

Visual Histories of Sex

Collecting, Curating, Archiving

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Today, a growing number of scholars are placing images and visual practices at the center of critical historical inquiries of sex and sexualities—a response both to changes of historiography and to increased access to visual archives and the proliferation of digitized images related to sexuality in recent years. At the convergence of multiple historical fields, a new body of critical histories of sexual desire, subjectivity, embodiment, and power is transforming the boundaries of historical interpretation—providing new temporal and geographical frames for investigating the historical relationships of sex and visual production, generating radical new lines of historical inquiry, and reshaping visual and queer studies.¹

The contributors to this issue ask: What new questions and challenges for the study of sex and sexual science are posed by critical studies of the visual? How are new historical and visual methodologies changing the contours of knowledge about the politics of sex and sexuality in the past? What—and where—are new methodologies still needed?

To begin to untangle some of these questions, “Visual Archives of Sex” aims to illuminate current research that centers visual media in the history of sexuality and interrogates contemporary historiographies. The contributions to this issue attend to the visual to complicate historical understanding of sexuality and the histories of sex that constitute knowledge of the past. If “queer things cannot have

straight histories,” as Daniel Marshall, Kevin P. Murphy, and Zeb Tortorici have argued in their analysis of queer archives and archiving, then the history of “sex” itself is arguably the queerest thing of them all.² Spanning a wide range of phenomena—from bodies, desires, and sexual practices to the affective, social, and political vicissitudes of identity—sex is a queer subject for historians because it has no straightforward archival presence. Its imprint on the past can be found in a wide range of sources associated with social and cultural history, the history of science, medicine and technology, material history, and the history of ideas. It intersects with histories of gender, race and racism, class, and disability and is concerned with the production and experiential realities of sexual lives, ideas, and bodies, and their affective reach.

A New Visual History of Sexuality?

Visual analysis has come to play a significant role in a number of areas of radical inquiry, including fields cognate to the history of sexuality, such as histories of science and medicine, slavery, and the body.³ Despite the proliferation of recent curatorial work on gender and sexual histories, however, many historians of sex have yet to engage fully with new visual methods and archive theories. Initially, at least, the history of sexuality as a field was constituted primarily as a history of words and discourses, influenced by Michel Foucault’s critique of the discursive production of sexuality in modern Western science.⁴ Studies of the emergence of the modern sexual vocabulary in Europe and the United States—terms such as *homosexuality* and *fetishism*—have since generated valuable insights into the formation of collective modes of identification, including in terms of the political gains, necessities, and limits of focusing on issues of taxonomy and a common language of sex.⁵

The interventions of historians working on different regions of the world, in turn, have expanded the geopolitical and temporal frames of investigation beyond Europe and North America to investigate the complex entanglements of Western “sexuality” in colonialism and anticolonialism.⁶ Furthermore, scholarship on gender, and especially transgender, has challenged the privileging of sexuality itself in studies of the development of a modern way of thinking about “sex,” including in relation to the natural environment.⁷ Yet if “the historiography of sexology is young,” as Kirsten Leng and Katie Sutton have observed in their recent reassessment of the field, sex itself remains a slippery subject for historians.⁸ A site of regulation as much as an expression of intimate desires, sex is both a discursive construct and a deeply experienced reality around which all kinds of social fantasies congeal—a queer temporality that forges ahistorical, anachronistic, and cross-temporal affective connections.

The very question of what counts as sexual “history” is itself contested, not only because of the complexity of the subject but also because of the relationship of sexual pasts to the present day—what critic Elizabeth Freeman calls an

“erotohistoriography” that reaches across time.⁹ What counts for some people as sexual history today because it took part before they were born remains part of the lived experience of an older generation whose sexual and political coming of age took place during the second part of the twentieth century. It is a profound critical challenge to acknowledge such different temporal relationships to the present without falling back onto Enlightenment chronologies of (sexual) progress. Furthermore, classification schemes for databases, which are hierarchical in nature, “don’t do well” with the “unfixedness” of social identities.¹⁰

Sex, Power, Archives

“Archives are not inert historical collections,” noted the historian Stuart Hall, adding, “They always stand in an active, dialogic, relation to the questions which the present puts to the past.”¹¹ Archives play an important role in shaping and negotiating both lived histories and access to (and understanding of) the recent and distant past. As what Ann Cvetkovich calls “repositories of feelings,” they are also sites of institutional power and manifestations of colonial ordering practices.¹² Historical records relating to sexual matters may be constituted around archives that attest to long histories of oppression and violence. They range from premodern religious doctrine on sexual sin to modern homosexuality trial records, and they cover topics as diverse as the classification of sexual types and behaviors in modern medicine and science and the colonial and racial laws circumscribing love and desire. Yet the issue of the archive concerns not only those that historically have served the church and the nation-state. More fundamentally, the term now encompasses private as well as public collections and, indeed, “unofficial, idiosyncratic, and personal collections of material.”¹³ Moreover, a focus on a range of media draws our attention to the “sheer heterogeneity of visual archives” in which sexually explicit images occur.¹⁴

For many historians today, the meanings of these ephemeral “archives of feeling” open up histories of queer resistance and hope, creativity, and pleasure in the face of severe censorship and other restrictions.¹⁵ As Amy L. Stone and Jaime Cantrell observe, “The archive supposedly creates some order and legibility to what was previously hidden and illegible.”¹⁶ Archives thus can offer glimpses of the experiential and affective dimensions of lives lived in the past, often in conditions that sought to deny their existence. Unpacking the historical meanings and effects of visual archives of sex also invites us to reflect on the affective and experiential registers of sources that speak in startlingly immediate ways.

Intersectional Frameworks

There is expansive opportunity to speculate within and across visual archives of sex to exhume sites of desire and myths inscribed on sexualized and racialized bodies. Such critical inquiries into visual sex can, potentially, destabilize Western norms,

forms of whiteness, and Euro-centric universalisms, including unseating the primacy of the white male gaze and its attendant violence (both discursive and physical), which fundamentally erase Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), especially BIPOC women's, affective lives. Where scholars research the structures and quotidian practices of racial and economic exploitation, visual archives offer an opportunity to challenge narratives of domination and control and to contend with women's and non-white men's lives. Rather than othering racialized populations, casting their desires as diseased and perverse and their bodies consumable (visually and otherwise) for others' pleasure, visual culture can speak to the proliferation among marginalized populations of joy, pleasure, resistance, and the active refusal to accept the erasure of one's own humanity. Decades ago, Audre Lorde spoke to the colonization of women's bodies and disjunctures that violate human needs, in *Uses of the Erotic, the Erotic as Power* (1978): "The principal horror of any system that defines . . . human need to the exclusion of the psychic and emotional components of that need . . . is that it robs our work of its erotic value, its erotic power and life appeal and fulfillment."¹⁷ Through our contributors, this issue argues that visual culture pulls back the curtain on what is visible and who sees, knows, controls, and holds power in everyday relations. That is, we expose some of the tensions that lie between the externally visible and internal processes of thinking.

Visual culture studies have mapped onto Black studies in wonderfully revealing ways. Scholars, such as historical archaeologist Whitney Battle-Baptiste and race and feminist studies scholar Britt Rusert, have examined antiracism, self-representation, and the politics of seeing to produce excellent work.¹⁸ The collection of images—richly tonal photographs and infographics—demonstrates the sheer depth of analytic force freed by visual landscapes to recover Black experiences. A question is raised as a central concern across several of the issue's contributors: what scholarly terrain in studies of racism/antiracism, Blackness, and self-representation might be tilled using visual archives of sex? The battle over representation and political norms (perversion and control versus agency and desire), through visual interrogatives, signifiers, metaphors, and positionality, shows both the power of looking and how visual archives of sex are always racialized, and vice versa. The visual is a lens onto the human condition—the degree of (in)compatibility between what is externally visible and processes internally felt. Scholars of race, Blackness, gender, and sexuality can use these insights to foreground intersecting identities alongside a long, concomitant history of antiracist activism. Thus, read on a visual plane, Black intimations, desires, and the repudiation of myths of inhumanity and perversion refine and expand our understanding of strategies of resistance. This reconfiguration of historical methods destabilizes racist narratives, particularly whiteness, revealing that white male supremacy is neither normative nor omnipresent. Further, visual archives can recover multiple proximities between Blackness and sex and their

many paths toward social justice. As rukus! curator, theater director, and filmmaker Topher Campbell posits in this issue, grappling with race and the erotic by archiving visual sex practices is integral to the struggle for racial and sexual justice in the United Kingdom. The mission of the rukus! project, a rich visual archive of Black LGBTQ+ individual and community lives, is to collect, preserve, exhibit, and otherwise make available for the first time to the public, historical, cultural, and artistic materials related to the Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities in the United Kingdom through exhibitions, film screenings, and other events.¹⁹

More broadly, visual sources are greatly impacting intersectional frameworks of analyses, perhaps because they offer Black studies and intersectional studies so many opportunities to construct histories of intersecting racial and sexuality politics. They can confirm the disjuncture between affective experiences and the images deployed on behalf of power: to control, quantify, and dehumanize. Of course, images are politicized, the meaning of their revelations generally struggled over. Thus scholars must also consider the ways visual culture supports racialization and control within regimes of power, as Derek Conrad Murray comments to Alexis Boylan in this issue:

I have a lingering concern about the overexposure of African descended folks worldwide, who find themselves the subject of a rapacious Western image culture that consumes black bodies for entertainment purposes . . . as an affective visual spectacle. In many respects, that societal thirst—and the plethora of images it generates—is confused for racial progress, because it grants visibility and provides support and pathways to success for a select few. If we look at African-American life as a totality, and not just the elite . . . we obviously see a disjuncture between the deluge of images of black bodies, contrasted by rampant disenfranchisement.

This *RHR* issue, then, engages non-white, antiracist, and feminist ways of “seeing” sexuality that challenge norms and myth making drawn from the apparent meanings of archived images. The methods and theories presented here open new pathways to consider what mutual entanglements exist between Black studies and sexuality analytics. How might they, together, elevate scholarly debates and enrich narratives about style, struggle, and the human condition, particularly those that support social justice movements?

Pornography and Archives

The marginalization of visual histories of sex has at times been facilitated by the large-scale exclusion of such materials from traditional archives, or their relegation into locked cupboards and roped-off areas, such as the British Library’s Private Case of erotic printed books from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries (access restrictions have now been removed and the collection fully cataloged).

Even as they “preserve traces of the past,” Tim Dean points out, archives are distinguished by “differing degrees of publicness: the more sensitive their holdings the harder they are to access.”²⁰ The Kinsey Institute at Indiana University, for example, represents a rare university archive to collect sexual ephemera, joining dedicated sex museums and other “alternative archives” such as queer and LGBTQ collections, frequently staffed by volunteers, in carrying much of the weight of preserving sexual pasts.²¹ For a brief window of time, from the 1940s to the 1960s, for example, prison wardens and guards shipped seized materials to the Kinsey Institute, creating a unique archive of objects that indicate how, as Lisa Z. Sigel shows, prisoners “created and articulated desire, bodies, and pleasures, how they wrote and drew themselves and others, how they plotted and narrated stories, and how they responded to the surveillance that they knew was taking place.”²² Both the erotic and the pornographic have hovered at the margins of the historiography of sexual science, in which research into historical connections with the adult entertainment industry remains in its infancy. This is despite a strong tradition of sexologists’ engaging with media and erotica that move beyond the strictly “scientific,” whether by publishing in North American erotic magazines such as *Forum* and *Playboy* in the 1970s and 1980s, as Janice Irvine examines,²³ joining the editorial boards of titillating mid-century popular science magazines such as *Sexology* in the 1950s, or going back even further, by turning for evidence to the explicit images and materials circulated in the erotic book trade of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²⁴

Yet the histories of people, bodies, and desires that do not match the norms of their time are not just found in official documents. For this reason, José Esteban Muñoz argues, it is necessary to pay attention to “ephemera of evidence”: a method of historical inquiry that “does not rest in epistemological foundations but is instead interested in following traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things.”²⁵ This includes the need to attend to fleeting, unconventional forms of evidence, while insisting on how even evidence of the erasure of histories of non-normative desires and sexualities can promote productive historiographical reflection.

Digital Technology and Media Histories

New critical approaches to visual materials offer one way of following the often elusive traces of sexual pasts—beyond the sexological frameworks that have come to dominate modern ways of thinking about sex. For example, historian Cait McKinney’s queer history of lesbian media technologies coined the term *information activists* to describe a series of social movement organizations and individuals in the United States and Canada “who responded to their frustrated desire for information about lesbian history and lesbian life by generating that information themselves.”²⁶ Late twentieth-century radical feminists, she shows, designed “complex multimedia practices” to circulate information that was difficult—or even impossible—to come

by otherwise. Historicizing feminism and other social movements means explorations with a range of materials and processes—such as community-generated databases, newsletters, and other information—as conditions of possibility. “Queer digital archives built by community groups,” McKinney writes, “find ways to maintain traces of how objects were used by activists, such as the high-resolution photographs of actual [cassette] tapes that accompany each streaming audio file produced by the Lesbian Herstory Archives.” Digitization in turn changes the kinds of encounters we have with objects because, “quite simply, the different media *feel* different.”²⁷

Art historians and literary and cultural critics working broadly in the field of queer history have explored how sex entered the archive on a more intimate level via cultural production, as mimetic evidence of something that is lived, experienced, and fantasized about. Here, and in the burgeoning scholarship on transgender, visual materials, including film, photography, drawings, paintings, and other graphic materials, have increasingly come to play an important role in examinations of the material as well as affective realities of archival objects and their role in mediating access to the past and its present-day manifestations. GerShun Avilez’s recent study of what he calls the “injury-bound” Black queer body, for instance, tracks the Black queer body’s spatiality in the United States through various visual modes, from modes of perception to state surveillance, to reveal the paradoxical simultaneousness of Black American queer invisibility and hypervisibility.²⁸ A major recent reappraisal of nineteenth-century German sexual science and its legacies, in turn, interrogates the central role of visibility in shaping German sexual identities and the archives formed around them. It develops the notion of “looking through sex” as a methodological tool for revealing histories that have been hidden or overlooked. Yet the phrase *looking through* also means not seeing what is there. The contributors to this special issue pursue the critical pleasure of examining visual materials for evidence of queer and trans life in the past, or tracing histories of sexualized and racialized violence and exploitation in haunting objects as seemingly “innocent” as glamour shot or swimwear advertisement. But they also reflect on the critical challenges of “seeing” the images as they are and were intended at the point of production.

Attention to such methodological challenges is vital for understanding the knotted visual histories of sex and how they are circumscribed by circumstance, including technological and financial binds that often remain unnoticed—for example, economic and other constraints that require original color images to be reproduced as black-and-white images (as for some color images in this volume). As Derek Conrad Murray points out in this issue, photography is a widely used if not oversaturated means of aesthetic (self) expression. In the history and historiography of sex, however, photography occupies a complex, and to some extent more elite, position. It was established as a technology of (dis)identification at a time when the newly coined modern sexual classifications, especially the vocabulary of same-sex sexuality, started to gain widespread traction. In the West, the coeval development

of modern photography and sexuality intersected in numerous ways. On the one hand, photographs played a diagnostic role in scientific endeavors to categorize sexual types. The influential Institute of Sexual Science in Berlin, for example, which was at the heart of international sex research before World War II, used photographs of individuals to illustrate the theory, first developed by Institute founder Magnus Hirschfeld, of *sexuelle Zwischenstufen*, or the idea that there exists near infinite variation in sex and gender. The institute's use of photographs as evidence is indicative of the normative deployment of photography in the establishment of scientific truth and authority. Yet the sexological turn to photography nevertheless also enabled what we might call a form of queer self-fashioning. Many of the photographic subjects represented themselves in ways that felt appropriate to them, documenting their own self-expression and thus contributing to the development of a particular kind of record of Berlin's sexual subcultures.

While these images indicate some of the productive intersections between medical and sexual subcultures, the deployment of photographs as a diagnostic tool also perpetuated the medical objectification of certain subjects. The institute's pioneering work on intersex, while foundational to the development of a modern understanding of the existence of variation in "sex characteristics," illustrates this point. It visually reduced the subject to a mere body part by training the photographer's lens on the subject's genitals, a reminder that visual materials are not neutral illustrations of certain practices or circumstances. The use of photography in the institute clinic, a space that was overtly dedicated to sexual reform through scientific evidence, reinforces that visual materials cannot serve a merely illustrative role in historical analysis. Instead, historians must pay close attention to the production of images, their context, and the implication of the viewer, historical and contemporary, in meaning production. How, then, to approach visual materials that merge intensely personal and more public displays of sexual identity and desire? How do the questions about access and interpretation that radical histories of sexuality have grappled with in textual contexts shift when our focus moves to visual fragments and archives?

These are difficult questions, and ones that historians have not always answered particularly well. Photographs, as Julia Adeney Thomas observes, have the capacity to "disarm" historians, to "drive us crazy" in the way they "flirt" with the viewer,²⁹ at once seeming to offer an immediacy of access to the past yet also resisting those attempts at knowledge—what Elizabeth Edwards refers to as their "historical seduction."³⁰ Are there new ways of looking at, feeling, and even "listening" to the visual to uncover histories that are hidden as well as those in plain sight? Tina Campt has suggested that one might "listen through" seemingly banal or "flat" images; she takes the example of passport photographs of mid-century Black British men migrating from the Caribbean, for example, to see their subjects as much more than "mute supplicants of governmentality."³¹ Becoming attuned to their "quiet

frequencies,” she proposes, opens windows onto marginalized histories of Black self-fashioning and resistance: of masculinity, respectability, mobility, and citizenship. Attending carefully to such layerings or frequencies becomes especially pertinent when it comes to dealing with erotic images. These, after all, have the potential to open up histories of desire and pleasure, sensuality and the illicit—aspects of the sexual past that have been persistently downplayed in the historiography. “Why are more sexually charged images still so peripheral,” Jennifer Evans insists, “considering the enormous potential of these sources in unveiling not only the shape and face of moral panic, but also the more pleasant of human capacities, including intimacy, physical and emotional compatibility, attraction, and desire?”³² At the same time, inquiring into the role of photographs as historical evidence opens up crucial questions for historiography more broadly. By “exposing the questions we ought to raise about all historical evidence,” as Jennifer Tucker and Camp observe, “photographs reveal not simply the potential and limits of *photography* as a historical source, but the potential and limits of *all* historical sources and historical inquiry as an intellectual project.”³³ While the visual archives examined in this issue are not limited to lens-based images, these reflections provide a suitable frame of reference for thinking about the value of turning in earnest to visual sources in expanding our knowledge of sexual pasts. Indeed, some of the most exciting methods and approaches to the study of photography in visual archives of sex may come not from the direction of history and theory of photography, or even from art history, but from social and cultural historians attending to what people in different times and places made and consumed, bought and circulated, preserved, and discarded.³⁴

Overview

The contributions to this special issue present a series of fresh, theoretically engaged contributions to the visual history and historiography of sex. They highlight the complex circulations and changing meanings of visual media for different audiences over time and ask, often in very different ways, how images help us arrive at more critical and radical histories of sex.

In the opening roundtable, “Curating Visual Histories of Sex,” four curators of recent exhibitions that focused on sexuality, queer, and trans experience reflect on the dynamics and challenges of showcasing sexual histories to broad publics in museum and gallery spaces. They emphasize the rich collaborations with trans and queer activist communities that informed their approaches, while also reflecting frankly on ongoing tensions around who has the capacity to represent histories of nonnormative gender and sexual experience, and how. These discussions point to the shifting parameters of viewership across time, and across generational divides in the present, with viewers of different ages bringing to their exhibition experience very different histories of encounter with the medical profession, political activism, or racial discrimination, to name only a few relevant positionalities. The experience

of younger viewers critical of the representation of trans surgeries in the traveling exhibition *TransTrans: Transatlantic Transgender Histories*, Annette Timm reflects, thus sat in tension with the responses of older trans people for whom the exhibition prompted the sharing of personal memories, reflections, and images. Jeanne Vaccaro, curator of *Bring Your Own Body*, also explicitly sought ways of telling stories such as that of activist Chloe Dzubilo for a new generation, forging connections between her historical struggles and “contemporary movements for housing justice, transgender liberation, and AIDS organizing.” Together with Meg Slater from the curatorial team behind *Queer*, a critical revisiting of the collection at the National Gallery of Victoria, Australia, and Ashkan Sepahvand, curator and artistic director of *Odardle*—an explicitly “postcolonial perspective” on the collection in the Schwules Museum (Gay Museum) in Berlin—they reflect on how visual materials enable the telling of different kinds of sexual histories in ways that resist pathologization, sensationalism, and appropriation, and the unique experiential and affective encounters made possible for visitors within the exhibition space.

The four feature essays explore visual archives and the ways in which they shape radical histories of sexuality across contexts, ranging from the post–World War II militarized Pacific to a mid-century British murder trial, and from photographs of transwomen in late Franco-era Spain to East German homemade gay pornography. In “Bikinis and Other Atomic Incidents,” Sunny Xiang arrives at the question of visual archives via swimsuit advertisements and synthetic fabrics, showing how figures such as the white, female “bikini blonde” functioned as hypervisual iterations of “atomic culture.” The radical swimwear’s “exotic geographic referent,” the Bikini Atoll, worked to subtly legitimize US atomic power and racialized militaristic imperialism in the mid-century nuclear Pacific. It did so in ways that were not so much invisible, as previously argued, but rather “conspicuously incidental,” while advertising for new synthetic fibers and intimate foundation wear worked to simultaneously introduce American society to an “atomic” vocabulary and to promote cold war values—“freedom, comfort, and protection”—among the American public.

The complex overlaying of white, blonde, female sexuality with difficult histories of violence, domination, and victimhood connects Xiang’s analysis to art and visual historian Lynda Nead’s examination of photographs of Ruth Ellis, the last woman hanged in Britain, in 1955, for murdering her male lover following years of domestic abuse. Nead’s feminist visual analysis teases out how the meanings of photographs of the glamorous, sexy, socially aspirational, and working-class model and nightclub hostess frequently exceed that which is directly pictured. These photographs, reproduced innumerable times as they circulated through the world press, raise important questions around gender and sexuality and how these traversed mobilities constrained or enabled by class, respectability, criminality, and whiteness. “A Bruise, a Neck, and a Little Finger” homes in on a series of amateur glamour

shots taken in Ellis's flat, provoking us to reflect on the ways in which sex and desire might be considered to be "in" the archive—how we look for it, and when we believe ourselves to have found it—as well as what these photographs might tell us about women's lives in postwar Britain.

A similar challenge to how historians approach visual archives emanates from Javier Fernández Galeano's thoughtful exploration of "The Hermeneutics of Trans Visual Archives in Late Franco-Era Spain." Galeano homes in on the "running mascara" evident on police mugshots of working-class trans women in the early 1970s. At a time of sharp legal discrimination, these photographs are contrasted with more personal images and documents created, like Ellis's, in both more quotidian and intimate settings. Drawing on the existential significance of visibility theorized in recent trans scholarship, Galeano "listens" to these vernacular photos for the "fissures" between state narratives and individual subjectivity to situate them as "material performances" of trans subjectivity. Rather than simply illustrating the effects of state-sanctioned transphobic violence, he reads these visual archives for the way they very deliberately celebrate "joy, sisterhood, and intimacy as tenets of a livable life."

The capacity of visual archives, often quotidian and handmade, to offer access to hidden histories of pleasure and sensuality in the face of restrictive political structures is likewise central to Kyle Frackman's analysis in "Homemade Pornography and the Proliferation of Queer Pleasure in East Germany." Gay erotica produced under 1970s state socialism blended visual genres and registers—amateur snapshots taken in living rooms and bedrooms sit alongside cut-outs from commercial porn magazines—and were circulated and recirculated through underground queer networks. Frackman offers a queer lens on sex in socialist East Germany, showcasing "a clandestine yet joyful" gay sexual culture, in a time and place in which the private realm took on heightened significance for self-expression. Such images represent precisely the kind of "sexually charged" sources that, as noted above, scholars like Jennifer Evans urge historians of sexuality to take more seriously, with a view to telling histories of desire and celebration rather than just repression or violence.

Community initiatives such as "living archives" are often places of resistance to historical erasure and injustice. This is the case with the rukus! archive project: a rich visual archive launched in London in 2005 by photographer Ajamu X, and filmmaker and theater director Tophér Campbell, whose conversation with artist-scholar Conor McGrady is featured in this issue. The archive's mission is "to collect, preserve, exhibit, and otherwise make available for the first time to the public historical, cultural, and artistic materials related to the Black lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities in the United Kingdom through a variety of activities and events (exhibitions, film-screenings, oral history work, presentations, etc.)."³⁵ With intellectual origins in the work of Stuart Hall and British cultural studies more

generally, the project establishes a critical dialogue both with mainstream heritage practices and dominant Black and queer identity discourses. For as its cofounders Ajamu X and Campbell point out, sifting through the past to recover “what isn’t there but was” can be an act of “collective rebellion”: it constitutes a form of “queer archive activism,” defined by Alexandra Juhasz as “a practice that adds love and hope to time and technology.”³⁶

Campbell and Ajamu X hold up the collection as a deeply political project: a strategy for invisibilized Black British LGBTQ+ communities and a riposte to the way in which white mainstream straight and LGBTQ+ cultures actively erase Black queer communities in the UK, the rukus! archive is foundational to self-representation, to seeing, and to being seen, for these communities. The archives are important not least because sexual minorities use them as “a form of cultural memory”; the archive holds the potential for identifying, preserving, and interpreting the traces of subjugated knowledges, and to research on what are sometimes known as “migrant archives,” counterarchives, and queer archives.³⁷

A second set of essays and interviews also reflects on the themes of this issue. David Serlin’s conversation with “queer Latinx medievalist” and art historian Roland Betancourt on Byzantine art and sexuality leaps back across the centuries to consider representations of the sexual in early Christian iconography. Betancourt’s method of close visual analysis resists the “normative filters—both methodological and ideological” that have shaped dominant interpretations of well-known works. Doing so enables him to access a greater complexity, even a fundamental queerness, to past negotiations of sex than historians have tended to acknowledge. Canonical depictions of Mary’s Annunciation, for example, frequently brush aside discussions of “consent” based on the presentist assumption that such a thing did not yet exist. Seeing queerness in the medieval archive, Betancourt argues, means “disorienting and disabling” those filters, looking closely, and remaining open to the possibility of surprise.

Two reflective essays then explore, first, how and why pornographic visual cultures seem to pose such problems for queer historiography and, second, the challenges and dynamic richness of engaging closely with images in the space of the university classroom. In “Sexing the Archive: Gay Porn and Subcultural Histories,” João Florêncio and Ben Miller confront the frequent reluctance of historians of queer lives and sexualities to delve into sexually explicit sources, or to see them as integral to histories of queer politics. Pornography’s dual status as both documentary and fantasy certainly complicates its use as historical evidence of affect and intimacy—not least by implicating the bodies and emotions of historians themselves. Yet to ignore such sources, these authors insist, “threatens queer history by writing sex out of it.” Sarah Jones, too, confronts the value of embracing rather than avoiding such sources. In “Teaching the History of Sexuality with Images,” she explores how

using visual objects in the classroom can break open feelings of awkwardness and embarrassment to enable more radical speculation, personal discovery, and debate: debate about what constitutes an archive, what is left out, and how to critically navigate materials with the potential to shock, offend, or perpetuate individual or collective traumas or exploitation.

Bookending this “Reflections” section, Alexis Boylan’s wide-ranging discussion “The Cost of That Revealing” with artist and scholar Derek Conrad Murray extends from the social inequalities highlighted by COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter campaign to the ubiquity and politics of the selfie—including the work, featured in this issue, of former student Vivian Fu—the increasing neoliberalism of the university sector, and Murray’s critical reappraisal of photographer Robert Mapplethorpe’s Black male nudes in his new book *Mapplethorpe and the Flower*.³⁸ Like Betancourt, Murray emphasizes the need to resist the “noise” of conventional readings to work toward a deeper, more usable approach to visual culture—and again, this involves a “return to the object,” as he puts it, to produce scholarship with truly radical potential. It is necessary, Murray insists, to resist overly “reverential” scholarly traditions that repeatedly produce a distorted colonialist, whitewashing approach toward the Western art “canon”: “I’ve had to unlearn the kinds of devotion and deference towards the ideas of preeminent thinkers, so I could actually locate the omissions, blind spots and erasures that have, in many instances, led us astray.” This discussion demands a much sharper critique of today’s “too invasive, too panoptic and voyeuristic” Western culture of visual representation—a culture of “ceaseless observation” that has repeatedly fetishized the Black body and turned this figure into an object of consumption and spectacle. In this context, he insists, “the right to opacity can function as resistance to imposed legibility and ideological reduction.”

Derek Conrad Murray’s productive questioning of the “logics of constant visibility” offers at once a lens through which to view the contributions to this issue as a whole and a striking counterpart to the politics of visibility developed by writer, performer, video maker, and sex worker activist Carol Leigh, a.k.a. Scarlot Harlot, in the second and last of this issue’s “Curated Spaces” sections. Responsible for coining the term *sex work* in the 1970s, here Leigh walks us through a section of her own visual archive of the “whore gaze.” Traversing several decades of sex work and anti-homophobic and pro-sex activism as a self-proclaimed “Jewish intellectual red diaper baby” of the Holocaust generation, Leigh takes us to places such as the Venice Biennale in 2001, which saw the birth of the Red Umbrella movement for the rights of sex workers, just as Slovenian artist Tadej Pogačar’s *CODE:RED* provided a rallying point for the World Congress of Sex Workers and the first Red Umbrellas March—a symbol of collective struggle and resistance against sex worker stigmatization.

Cover Photograph by Artist Vivian Fu

This issue's cover image, titled "Self-Portrait," by the brilliant photographer Vivian Fu, seems especially representative of the themes raised herein. This striking, even lingering, image suggests the creation or construction of archives (here, photographic) and the nature of their curation even before they exist—the desire of the artist-technician's eye to reveal, display, or converse with the human condition. This image also reflects both subjects' visibility and invisibility by placement in relationship to the photographer. Fu herself is shaded, partially visible in the foreground while in the background there is a blurred but suggestive silhouette. This affective choice connects the quotidian acts of living (with a lover) to a specific moment, caught on film. The figure seems human, sprawled on a bed unclothed—distanced from the photographer who is recorder of a scene and initiator of a visual archive (of sex?). It suggests the illusiveness and complexity of considering the past through visual archives.

Heike Bauer is professor of modern literature and cultural history at Birkbeck College, University of London. She has published widely on sexology, literature, and the modern history of sexuality, and on the rise of queer and feminist graphic novels. Her most recent book is *The Hirschfeld Archives: Violence, Death, and Modern Queer Culture* (2017; available open access: www.oapen.org/search?identifier=628406). She is now at work on a cultural history of the dangerous dog.

Melina Pappademos is associate professor of history and the director of the Africana Studies Institute at the University of Connecticut, Storrs. She researches the social and cultural history of race and political mobilizations in the Caribbean and Latin America. Her first book, *Black Political Activism and the Cuban Republic* (2011), won the Southern Historical Association's Murdo J. Macleod Best Book Prize. Her second book project examines political symbolism during Cuba's turbulent 1930s and 1940s.

Katie Sutton is associate professor of German and gender studies at the Australian National University. She is the author of *Sex between Body and Mind: Psychoanalysis and Sexology in the German-Speaking World, 1890s–1930s* (2019) and *The Masculine Woman in Weimar Germany* (2011), and articles on the history of gender, sexuality, and sexology in early twentieth-century Germany, including interwar trans subcultures.

Jennifer Tucker is associate professor of the history of technology and feminist, gender, and sexuality studies at Wesleyan University. She has published widely on photography, Victorian visual culture, museums, the role of evidence in jury trials, environmental law, guns and society, and public history. Her books include *Nature Exposed: Photography as Eyewitness in Victorian Science* (2006) and *A Right to Bear Arms? The Contested Role of History in Contemporary Debates on the Second Amendment* (2019).

Notes

1. Murphy, Tortorici, and Marshall, "Queering Archives: Historical Unravelings."
2. Marshall, Murphy, and Tortorici, "Queering Archives," 1.
3. Brown, *The Repeating Body*; Tucker, *Nature Exposed*.

4. Foucault, *History of Sexuality*.
5. Bauer, *English Literary Sexology*; Bauer, *Hirschfeld Archives*; Beccalossi, *Female Sexual Inversion*; Chiang, "Liberating Sex, Knowing Desire"; Damousi, Lang, and Sutton, *Case Studies*; Doan, *Disturbing Practices*; Kahan, *The Book of Minor Perverts*; Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy*; Leng, *Sexual Politics and Feminist Science*; Love, *Feeling Backward*; Spector, Puff, and Herzog, *After the History of Sexuality*; Sutton, *Sex between Body and Mind*.
6. Arondekar, *For the Record*; Bauer, *Sexology and Translation*; Chiang, *After Eunuchs*; Fuechtner, Haynes, and Jones, *A Global History of Sexual Science*; Kozma, *Global Women, Colonial Ports*; Mitra, *Indian Sex Life*; Pande, *Sex, Law, and the Politics of Age*.
7. Chiang, *Transtopia in the Sinophone Pacific*; Halberstam, *Wild Things*; LaFleur, *The Natural History of Sexuality in Early America*; Manion, *Female Husbands*; Stryker, *Transgender History*.
8. Leng and Sutton, "Histories of Sexology Today."
9. Freeman, "Time Binds, or Erotohistoriography."
10. McKinney, *Information Activism*, 197.
11. Hall, "Constituting an Archive," 92.
12. Cvetkovich, *Archive of Feelings*, 7.
13. Dean, "Introduction," 10.
14. Dean, "Introduction," 18.
15. Werbel, *Lust on Trial*; Cvetkovich, *Archive of Feelings*, 7.
16. Stone and Cantrell, "Something Queer at the Archive," 5.
17. Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic*, 3.
18. Battle-Baptiste and Rusert, *W.E.B. Du Bois's Data Portraits*.
19. X. Campbell, and Stevens, "Love and Lubrication in the Archives."
20. Dean, "Introduction," 3.
21. Tyburczy, "All Museums Are Sex Museums"; Evans, "Seeing Subjectivity," 434.
22. Sigel, *People's Porn*, 23.
23. Irvine, *Disorders of Desire*.
24. Bull, "More than a Case of Mistaken Identity," 12.
25. Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence," 10.
26. McKinney, *Information Activism*.
27. McKinney, *Information Activism*, 157.
28. Avilez, *Black Queer Freedom*, 11.
29. Thomas, "Evidence of Sight," 151.
30. Edwards, "Thoughts on Photography," 24–25.
31. Campt, *Listening to Images*, 9.
32. Evans, "Seeing Subjectivity," 434–35.
33. Tucker, with Campt, "Introduction."
34. Tucker, "Visual and Material Studies"; Tucker, *Nature Exposed*; Tucker, "The Historian, the Picture and the Archive."
35. X. Campbell, and Stevens, "Love and Lubrication in the Archives," 271.
36. X. Campbell, and Stevens, "Love and Lubrication in the Archives," 272–73.
37. Dean, "Introduction," 10–11.
38. Murray, *Mapplethorpe and the Flower*.

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