Pornography in the Library

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Thus, less than twenty-four hours after her arrival during her second day there, she was taken after the meal into the library, there to serve coffee and tend the fire. Jeanne, whom the black-haired valet had brought back, went with her as did another girl named Monique. It was this same valet who took them there and remained in the room, stationed near the stake to which O had been attached. The library was still empty. The French doors faced west, and in the vast, almost cloudless sky the autumn sun slowly pursued its course, its rays lighting, on a chest of drawers, an enormous bouquet of sulphur-colored chrysanthemums which smelled of earth and dead leaves.

Pauline Réage

I. A perverted library

When Grove Press put out an American edition of *Story of O* in 1965, the publication did not initiate a momentous legal battle over obscenity, nor did it face aggressive censorship campaigns. Generally speaking, it did not even shock public tastes or outrage critics. The translation hit shelves in a plain white wrapper that indicated the book’s title and its intended audience (“limited to adults”) after Grove Press had already engaged a series of high-profile legal battles over so-called modern classics *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and *Tropic of Cancer*. By 1965, *Story of O* had accrued the peculiar distinction of winning the Prix des Deux Magots at the same time as weathering a publicity ban in France.
Rather than sparking a new round of public debate about literary value and obscenity in the U.S., however, the novel’s publication typified a historical moment that redefined pornography’s relationship to the general public by granting mainstream audiences access to sexually explicit literature. As Eliot Fremont-Smith remarked in his New York Times book review the following March, the moment of O’s publication “marks the end of any coherent restrictive application of the concept of pornography to books.”

His review goes on to affirm both artistic vision and art’s visibility: “what art is about is seeing,” Fremont-Smith explains, “which is why art is always at war with those who would righteously restrict the scope or manner of vision.”

We might add that pornography, too, trades in the visual and that efforts to censor it have organized around a will to suppress the visibility of sex. Following Linda Williams’s development of the principle of maximum visibility, we can say that straight porn most successfully makes visible women’s bodies and men’s pleasure. As the epigraph to this paper suggests, however, Story of O exemplifies the circumstances in which pornography operates according to a different and distinctly spatial problematic that arises from the mainstream acceptance of “obscene” printed material. Outlining the spatial dimension will require a shift in critical attention away from questions about how or why we look at sexually explicit materials toward related questions about how or why we organize them as we do. With that in mind, the basic question that begins my investigation is where, if anywhere, in the library do we find pornography?

With the decline of legal censorship and the resulting increase in access to pornography after the Second World War, public institutions in the U.S. had to reevaluate
their relationship to formerly banned materials. Libraries emerge in the later 1960s as a privileged and highly contested institutional space for those reevaluations because the legal changes regulating print culture impacted more than just their moral sensibilities; those changes also impacted the core of their professional practice. Naturally, librarians felt the urgency of legal decisions regarding obscenity and, within the field of library and information science, debates about collection development began to formalize around the question of pornography. In that discursive context and at that historical juncture, pornography amounts to a problem that raises an entire set of questions about intellectual freedom, community service, media access, heterogeneous social values, and more practical concerns about how to manage potentially sensitive collections.

I do not want to overestimate *Story of O*’s engagement with any of those issues. The library is hardly central to the novel’s development and, like many libraries of an earlier era, it seems to serve only a select group of gentlemen readers rather than the variously constituted communities at issue for public institutions. However, its notably unspectacular publication history marks a moment in postwar America when dirty books found their way to public bookshelves without any of the Comstockery that met earlier attempts in the twentieth century to peddle pornography. In the relative calm following the censorship cases pushed forward by Grove Press, during which it published *Story of O*, a professional debate about institutional practices and responsibilities flourished within the field of library science, eventually incorporating considerations of image and moving-image porn. Although those debates incorporated highly contested
watchwords—freedom, decency, and democracy, to name just a few—the most vocal participants identified their stakes as the life, or death, of the library.

Before attempting to account for those debates and the problems they raise for thinking about the space of the library, it helps to consider how *Story of O* depicts that space within its narrative frame. Brief as the reformulation is, it nonetheless stands as an example of the imaginary formulations that structure debates about libraries. At the same time, it places sexuality squarely within the space of the library and so offers a perspective that needs further development. Doing so will provide the entry point to discussing some of the problems of imagination attendant on thinking about the place of sexually explicit materials in libraries. Taking the library scene in *Story of O* as a point of departure, I also want to suggest that turning attention to the organization of institutions that house, archive and sometimes lend sex materials can help produce an understanding of pornography in spatial, rather than primarily visual, terms.

As in any sex scene, immanent to the library scene in *Story of O* is an organizational model that puts bodies in relation to one another. Positioned near and stoking the fire, O stands under the bureaucratic authority of her valet whose physical power over her body derives from his position within an institutional hierarchy. While she tends to the service end of the library’s function, he is “stationed” near the stake that symbolizes and at times materializes O’s attachment to her submissive role as servant. Jeanne and Monique, who fill a similar if not identical role to O, indicate the bureaucratic nature of the valet’s authority by demonstrating its reach over a particular group of servants. Unlike the other two women, however, O’s presence clarifies the particularity
of the bureaucratic arrangement by emphasizing her newness within the system. The
valet takes her to the library so that she can learn to navigate the space according to a
sexual pedagogy. In this case, the pedagogical form depends on a sadomasochistic
relationship of dominance and submission that teaches O to take the submissive role in
serving gentlemen readers. Within 24-hours of arriving at Roissy—a Sadean château that
inverts liberal humanist expectations about sexuality—O learns to serve coffee and her
flesh in the same gesture of ardent acquiescence to violations of her selfhood. By
representing it as the primary stage of her sexual education, *Story of O* figures the library
as a space of initiation, learning, and discovery. In other words, it is a social space
designed to produce knowledge.

Characterizing the library as a space designed to produce knowledge should not
come as a surprise. In fact, leaving aside the sexual content, that characterization might
easily align with the stated goals of any public library. As a quick glance at library
mission statements will reveal, public libraries task themselves first and foremost with
pedagogical goals: to provide patrons with information that will satisfy their educational
needs and, more importantly, to educate patrons about the value and standards of library
use. To sustain itself as an active institution, the library depends on teaching people to
locate and access the media that it houses, which, in our information rich age, can require
considerable know-how. That pedagogical mission places librarians in a complicated
relationship of authority and responsibility to patrons—they must turn patrons into
productive library users at the same time they account for the needs of individuals. The
successful library instructor, however, will teach patrons to navigate library systems so
that they can satisfy their own particular needs, thereby incorporating themselves into the bureaucratic mechanisms of the institution that make it operate efficiently.

For the sake of clarity, I should emphasize that I do not intend this assessment of the library’s pedagogical function as a critique of institutional power. Of course the library reproduces its values by educating patrons. However, the library that educates patrons about the mechanics of its information systems also gives patrons the power to better navigate those systems, effectively making the library serve them on a more individual basis. Rather than a gatekeeper, the librarian serves as an instructor who animates the relationship between patron and media by making the points of connection more direct. The sexual dynamic of *Story of O* perverts that instructor role by collapsing the agent of library service and the object of library education into a single body. O plays the pupil (the subject of an educational program) while also maintaining service responsibilities (the agent of custodial duties at the library). The gentlemen readers, on the other hand, maintain their position as patrons (subjects of library service) while also adopting the instructor’s authority over and responsibility for teaching O to submit to Roissy’s sexual mechanisms. The peculiar organization of institutional roles at the library in *Story of O* effectively creates a double hierarchy that structures O’s sexual education. She finds herself servant to both the library and its patrons, without the librarian’s traditional authority to interpret patron needs according to already extant institutional systems. Of course, librarians may often feel so beholden—caught between the demands of the institution and the demands of a patron—but their professional relationship to
patrons remains defined by the power and the responsibility to enhance access to institutional services.

One way to understand the retooled and thoroughly bound position that O experiences is to bill it as a consequence of the sadomasochistic program at Roissy. Seen against the backdrop of more conventional institutional bureaucracies, however, the double hierarchy that defines her place in the library tips the relational dynamics in a way that allows patrons’ sexual desires to enter a formula otherwise designed to separate them from patrons’ educational needs. As both patrons to be served and instructors to be heeded, the gentlemen readers have the opportunity to introduce sexuality as a material concern for O’s education. Thus, their desires define the library’s use. When they want their coffee and their newspaper, the library functions as a posh reading room. When they want to fuck, the library functions as an orgy hall. Characteristic of pornographic fantasies, *Story of O* erases the relational obstacles that regulate access to sexual encounters as O learns to place herself at the complete disposal of Roissy’s patrons. Perhaps it’s an obvious point, but this scene makes no room for the stereotypical shushing librarian. It also obscures the library’s collection and so forecloses any possibility for the holdings to mediate O’s sexual education. With that foreclosure, the novel imagines one possible reconfiguration of institutional space that would allow for the entry of sexuality and sexual experience.

By foregrounding the relationships between bodies in the library, *Story of O* unwittingly identifies one of the anxieties of librarianship in a post-censorship age. Will the introduction of sexual materials into the general catalog change the library’s
institutional program? Will sexual materials in the library change the relationship between librarians and patrons? Will explicit materials encourage sexual harassment in the library? The novel touches on those professional anxieties by depicting a set of relationships common to a conventional library but arranged in an unconventional manner. Where the usual arrangement prescribes an institutional bureaucracy attended to by custodians serving patrons, *Story of O* gives us the slightly different situation where we find custodians subject to the desire of patrons under the authority of a bureaucratic institution. Notably, it presents that reorganization against the backdrop of an image depicting the library as bound by and to death. Oblique sunlight illuminates a bouquet of chrysanthemums that smell of earth and dead leaves. The visual image of a traditional funerary flower combines with the olfactory image of tilled earth to associate the library with an open grave while the “dead leaves” allude to an otherwise absent collection of books. Without explicit attention or detail in the text, the ignored volumes return to their place in the library as a haunting image of their individual folios. More than as an active repository, Roissy’s library acts as a burial site animated by sexual activity.

**II. Dead collections**

If *Story of O* provides an unconventional arrangement of bureaucratic relationships within the space of the library, its vision of the library as a dead space follows from a much more pedestrian history. Tracing that history, however, leads to a number of entanglements that still need scholarly attention if we hope to unravel them. One of the most obvious problems arises in the distinction between libraries and museums, both of
which constitute archival institutions. The two institutions serve different purposes in the contemporary era and, in fact, they have distinct histories. Even so, drawing firm distinctions between the two without the benefit of careful historical analysis may prove problematic. Suffice it to note here that some of the divergences occur in the differences between stacks and galleries, bibliography and archeology, circulating materials and exhibiting materials.

Despite the differences, libraries and museums have found themselves bound up together or used interchangeably in popular and critical imaginations. At least part of the association derives from the fact that national libraries and museums often were housed together, the most prominent example being The British Museum and Library—two institutions that remained yoked by shared physical space until 1997. The most enduring connection for theoretical associations, however, focuses on the overlap in archival practices. Specifically, cataloging technology acted as a confluence between the institutional development of libraries and that of museums during the nineteenth century. Although institutional catalogs had been in use since at least the end of the sixteenth century, the nineteenth century saw an “unprecedented and still unparalleled interest and activity in cataloging,” as Ruth F. Strout explains in her brief survey of cataloging history.⁹

Amid that cataloging frenzy, the word “pornography” appeared as a new category in the taxonomy of classical artifacts. A number of scholars writing about pornography have explained that the excavation of Pompeii and the many sexually explicit representations preserved there posed a problem for catalogers hoping to take advantage
of print media to share archeology’s newest discoveries. In perhaps the most thorough treatment of that history, Walter Kendrick explains that the problem stemmed from anxieties about audience and authorial credibility. Catalogers could not regulate access to their volumes in the way a “secret museum” housing the objects themselves could regulate access to their premises. Motivated by fear that impressionable members of the public might put scholarly material to lascivious ends, catalogers created internal obstacles to dampen the erotic effects of the representations they publicized. Kendrick explains that such catalogers would leave text untranslated to “protect” women, children, and the poor. M. L. Barré’s French catalog of the Museo Borbonico (1875-77), which housed the objectionable artifacts uncovered at Pompeii, even went as far as miniaturizing some of the more erotic aspects of nude relics.10

In addition to what now seem like drastic attempts at maintaining decorum, Barré also depended on the combination of classification and figurative association to maintain the credibility of targeting a professional audience. The subset of a “pornographic collection” in museum catalogs correlated to a distinct space within libraries where offensive materials could remain hidden from public view. Barré’s concern about communicating his intellectual intentions moved him to define his work as scientific, invoking disciplinary authority to give his work a grounding metaphor. More than the seriousness of “science,” however, Barré’s use of analogy provides the lasting characterization of archival spaces as lifeless. He concludes the introduction to volume eight of his catalog with this description of his methodology: “We have looked upon our statues as an anatomist contemplates his cadavers.”11 Far from the only writer to associate
archives with dead bodies, Barré may have been the first to link the process of cataloging with a process of exhausting the vivacious spirit assumed to inhere in sex materials. Why should the abstract spatial organization of an archive ring the death knell for materials housed in it? For Barré that process of stagnation appears as merely a hopeful justification for his work with obscene materials. Robbed of their erotic charge, he hopes the statues will not seem like indecent objects of study. As the conceptual link between an archival death and sex materials continues to operate in more recent discourses on pornography, however, Barré’s professional anxiety has morphed into anxiety over the loss of sexual allure.

A recent book by Geoff Nicholson exemplifies that anxiety, insofar as it documents the author’s ambivalent fascination with the act of collecting and systematizing objects related to sex, especially pornography. In the early sections of *Sex Collectors*, Nicholson articulates his fascination with the social place that pornography occupies. He locates that place quite literally in the trash. Describing his work as a garbage man in Sheffield, England, he tells readers that he and his coworkers were in the habit of rummaging through bins to sort out items of interest. The one thing they could count on finding, apparently, was pornography. It seems that many of the people who liked to look at and read sexually explicit publications did not find them fit for owning. Although not prone to disposing of pornography himself, Nicholson sympathizes with the gesture of dispersing a collection when he explains the hesitancy he feels about sex museums. Both pornography and museums carry the sexual charge of revealing intimate secrets so long, he suggests, as they are kept apart. When combined in the form of a
public sex museum, the process of detaching the sex objects from their primary milieu among cultural detritus and placing them on display in a legitimate institutional setting “involves a sort of death. Quite simply, things die when they’re put in museums.”

Nicholson differentiates between private sex collections and institutional, or public, sex museums. For him, the elimination of allure from an object culturally imbued with sexuality has less to do with the accumulation of such objects in physical space than it does with their classification in a taxonomic order. The process of ordering a collection, whereby individual objects become parts of the whole, creates what Nicholson calls a metonymic displacement.

The concept of metonymic displacement derives from Roman Jackobson’s revisions of classical rhetoric and Jacques Lacan’s later psychoanalytic readings of Jackobson’s formative work. Nicholson, however, cites literary theorist Eugenio Donato’s usage, which posits metonymic displacement as an operation that produces the fiction by which museums sustain themselves as representational totalities. In an essay on Gustav Flaubert’s novel Bouvard et Pecuchet, Donato argues that classificatory systems never adequately represent the world because they attempt to homogenize the irreducible heterogeneity of its constituent parts, displacing the singularity of those parts in the process. The anxiety that Nicholson and Donato share hinges on the perception that a museum’s classificatory system mutes the diversity that gives the items their dynamism. For Nicholson, that prior vitality relates explicitly to sexualized objects, which he believes the archive somehow sanitizes. Donato works at a more abstract, generalizable level when he invokes a Derridean problematic to question any claim that would suggest
an archive has the power to stabilize the fraught relationship between a singular object and its place in the collection.\textsuperscript{15} He argues that an archival institution—including the Library and the Museum, both of which he capitalizes to indicate their prototypical status in his reading—imposes “the impossibility of reaching its order, its totality, or its truth.”\textsuperscript{16} For him, the Museum requires critical demystification because it undermines the value of individual objects and because it disavows the vicissitudes that disrupt classificatory order.

Donato’s theory exposes the limit of any archival project that seeks to organize its holdings into an ontological hierarchy. Totalizing systems of classification cannot account for disorder in the form of decay, missing items in a series, the arrival of foreign objects, the potential for a single object to hold various indexical positions, or any of the limitless and unpredictable possibilities that the world may introduce to an archive. He overstates his case, however, when he suggests that a catalog extinguishes the life of its objects by abstracting each item in the series from its own particularly. Of course catalogs abstract particularities. But that process could erase the dynamism of a heterogeneous collection only if we misunderstand an object’s value as the product of classification. Barring against that misunderstanding, Donato forgets that a catalog not only organizes a collection but also provides access to it. A catalog necessarily opens the collection it orders to the disorder of a world that it cannot replicate. The inability to satisfactorily represent the world according to a spatial arrangement may be, for that reason, the function of an archive’s potential rather than its failure. Admittedly, Donato’s deconstructive reading of the Museum supposes a model archival institution, allowing
him to sidestep some of the more practical problems facing archival institutions. That elision underestimates the suppleness of actual cataloging technologies, which often find ways to account for the outside world even if they account for it at the limits of representation rather than through the mastery of representation.

Despite any tendency to idealize catalogs as totalizing technologies, the concept of metonymic displacement helps identify the abstract processes that structure archives as virtual as well as physical spaces. By introducing an outside to the understanding of an archive’s internal operations, Nicholson and Donato specify the dichotomous configurations that lead to a fantasy of archival space as dead space. In short, they formalize the equivalencies that organize life, sexual allure, and objects on the outside, while placing death, sexual stagnation, and serialized records on the inside of the archive. The inevitable failure of the inside to represent the outside explains why Nicholson, for example, finds sex museums “unsatisfactory and disappointing.” They cannot reproduce the excitement of his childhood experience reading girlie mags under the bed sheets or his adult experience recovering pornography from the trash bin, precisely because they create a socially legitimate space for “high-minded speculation about sexuality and culture.” Systematized archives and cataloged museums, for Nicholson, confer upon the study of pornography exactly the sort of intellectual authority that Barré hoped to reserve when he insisted that the Secret Museum’s holdings were as cold to him as corpses.

That authority took a long century to accrue over the grave of indecency. Nonetheless, the historical trajectory from anxiety-ridden pronouncements of
professionalism at the end of the nineteenth century to the disaffected indifference toward public sex collections at the beginning of the twenty-first century dramatizes the shift in imagination that produced pornography as a body of knowledge, if necessarily a contentious one. Only one of many struggles surrounding the study of pornography, the dialectic between live sex and dead archives animates the critical imagination as it attempts to manage the seemingly self-canceling attributes of sexual materials: their potential to produce pleasure and their potential to produce knowledge. That dialectic animates the library scene in *Story of O* as sexual education anathematizes books as “dead leaves”; it informs early justifications for cataloging erotic statues as if anatomizing cadavers; it haunts contemporary sex museums that kill the allure of their holdings in order to encourage intellectual speculation; and it also structures recent debates within academic porn studies about the collection, preservation, and transmission of pornographic materials.

**III. Negotiating the archive**

Up to this point I have avoided asking the most basic question facing librarians in the age of relaxed censorship following the Grove Press cases: Should we collect pornography? Before addressing the factors complicating that question from the institutional end of discussion, I wanted to elaborate a set of tensions structuring the archive as an imaginary space. Those tensions inform a substantive rift between different perspectives within porn studies. We find, on the one hand, an imperative to archive pornography as an identifiable body of knowledge. On the other hand, the idea that cataloging pornography
renders it somehow un-pornographic leads to the conclusion that archival projects are
doomed to irrelevance, if not failure. To call the rift a debate may be misleading insofar
as the perspectives on pornography’s relationship to archival conservation hardly speak
to one another. Introducing aspects of the discourse on pornography from library and
information science will help lessen the gap between positions, in part because library
science has produced a sophisticated understanding of the archive that neither idealizes
nor forgets its material form.

To understand the most difficult challenge of constituting a porn archive we must
move away from deconstructive treatments of representation and taxonomy toward a
Foucaultian approach that understands pornography as itself a social structure. Frances
Ferguson elaborates that theory in her book *Pornography, The Theory: What
Utilitarianism Did to Action* by drawing a parallel between pornography and evaluative
social structures developed by utilitarian thinkers, including Jeremy Bentham (whom
Foucault famously critiques in *Discipline and Punish*). The main thread of Ferguson’s
argument develops a positive reading of utilitarianism that suggests that pornography,
much like a spelling bee or an athletic competition, undermines identity-based privileges
by assigning value to performance within the context of the predetermined rules of the
field. Her complex theory of pornography strays considerably from the most familiar
definitions and I cannot do justice to all its nuances here. However, I want to pay special
attention to one of the more unusual aspects of Ferguson’s analysis—the sidelining of
content.
Her avowed disinterest in the subject matter and substance of the books she reads leads her to insist that pornography necessarily eludes the archive. As she explains, during the late eighteenth century, “the content of pornography became less and less important and the development of a context (environment) that amounts to a representational technology assumed center stage.” In other words, pornography emerges as a representational form rather than as a distinct subject. She argues throughout the book that representations need not cause offense or even involve sexually explicit content to count as pornography by her definition. Rather, a representation must cause some demonstrable harm—usually in the form of sexual harassment—that excludes someone from participating, for example, in workplace or school activities. Can a dirty magazine still cause harm after it’s taken out of the office and put into an archive? How do libraries collect pornography if removing a representation from its immediate context changes its status as pornography? While Ferguson may not have any interest in library acquisition policies, her account demands consideration here because it produces a problem for porn studies insofar as it insists on the radical ephemerality of pornography. Defined by the uses to which it is put, pornography cannot be possessed as one possesses a copy of *Story of O*. The pornographic object recedes along with the possibility of pornography as a form of material knowledge.

Ferguson emphasizes historical distance rather than context, but she and Geoff Nicholson both remain skeptical about the status of porn in academic hands because they define it against presumably innocuous scholarly interests. As Ferguson explains, the objects of her study, all from centuries past, now seem “distant and inoffensive—in short,
historical and/or scholarly.”22 Even without agreeing on what designates pornography as pornography, both writers seem to agree that once a text assumes the pall of scholarly detachment it cannot retain its pornographic qualities. Ferguson diverges from Nicholson, however, when she concludes that the transmission of pornography, from one generation to the next or from one context to another, presents both a theoretical and a material impossibility. She writes:

If it doesn’t feel contemporaneous, it isn’t pornography. Pornography brooks no stance involving historical distance. This is a point made obvious in the way that video stores that specialize in hard-core rentals treat their own stock. Aside from a very small number of ‘classics,’ pornography doesn’t seem to them worth preserving; the tape is frequently more valuable to them than the images on it, and they substitute new images for old with great alacrity. In that, it seems to me that they are on to something about pornography that scholars like Walter Kendrick miss. When Kendrick talks about a ‘secret museum’ containing historical pornography, he ignores the fact that the difficulty of compiling a museum or archive is not that untold images have been lost under the pressure of censorship. Rather, untold images have been lost because they didn’t seem worth saving to some of the very persons who had been their most enthusiastic admirers.23

The empirical evidence supporting Ferguson’s understanding of the challenges surrounding the creation of an archive goes further than placing pornography on the trash heap—it erases the historical record of pornography.
To understand the space of an archive we must understand the material vulnerability that Ferguson indicates in her example. However, while that example allows for a strong critique of Kendrick’s overestimation of censorial power, it trades on an understanding of porn that ignores the institutions—whether courts, libraries, or publishing houses—that earmark objects as pornographic. That blind spot forecloses any account of how those institutions consecrate pornography’s scholarly value and, conversely, any account of how pornography shapes institutions. We must stipulate that, even when they coincide with one another, consuming and collecting porn do not amount to precisely the same thing. Despite any presumed indifference on the part of the consumers originally targeted by material culture, archives of all sorts do exist. That said, we should take Ferguson’s example seriously because it shows that archives exist at the limits of their ability to represent the entirety of even clearly demarcated fields. Archives are in fact always partial.

For a theorist interested in social institutions, it seems surprising that Ferguson would not acknowledge that, apart from commercial determinations of value, scholarly institutions have decided in the past and may decide again in the future that pornography is worth preserving, even if such institutions operate on a comparatively limited scale. Linda Williams, on the contrary, has not failed to recognize the potential for nor the fact of porn archives. Writing from a very different perspective, with significantly more commitment to porn studies as an academic field, Williams positions the archive as a necessary foundation for the study of an orphaned history of sexuality and American film. Although her disciplinary background determines the context in which she discusses
archives, her insistence on the need to archive pornography impacts the developing field of porn studies as a whole. To the extent that it addresses questions of access and administration, Williams’s exhortation to conserve touches on key questions for institutional archives regardless of the media any particular collection features. Anyone researching pornography should be generally sympathetic to the archival imperative when she articulates it as a principle of access: “any archive, even a sex film archive, exists in order to be preserved and for its contents to be made available to those interested in its materials.”

In contrasting Williams to Ferguson, however, I do not mean to suggest one as a corrective to the other. Instead I intend to draw attention to the different conceptions of pornography that allow for two different understandings of how an archive exists, if it exists at all.

Ferguson’s and Williams’s theories of pornography share some basic features: they both think of porn as a technology that enforces visibility; they both use Foucault to theorize that aspect of porn’s work; and they both think of pornography as essentially representational. Where Ferguson tries to account for how such representations raise questions about the justice of social recognition, however, Williams argues that they mediate between knowledge and pleasure. In her account, pornography becomes the site at which the experience of pleasure and the production of knowledge interpenetrate to form a generative loop. Perhaps the most important difference between the two theories is also the most obvious: film stands out as the primary technology of representation for Williams. Cameras, magic lanterns, zeotropes, Kinetographs, Kinestoscopes and other precursors to present-day movies produced a “new larger-than-
life, projected film body” that heightened visibility. Film put the body on display in such a way that its movements could be stopped, slowed, played backwards, reconstituted, and endlessly repeated. For Williams, then, the document assumes a central role in the development of pornography. Porn must exist in a material form that can reliably repeat, for different audiences in different contexts, the same visual manifestation of bodies.

The centrality of the pornographic document as a mediating technology underpins Williams’s interpretation of stag films and 1970s mainstream hard-core films in Hard Core. To characterize it broadly, that seminal study sought to stabilize uncertain documents of visual pleasure as a form of knowledge by contextualizing porn’s history and its critical significance. In more recent work, she has pursued that project by advocating for the development of pornography archives that will make sexually explicit materials more accessible to scholarship. For example, speaking from the vantage point of the Kinsey Institute, our most extensive archive of sex materials, Williams concludes that, “It is no longer enough to be able to view stag films on Kinsey Institute premises at Indiana University in private screenings. The stag film heritage needs the collaboration of scholars and archivists to preserve and study a body of work that has been far too long neglected.” Her concluding comments focus especially on the production of a DVD of those stag films housed at the Kinsey Institute, a project that fell through due to Indiana University’s anxieties over copyright. Williams’s imperative to archive, then, treats access to the archive in its secondary effect of circulating the materials it contains.
Although vital to the field of porn and film studies, this imperative moves too quickly away from the space and the materiality of the archive itself, which in turn deemphasizes the importance of the technological conditions that produced the movies in question. Part of the advantage of archives and special collections is that they preserve representations in their original material forms even if their original material contexts no longer exist. In doing so, they mark the difference between 16mm and 8mm film, vanity publications and commercial publications, collectors’ editions and penny papers—distinctions that have been instrumental in reconstructing the history of pornography’s institutional reception. The space of the archive also poses another advantage, intimately linked to the materiality of its holdings, in that it reminds us of the vulnerability of any archival project. Archivists cannot define pornography better than anyone else, cannot collect the entirety of whatever they do define as pornographic, and oftentimes cannot catalog everything they manage to collect. Once an archive does enter materials into a catalog (thereby making them accessible to the public), those materials become more vulnerable to deterioration, damage, vandalism, and theft at the hands of the people using the collection. Rather than presenting the greatest challenge to constructing an archive, however, the material vulnerability of its holdings makes apparent one of the ways in which the archive is most alive.

**IV. The living library**

By suggesting that the archive has living characteristics, I go against the grain of the critical and literary imagination. Instead, I follow the majority of modern library and information scientists who base their philosophy on S. R. Ranganathan’s five laws of
library science, the last of which proposes that the library is a living, growing organism. As he explains in his foundational treatise, first published in 1931: “It is an accepted biological fact that a growing organism alone will survive. An organism which ceases to grow will petrify and perish. The Fifth Law invites our attention to the fact that the library, as an institution, has all the attributes of a growing organism. A growing organism takes in new matter, casts off old matter, changes in size and takes new shapes and forms. Apart from sudden and apparently discontinuous changes involved in metamorphosis, it is also subject to a slow continuous change which leads to what is known as ‘variation’, in biological parlance, and to the evolution of new forms.”

Ranganathan, unlike most writers theorizing the archive outside of library science, tells us of the vital characteristics of a practicing archival institution and explains how they govern the organization of archival space. As a growing organism, the library does not serve as a stable foundation prior to a field of study. Rather, it gathers in a single physical space objects from various fields foreign to each other and juxtaposes them according to a mutual classificatory order. If that order does not adequately represent a totality outside itself, it provides instead a space wherein society confronts the limits of self-representation and self-knowledge. In this last section, I will briefly outline how librarians in the U.S., during a twenty-five year period of post-WWII social change, rethought the space of the archive to better accommodate sexual materials, especially pornographic print materials. In the instances that they have been collected, those materials testify to the importance of sexuality within the institutions that house them.
The debates among librarians about whether or not to archive pornography depend on a distinction between the library as an institution and the library’s holdings. Different conceptions of the institutional role of the library determine what sort of holdings it should make available to the public. As Martha Cornog and Timothy Perper explain in the introduction to *Libraries, Erotica and Pornography*, librarians have fluctuated between understanding the library as a custodial institution of public tastes and an institution in service of intellectual freedom. While that distinction should not be understood as self-evident or unproblematic, it has nonetheless structured debates about collecting sexual materials. In the wake of de-censoring print, the general trend has been a shift toward understanding libraries as serving the interests of intellectual freedom. The problem of pornography, however, has highlighted the limitations of that trend. In 1966, for instance, following several decades of obscenity trials, Kathleen Molz lamented that, “librarians have traditionally placed a greater reliance in these matters on the literature of jurisprudence than on the literature of criticism, for pornography is essentially an aesthetic, not juridical, problem.” Citing *Story of O* among other novels as an example of “high pornography,” she suggests that academic and literary critics have a responsibility to identify the “inherent tawdriness of much modern fiction.” Using the rhetoric of artistic taste—as opposed to obscenity, morality, or harm—she concludes that libraries should focus on traditionally valued works of literature rather than subcultural interests.

At about the same time, Dan Lacy published an article arguing that public pressure accounted for the exclusion of pornography from libraries more often than
collection policies. Responses to Molz’s reservations about standards of literary value can be articulated in the form of a social and ideological argument. For example, in 1971 Bill Katz asked, “Why shouldn’t the larger public libraries have a section devoted to pornography?” In answer to his own question, he argues that libraries absolutely should include some so-called controversial materials in the interest of democracy. Shifting tone from the political toward the social, he concludes that collecting pornography “would be a move toward the future before the future caught up with and passed the library.” In these formulations, the library constitutes less a reflection or a foundation of the society it serves than an idealized organization of its various factions. The marginal factions either drop out because they don’t constitute enough of a demand or, more liberally, they constitute a future audience that the library must serve if it wishes to remain relevant.

One outcome of the intensified debate—within library science as well as other academic, professional, and social fields—was an increase in printed material about pornography. Regardless of the various positions on the matter, a discourse on pornography increasingly came on/scene, as Linda Williams would put it, and libraries could not ignore the growing body of literature. As Cornog and Perper explain, “If public debate exists, then a need to know exists, and that is what libraries are for: to provide relevant material to all sides in the debate.” How exactly to provide those materials, however, became the focal point of efforts to rethink the space of the archive. By the mid-1980s, librarians realized that available methods inadequately provided access to the sexual materials that had come into the forum of public debate. In efforts to increase
access, they began formulating ways to update cataloging systems and shelving practices to help avoid “bibliocide.”

Those efforts, however, had to arbitrate between two competing concerns—the desire to maximize intellectual and physical access while protecting the integrity of their holdings. Much as the imaginary space of the catalog shaped the physical space of the museum in the earliest instances of “pornography” archives, now both Dewey Decimal Classification and Library of Congress Classification dictate the actual shelf location as well as the grouping of books. How a book gets cataloged determines how accessible it will be to people searching for sex materials; whether it falls under erotica or pornography, whether it gets grouped with traditionally pathologized or traditionally normative sexual behaviors, whether it sits next to other books about sexuality, or whether it ends up with the books on librarianship all depend on how the catalog, or the cataloger, inscribes the acquisition. Not surprisingly, different libraries handle the catalog in different ways, sometimes supplementing it with bibliographies or vertical files, depending on the size of the collection, the needs of its patrons, and its institutional function.

Despite different approaches to intellectual access, every library has to face similar questions about physical access that recall the infamous Private Case at the British National Library and L’Enfer at the French National Library. Should sexually explicit materials be segregated from the general collection? If considerations of that question from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century revolved around questions of morality and anxiety about the impressionable minds of ungentlemanly patrons, certainly
traces of those concerns showed up in more recent deliberations over physical access to sexual materials. However, by the mid-1980s, professional discourses focused on the competing interests of convenience for patrons versus protection for the materials.

A remarkable number of librarians met the obligation to collect sexual materials with exasperated objections that such materials inevitably suffer from damage, vandalism, or theft.\(^{38}\) Their objections were not unfounded. A 1987 survey of what happens when libraries subscribe to *Playboy* revealed that in many cases they experienced negative reaction from staff members who apparently had to retrieve copies from the men’s bathroom, clean fresh semen from the pages, and struggle to keep the periodical shelves in order. As one respondent explained, “Paper copies lost much weight in the form of photos of nubile young women. They even mutilated the microfilm…. Why? They weren’t even in color!”\(^{39}\) The physical instability of sexual materials takes the forefront in weighing the pros and cons of collecting pornography. Many of the libraries surveyed did continue to collect *Playboy*, but sacrificed patron convenience by keeping it on reserve behind the circulation desk or by making it available only as a microfiche copy.

That strategy for protecting the holdings follows in a long archival tradition of prioritizing material preservation over circulation. In the case of pornography, however, there is at least one key difference. Responses to the vandalism of sexually explicit materials are inconsistent with responses to the vandalism of other holdings, even though all holdings stored in open stacks remain equally vulnerable. As Cornog and Perper write, “sexuality collections in general ‘pose special problems in security and preservation.’”\(^{40}\) In
fact, browsing the limited collection of critical works on pornography available at my home institution, I found a copy of Dirty Looks: Women, Pornography, Power damaged by a semen stain that prevents interested parties from reading the entirety of Chris Straayer’s article on Annie Sprinkle (see fig. 1). I also came across a copy of Wendy McElroy’s book XXX: A Woman’s Right to Pornography defaced with this defiant counterclaim scribbled over the preface: “LIAR. PORNO IS SEXISM.” Less abrasive, perhaps, but equally demanding are extensive marginal comments criticizing every one of Laura Kipnis’s claims in the introduction to Bound and Gagged. How does one understand the insistent marks of these library vandals, some of which are, admittedly, more immediately legible than others? <Squires Figure_1 here>

While some librarians take them as an affront to their work as custodians of public texts, critical scholars of pornography might just as easily understand them as acts of protest against their research. Martha Cornog, however, offers a more remarkable interpretation that makes such instances of material defacement speak to the living characteristics of an archive: “Almost by definition, vandalized material is popular material, so much in demand that patrons will transgress the usual rules of the library and society to possess it. Theoretically, at least, librarians should be delighted to possess such items because they draw people into the library. And from that viewpoint, reasonable responses to vandalism are buying more copies (print and/or fiche), making photocopies of popular selections, and restricting the rate or duration or privacy of use through limited circulation or a reserve room system.”41 In other words, if we accept the aphorism that many hands make dirty books, we can move beyond censorship to considerations of
regulation and circulation. Cornog does just that by providing a rationale for increasing the circulation of controversial materials, rather than locking them up, on the practical grounds of increasing the social function of an archive. Equally important for understanding archival space is the ability to read patron use in the marks that readers leave behind them, whether that use amounts to protest, study, recreation, or sexual fulfillment. Just as a cataloging system juxtaposes unlike materials in a single space, the material archive places a semen stain, anti-porn sloganeering, and study notes on a plain of equivalency so that each speaks to how readers negotiate, engage, and contest the formal organization of sexual knowledge. Needless to say, the sort of engagement such vandalism represents depends on the material manifestation of an archive.

The space of the archive as a social institution requires both a physical location and material holdings in order to provide patrons with the opportunity to engage to the fullest extent the bodies of knowledge that it organizes, not to mention the chance to engage with the other bodies that any archive draws into its space. For that reason, the availability of library materials to physical defacement and decay at the hands of their most passionate readers—what we might judge as their very instability as material—stands as one of the most important features of a living library. This does not begin to answer the question of whether we should or should not archive pornography. Rather, it begins to understand the place of pornography and other sexually explicit materials in the archive as opening toward negotiations of sexuality in a social institution that, by various turns, bears the stereotype of complete asexuality or fantastical hyper-sexuality. By better understanding the various polemics and institutional contests that have included or
excluded pornography from the archive, we will have a stronger sense of pornography’s history and a better understanding of the history of the social institutions regulating it. Pornography’s place in the archive speaks to both shifts and fragments in public opinion at the same time it speaks to librarians’ critical responses to those changes.

In the move from serving as guardians of public decency to crusaders for intellectual freedom in the second half of the twentieth century, archival institutions amount to neither repressive nor progressive forces per se. They do, however, ground the changing ideological terms in a material practice of collection and dissemination that demonstrates the limited efficacy of society’s attempts at representing itself to itself. The archive does not, as some suppose, constitute a technology that provides unmediated contact with the past. The archive does, however, provide a unique space in which we can begin to understand the material articulations and contestations that reorder how various social fields produce sexual knowledge. To the extent that institutions heed the imperative to collect porn, whoever uses those collections should heed the correlative imperative to examine the power that the archive has to administer the study of pornography.
Notes

* I owe many thanks for the help and encouragement I received while writing this essay. Tim Dean offered his astute editorial advice and corroborative anecdotes during every stage of the writing process. Linda Williams provided encouraging feedback during the initial drafting stages. Steven Ruszczycky and Allison Siehnel talked me through some of the thornier theoretical aspects of my research. Finally, Caitlin Shanley patiently entertained my interest in her profession, providing me with a crucial foothold in unfamiliar territory.


2 In 1962 Grove’s edition of *Naked Lunch* also went to trial in Boston for obscenity. The Massachusetts Supreme Court reversed the lower court’s decision in 1966, lifting a ban on the grounds of the novel’s apparent social value. For an account of the legal and literary history of that period, see Glass, “Redeeming Value,” 41-361. My reading of Réage is indebted to his scholarship on Grove Press.


4 Ibid., italics in original.

5 Williams, *Hard Core* (1999), 48-9. Williams traces the history of hardcore pornography back to the advent of moving motion images. I address her notion of “maximum visibility” in the third section of this chapter.

6 Moore, “Broadening Concerns for Intellectual Freedom,” 309-14. Citing *Story of O* along with several other Grove Press publications as examples of controversial books deemed “to have merit and value,” Moore describes a newly felt freedom from concerns
about the legality of such books. He writes, “librarians are recognizing the necessity—and the privilege—of basing selection on critical judgment rather than on satisfaction of popular demand” (311). The opposition between demand and judgment registers a professional awareness of the critical turn toward rethinking acquisition policies in light of deregulation. It also marks a tendency to articulate such debates in terms of taste before access.

7 American Library Association, “Mission, Priority Areas, Goals.” Almost every library has a mission statement available for patron review. The American Library Association’s (ALA) basic mission exemplifies the field as a whole in its emphasis on fostering librarianship with the intent to “enhance learning and ensure access to information for all.”

8 Internet access in libraries has heightened situations in which employees feel sexually threatened. In 2003, for example, a dozen Minneapolis Public Library employees filed suit against their employer for providing patrons with unfiltered access to the online pornography. They settled the case outside of court and, as cited in a legal memorandum by Janet M. LaRue, the Minneapolis Public Library acknowledged in a public statement the importance of finding a structural “balance between allowing the public access to lawful materials and protecting its employees” (2). See Janet LaRue, “Library Procedures for Disabling Software Filtering and Unblocking Web Sites,” Concerned Women for America.

9 Strout, “The Development of the Catalog and Cataloging Codes,” 270. She names Nomenclator, published in 1595 by Leiden University, as the first catalog printed by an institutional library.

Ibid., 15.


Donato, “The Museum’s Furnace,” 64.

Donato’s article precedes Jacques Derrida’s book-length essay *Archive*. Nonetheless, Derrida’s interest in the relationship between memory and representation informs Donato’s use of deconstruction to formulate the modern Museum as a failed archival project. *Archive Fever* adds that the failure to reconcile memory with an accurate representation of the past conditions the possibility of a future that avoids simply repeating the past.

Donato, 58.

Nicholson, 28.

Ibid., 30.


This point presents a certain difficulty for understanding what specifies pornography. What, for example, distinguishes pornography from any other method of causing an individual harm? Would prayer in public schools count as pornographic because, as she
writes about pornography, it “might be used to deny an individual access to the value-enhancing activities” of the social structure (xvi)? My understanding is that Ferguson’s theory would not in fact consider prayer pornographic unless it denied access on sexual grounds, either by salacious innuendo or by hierarchizing bodies according sexed distinctions. I would argue that despite minimizing the importance of sexual content her theorization of pornography depends on the particularity of sex.

22 Ferguson, 153.

23 Ibid., 152.

24 Williams, “‘White Slavery’ Versus the Ethnography of ‘Sexworkers’,” 128.


26 Ibid., 45.


29 Cornog and Perper, “For Sex, See Librarian,” 4-14.


31 Ibid., 100.


34 Ibid.

35 Cornog and Perper, 26.

36 Cataloging can present challenges to access even after materials enter the library system. An anecdote about Tales from Time Square illustrates one difficulty: “Although its chapters deal with such topics as stripteasers, prostitutes, and peep shows—in short,
the sex industry—LC [Library of Congress] classed it as 974.71, a ‘New York’ notation appropriate for history and civilization books.” Cataloger Sanford Berman described the mistake as “bibliocide by cataloging” because it effectively obscured the book’s content from anyone looking for information about the sex industry. Even still, however, many libraries physically segregate adult materials by placing them in special collections or on reserve. See Cornog, “Providing Access to Materials on Sexuality,”169.

37 Cornog and Perper, 14. Surveys have indicated that university, school, and public librarians each provide different levels of access to sexual materials. Even within the university, social science librarians tend to be more liberal in their treatment of sex materials than those in the humanities, who in turn tend to be more liberal than librarians in the sciences.

38 Cornog, “What Happens When Libraries Subscribe to Playboy?,” 149.

39 Ibid., 159.

40 Cornog and Perper, 26.


42 Coutt, “Perverted Proverbs,” 126.

43 This reading of library vandalism does not advocate for the abandonment of DVD projects such as the one the Kinsey Institute had planned. Nor does it recommend careless gambling with precious materials. An anecdote from Gershon Legman’s experience at the Private Case illustrates the outdated and naïve elitism such a position would assume. During his time researching at the British National Library he met a fellow researcher who walked out of the archive with several valuable manuscripts. In astonishment, Legman asked if they don’t check briefcases, to which the man replied,
“Anybody who uses the British Museum is a gentleman and a scholar.” The lesson is that circulating all controversial materials without consideration of their value or replaceability would no more contribute to the archive’s function than would circulating all holdings in general. See Legman, “The Lure of the Forbidden,” 59.

44 For a brief account of the sexy-librarian stereotype, see Indiana, “In the Stacks and in the Sack,” 100-4.

45 Kendrick, 5. Walter Kendrick suggests that the excavation of Pompeii fascinated the British because it offered them “the compelling spectacle of an unmediated vision.” That assertion contradicts the history of Pompeii catalogs which he demonstrates to be highly mediated forms for transmitting sexual knowledge from antiquity to modernity.