certain whiteness, racial difference took erotic valence primarily as a fetish commodity. While he occasionally noted interracial scenes within videos, racial difference was primarily something confined to specific niche titles and lists. This not only reflected the industry’s marketing tactics, but also the Archivist’s complicity in endorsing and extending those strategies.

Certainly the racial problematics of gay erotica predated the advent of VHS, as witnessed in what Tracy Morgan has called physique magazines’ “pages of whiteness.”³² But the video market spurred an intensification of niche marketing, and racial difference joined BDSM, bisexuality, and other “niches” in being largely cordoned off from the “regular” erotic playing field. Thus, for instance, the Latino Fan Club, a line of tapes centered on “uncut Puerto Ricans” (as the Archivist quoted *Stallion* magazine): *The Boys of El Barrio* is described in the index as “show[ing] what Latin love is all about”—probably ad copy, since the phrase reappears with the film on tapes 217 and 308. But if the Archivist simply engages in recursive racialism there, other racial articulations emanate out of his own perspective. An interest in “Black Men in Tapes” generated its own index in the second binder. Examining the 1990 tape *BFP Duo Series, vol. 1* (373.5), he notes that “this tape offers clear proof that blacks really do have bigger wangs than whites.” The subsequent commentary, calling the performers “reasonably attractive,” suggests that these were the Archivist’s own words. The same assertion also appears in regard to *Mr. Footlong Encounters* (9.3), an early index entry that simply reads, “It’s true, black dicks are longer and Duncan’s 12 inches helps prove it.”

This presumption of racial knowledge, of course, dates as far back as the European colonial project, but its pornographic iteration reflected well the ways the “truth” of race could be inscribed through the very act of white voyeurism. Did the 1989 film *The Guys from Guatemala* have anything to do with Guatemala or Guatemalans? Nguyen Tan Hoang has noted that white “knowledge” about race is perpetually belied by its mutability, as in the case of Brandon Lee, the first Asian-American gay porn star, who began with a more ethnically ambiguous, possibly Latino, onscreen identity.³³ The Archivist accepts the racial truths of *The Guys from Guatemala*, calling its actors “primitive young men.” As he

adds, invoking the figure of the cheap Latino day-laborer, “I can hear it now: Jim Moss, the director, saying, ‘I’ll give each of you five bucks if you beat off’” (302.2). When Latinos are not marked as “Guatemalan,” as in the uncredited cast of *Get It While It’s Hot*, they become to the Archivist simply “Mexican,” the perpetual Anglo default category for Latin Americans (444.6). Meanwhile, he accepts the classification offered by the title of *Oriental Encounters* (15.5), describing the setting as “the house of a wealthy Oriental.”

In all of these racial fantasies, the Archivist both echoes and extends the perverse implantations of the pornographic texts, in an insular dialectic of white desire for a perpetually fetishized Other. As such, he makes a useful case study in the perpetuation of racialized grids of knowledge within private organizations of desire, power, and pornographic sexuality operative in both straight and gay films.

Plague and Desire

Already by the time the Archivist was writing his index notes, a proliferation of analyses contended that AIDS had ushered in a new historical moment in gay consciousness, marked by trauma and a new nostalgia. Epidemiology had never been the dominant hermeneutic for rendering AIDS socially legible, of course; as Paula Treichler influentially wrote, it was as much an “epidemic of signification” as it was a medical one.³⁴ For the New Right, morality provided the lens, and while private internal struggles immobilized the Reagan administration (contributing to his infamous silence), public New Right spokesmen such as Patrick Buchanan and Jerry Falwell rushed to condemn gay men for the immoral behavior that spawned the crisis, often in ways that but dimly corresponded to the facts.³⁵

On the other end of the political spectrum, psychologist Walt Odets was reading HIV/AIDS not just through its body count but also the innumerable traumas it inflicted on partners, survivors, and close observers; the epidemic, Odets argued, “keeps company with the two World Wars and the Great Depression as a psychosocial event of twentieth-century world history.”³⁶ The nostalgia framework had also emerged early in the crisis, and in a 1990 article John Clum was able to identify the “new meaning” that memory and desire had taken in 1980s gay literature, where “the present is sad and terrifying, and the future is drastically foreshortened.”³⁷ Further, Hilderbrand suggests that the “affective uses of videotape”

themselves are often nostalgic—not only later in the digital era when it became a throwback format, but also in the very bootlegging practices that effectively constituted the poetics of VHS.³⁸

The Archivist reflected some of this nostalgia, as when he wistfully noted of *Bullet Gold 3: The Best of Bullet* (compiled in 1988 but drawing on earlier material) that it was “from the male porno days when the men were all grownups” (266.5). But if the Archivist found the shaved, gym-sculpted, youthful men of '80s gay porn unenticing, he showed no sign of it. Instead of a declension model that would see the 1987 loop-carrier *Room Mates* as inferior to Wakefield Poole's 1971 gay-liberationist landmark *Boys in the Sand*, the Archivist offers little to distinguish the two when they appear in that sequence on tape 222. *Boys* reappears on other tapes, but even when the Archivist revisits it for another, thematic, list, he describes it in the same terms as newer work: “TRIPLE WOW.” The differences between shooting on film and video, or two years after Stonewall versus six years after Reagan's ascent, seem not to register in his erotic response.

None of this is to suggest the Archivist approached his material ahistorically; rather just that other distinctions that would later be applied to porn apparently mattered little to him. Awareness of AIDS saturates the indexes. The Archivist kept a death log in the black binder (not all, of course, were AIDS casualties—though the epidemic's impact on the gay porn world was devastating), and perhaps the single most poignant moment in the vast discursive landscape of the indexes is a brief discussion of the film *Under the Sign of the Stallion*, included in a set of uncategorized notes in the black index. Its scenes in which “very masculine, hairy-chested men perform sexual acrobatics,” he wrote, were “unlike anything we've seen in American gay porn due to the health crisis.” He may have been invoking the acrobatic sex, or the hairy bodies; each seemed to give way to new regimes in the 1980s. As Marcel Barriault argues, the “need to depict clean, healthy bodies” led to “shaved, waxed, or naturally smooth bodies that allowed one to see no visible sign of Kaposi's sarcoma.”³⁹

Had sexual representation been disciplined by the threat of AIDS? Certainly the emerging safer-sex “pornographic vernacular” that Cindy Patton identified (and contributed to) as a major intervention by AIDS activists had left reverberations across the industry in the late 1980s. Government inaction and pressing urgency turned such porn stars as Al Parker and Richard Locke into activists, who sought to eroticize new forms of sex and pleasure that did not serve as vectors of HIV transmission, particularly the use of condoms.⁴⁰

Observing this shift at the ground level, the Archivist seemed neither celebratory nor dismissive of the developing norms. An early safer-sex porn film, *Alone and Private*, seemed to reflect the crisis only obliquely, by relying exclusively on “J/O” (jack-off) scenes, but ends with the filmmaker's voiceover, “play safely, use a condom” (192.3). The Archivist devotes a thick paragraph to the film, which earns no capitalized exuberance but does at least win an exclamation mark when one character “gets off a real load!” No editorial commentary elaborates on the closing voiceover—which jars against the film itself, since the J/O scenes necessitate no condoms.

Another early safer-sex gay porn film, *Play Safely* (1986), brought condoms more aggressively to light. It begins with a dialogue scene featuring two young men discussing a mutual friend, Philip, with concern; as one says, “he looked really thin and I've heard that he's been sick lately and they think he has AIDS.” “Just thinking about AIDS,” he adds, “makes me not want to have sex anymore.” Through a sexual pedagogy involving dialogue and sex scenes, the protagonists ultimately “see how fun rubber can be.” Though Patton argues that *Play Safely* confuses its own message through erotic unprotected flashback scenes (and indeed, when the two leads proceed to have sex after discussing their friend's possible AIDS in the opening scene, they do so without condoms), the film concludes with the rolling on of a condom, as one of the young men declares, “I'm not going to play games anymore. I'm going to play safely.”⁴¹

Responding to *Play Safely*, the Archivist implicitly contrasted it to *Alone and Private*, describing the “safe but steamy sex that goes beyond J/O and suck and fuck.” The introduction of condoms perturbed him little, as he singled out a “sexy number that includes a 69 and fucking with rubbers” (150.3). Elsewhere, in other entries, the Archivist simply noted without inflection “an AIDS spot” on a *Men in Films* compilation video (291.6), a fourteen-minute German safe sex ad with a “gorgeous German hunk” and an “equally hunky black man” (442.4), suggesting no resistance to the pornographic vernacular of safer sex. Indeed, when *Alone and Private* director Chris Stevens went beyond his J/O framework to include “sucking and fucking with rubbers” in another 1986 film, *Discharged*, the Archivist wrote, “all of it is pretty sexy” (142.2).

Significantly, the Archivist showed no inclination to separate safer-sex films from pre-AIDS films with condomless visual economies. This helps historicize by default the development of the “bareback” video as a defined niche with specific resonance; while the Archivist was clearly on the cusp of that marketing/erotic formation, it was not yet legible to him.⁴² Indeed,

though he accurately describes the 1988 *Turbo Charge* as “Al Parker’s safe sex video with his current lover Justin Cade” (243.5), when he returns to the film in a later iteration of his index, he describes it in greater detail but without any reference to condoms or safer sex at all. While there are multiple ways to read this moment, in the context of the indexes it seems to suggest a normalization of safer sex, without any great burden of nostalgia.

Certainly AIDS could not stop the Archivist’s ceaseless desire. He was particularly saddened by the death of director Steve Scott from AIDS-related illness in 1987. In a brief biography that doubled as an obituary, he summarized Scott’s work, and concluded with a wishful description of Scott’s uncompleted final project, which the Archivist claimed was to be a film called *Jr.*, with straight porn actor Harry Reems playing a retired football player searching for his son, a porn actor. The reconciliation, the Archivist wrote, “was to end with a kiss that could be merely paternal . . .”

While I can find no independent verification of *Jr.*, it was probably reported in the gay porn press of the 1980s, which remains wholly unindexed, largely unarchived, and rarely digitized. Yet it is also tempting to position it as pure imagination, a private erotic memory project undertaken as both tribute and wish-fulfillment by a porn connoisseur crediting a fallen porn artist with one final, unrealized masterpiece. It certainly serves as a glimpse into the affective archive contained in these lengthy, intricate indexes.

Closing Glimpses

The Archivist stopped dubbing and indexing in late 1992, and while we simply lack access to further information, it is impossible in the context of the era to avoid being chilled by the suddenness of the conclusion to his four-year endeavor. It is highly unlikely that the films of the Gay Male Pornographic Video Collection will ever be restored or even more accessible; in addition to the copyright concerns surrounding a bootleg collection, VHS dupes provide little foundation for any meaningful restoration.⁴³ The digital archive of the Internet calls into question the use-value of any such undertaking, though it might be a more prudent use of limited resources to cross-check which entries in the indexes remain absent from the digital realm and consider making them more available, as the historiographical march into the 1980s and ’90s accelerates. Surely the collection contains some otherwise largely lost ephemera within its cavernous recesses.

With that said, the most useful artifacts in the collection are unquestionably the indexes (Figure 5.4). Even their very materiality—the printed drafts held in folders alongside the binders, the print quality that invokes the early years of the personal home computer and the uses to which it was put, and the cut-out images put to illustrative, erotic, and affective use alongside the entries—helps reconstruct the private sphere of the porn collector on the brink of the digital era.

Much of what the indexes show is perhaps deductively obvious: that white men invested in racial fetishes; that gay men appropriated and resignified heterosexual smut; that gay desire persisted even in the worst of the plague years of the AIDS epidemic. Yet the private window that it opens, into a personal realm of affect and eros that interacted with larger collective imaginaries, remains valuable and still too rare some three decades after the advent of formal LGBT historical scholarship. One may question whether *all* male fuck films are indeed the instant classics that the

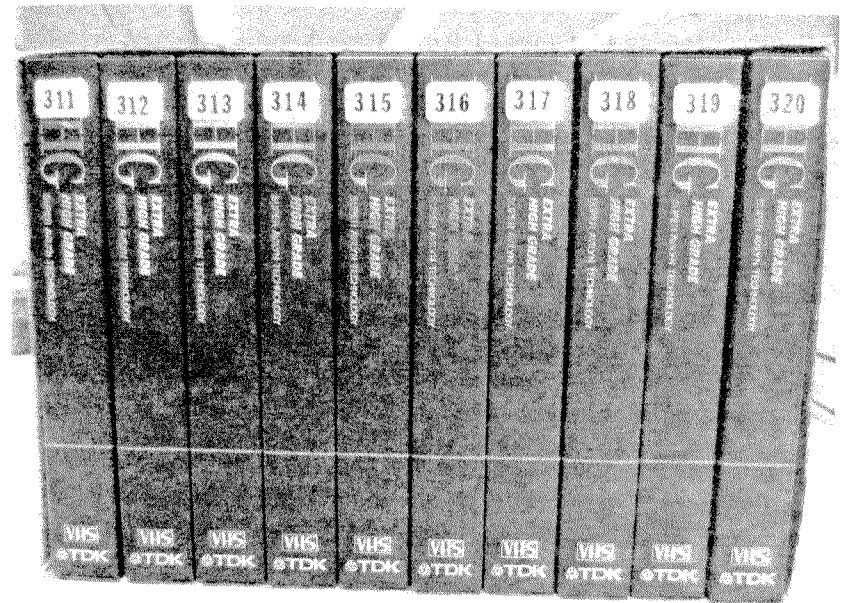


FIGURE 5.4. The tapes themselves numbered 311 to 320, a lost analogue archive. Male Pornographic Video Collection, #7563. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.

Archivist purported. Yet he created a classic of his own, an idiosyncratic, problematic, yet moving and revealing archive of the persistence of desire and its organizational logics during a time of fear, death, and backlash—not to mention a powerful signpost of the valuable as-yet-undiscovered historical artifacts buried in obscure archives of smut.

Notes

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1. Guide to the Gay Male Pornographic Video Collection, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University, <http://rmlc.library.cornell.edu/EAD/htmldocs/RMM07563.html>. The concerns about access seem to relate to institutional anxieties over copyright, given the wholly bootleg nature of this collection. Date of acquisition as per author phone conversation with Brenda Marston, 19 September 2014.

2. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785–1812* (New York: Vintage, 1990); B. R. Burg, *An American Seafarer in the Age of Sail: The Erotic Diaries of Philip C. Van Buskirk, 1851–1870* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994).

3. Black binder, Gay Male Pornographic Video Collection, 1978–1992, box 12. The black and red binders are both located in this box, and pose difficulties for clear citation because of their lack of pagination and occasional overlap. I have cited the master tape index in the black binder in-text by tape number and tried to make clear when citations are from the red binder as well.

4. Wilson, Douglas L. "Thomas Jefferson's Library and the French Connection," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 26, no. 4 (1993): 669–85; Ian Gibson *The Erotomaniac: The Secret Life of Henry Spencer Ashbee* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo, 2001). See also Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 145–190; James Gifford, *Dayneford's Library: American Homosexual Writing, 1900–1913* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995).

5. Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, ed. Douglas Crimp (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 197.

6. Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001) 69; Thomas Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (New York: Verso, 1993). See also Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), and the essays in Antoinette Burton, ed., *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

7. On queer archives, see—in addition to the rest of this collection—Charles McGraw, "The Papers of Foster Gunnison, Jr. and the Politics of Queer Preservation," *History Workshop Journal* 65, no. 1 (2008): 179–87.

8. Eric Schaefer, "Dirty Little Secrets: Scholars, Archivists, and Dirty Movies," *The Moving Image* 5, no. 2 (2005): 79–105; Dwight Swanson, "Home Viewing: Pornography and Amateur Film Collections, A Case Study," *The Moving Image* 5, no. 2 (2005): 136–40; Michel Barriault, "Hard to Dismiss: The Archival Value of Gay Male Erotica and Pornography," *Archivaria* 68 (2010): 219–46. Among the pioneering writings in porn studies are Thomas Waugh, "Men's Pornography: Gay vs. Straight," *Jump Cut* (March 1985): 30–35; Richard Dyer, "Male Gay Pornography," *ibid.*, 27–29; Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

9. All of the various archival repositories discussed throughout this book hold visual, filmic, written, and other forms of porn and erotica, often cataloged as individual items or by genre or format. Exceptions include such collections as the Heterosexual and Gay Male Pornographic DVDs held at Cornell and amassed by one collector, and the B.E.M. Erotica Manuscript Collection at the Kinsey Institute, preserved as an individual collection of 1,100 midcentury BDSM stories.

10. Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 7.

11. Tucked inside an inset folder in Index 1 is a Spartan business card bearing only a name. I assume this to name the Archivist, though I cannot be sure, and even if I could, I would still respect his anonymity here.

12. On the concept of the counterpublic, see Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone, 2002).

13. Thomas Waugh, *Hard to Imagine: Gay Male Eroticism in Photography and Film Before Stonewall* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 5, 217.

14. "Dear Bob" letter/story, 14 November 1947, and "Suppressed Scenes from the Memoirs of Fanny Hill," n.d., box 1, Gay Erotic Stories Collection, Human Sexuality Collection; "Seven in a Barn" typescript in box 1, folder 27, Explicit Underground Graphics and Literature Collection, ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, Los Angeles.

15. On obscenity doctrine, see Whitney Strub, *Obscenity Rules: Roth v. United States and the Long Struggle over Sexual Expression* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2013).

16. Jeffrey Escoffier, *Bigger Than Life: The History of Gay Porn Cinema from Beefcake to Hardcore* (Philadelphia: Running Dog Press, 2009).

17. James Chisum, "X," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 2 May 1971.

18. For examples of this reflexivity, see *The Back Row* (Jerry Douglas, 1972), *A Night at the Adonis* (Jack Deveau, 1978), and *The Dirty Picture Show* (Tom DiSimone, 1979), among numerous others.

19. Didi Herman, *The Antigay Agenda: Orthodox Vision and the Christian Right* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); John Gallagher and Chris Bull,

Perfect Enemies: The Battle Between the Religious Right and the Gay Movement, updated edition (Lanham, MD: Madison, 2001); Dangerous Bedfellows, ed., *Policing Public Sex* (Boston: South End Press, 1996).

20. Andrew Holleran, *Ground Zero* (New York: Plume, 1988), 20–21; Samuel Delany, *Times Square Red, Times Square Blue* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

21. Lucas Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice: Bootleg Histories of Videotape and Copyright* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 36, 5.

22. Joshua Greenberg, *From Betamax to Blockbuster: Video Stores and the Invention of Movies on Video* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 5, 16.

23. On abortion, see Rosalind Petchesky, *Abortion and Woman's Choice: The State, Sexuality, and Reproductive Freedom* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990).

24. John Heidenry, *What Wild Ecstasy: The Rise and Fall of the Sexual Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 297.

25. Though journalist Randy Shilts has been rightly criticized for both his problematic sexual politics and his fabricated "Patient Zero" narrative, his work still offers vivid and significant depictions of the many failures of the American healthcare system, which frequently led AIDS patients to homelessness and a lack of accessible care. See *And the Band Played On* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987).

26. James Kinsella, *Covering the Plague: AIDS and the American Media* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

27. Letter to George Fisher (author name redacted), n.d. (1983), box 1, folder 5, George Fisher Papers, Human Sexuality Collection.

28. On the marginalization of BDSM sexuality within the porn video market, see Connie Shortes, "'Cleaning up a Sewer': The Containment of S/M Pornography," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 26, no. 2 (1998): 72–79.

29. Indeed, this aspect of heterosexual pornography has gone generally underrecognized, and the seemingly deliberate efforts of (often themselves queer) performers such as Georgina Spelvin and Annie Sprinkle to instigate quite striking moments of male-male genital contact deserves more attention as a site of subversion within otherwise heteronormative smut. See particularly Spelvin's threesome in *The Devil in Miss Jones* (1973) and Sprinkle's in *Kathy's Graduation Present* (1975).

30. From the Guide to the Collection of Gay Male and Pornographic DVDs, #7703, Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University, <http://rnc.library.cornell.edu/EAD/htmldocs/RMM07703.html>.

31. See Linda Williams, *Hard Core*, 34–57.

32. Tracy Morgan, "Pages of Whiteness: Race, Physique Magazines, and the Emergence of Public Gay Culture," *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Anthology* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 280–297. David Johnson has offered a gentle corrective recently, agreeing that physique

culture privileged an unmarked whiteness yet adding that the magazines nonetheless offered greater racial diversity than the mainstream mass media of the era; "Physique Pioneers: The Politics of 1960s Gay Consumer Culture," *Journal of Social History* 43, no. 4 (2010): 867–92.

33. Nguyen Tan Hoang, "The Resurrection of Brandon Lee: The Making of a Gay Asian American Porn Star," Linda Williams, ed., *Porn Studies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 246–47.

34. Paula Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999), 1.

35. On the politics of AIDS, see Jennifer Brier, *Infectious Ideas: US Political Responses to the AIDS Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

36. Walt Odets, *In the Shadow of the Epidemic: Being HIV-Negative in the Age of AIDS* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 15.

37. John Clum, "'The Time Before the War': AIDS, Memory, and Desire," *American Literature* 62, no. 4 (1990): 648–67.

38. Hilderbrand, *Inherent Vice*, xiii.

39. Barriault, "Hard to Dismiss," 239.

40. Cindy Patton, *Fatal Advice: How Safe-Sex Education Went Wrong* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996); Richard Locke, *In the Heat of Passion: How to Have Hotter, Safer Sex* (San Francisco: Leyland, 1987). Print authors also contributed to this new erotics, spearheaded by John Preston's 1985 anthology *Hot Living: Erotic Stories about Safer Sex*, as discussed in Mark John Isola, "'The String of This One Story': Erotica, HIV, and the Construction of Safe Sex in Gay Male Popular Memory," *Journal of Homosexuality* 60, no. 8 (2013): 1185–219.

41. Patton, *Fatal Advice*, 134.

42. On barebacking films, see Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

43. Lynne Kirste has discussed the obstacles faced by LGBT film preservationists; suffice it to say, this collection compounds the problems she lists. See "Collective Effort: Archiving LGBT Moving Images," *Cinema Journal* 46 no. 3 (2007): 134–140.

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Researching Sexual Histories

Edited by

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and

Jaime Cantrell

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