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The Sexual Representation Collection at the University of Toronto

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ABSTRACT
The Sexual Representation Collection’s mission is to aid in the recovery and preservation of pornographic materials, and materials related to their social and legal regulation, production, circulation, and consumption. It acquires, preserves, organizes, and gives public access to information and materials in any medium about sexual representation, with particular attention paid to feminist, queer, and kink material.

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In writing about the need for the Adult Film History Project, Peter Aililunas and Dan Erdman (2018) describe some of the challenges that porn scholars face in the archive. They detail the lack of accessibility, perplexing metadata and filing protocols, the thin paper trail the adult industry leaves behind, conservative institutional politics, the low priority that archivists sometimes attach to pornography, and financial barriers to research. They note the existence of ‘unofficial’ materials related to adult film history that exist in all kinds of archives, often set aside on out-of-the-way shelves, uncatalogued, ignored, and forgotten. The Sexual Representation Collection (SRC) strives to provide a counter-archive at a major research university, whose mission to aid in the recovery and preservation of pornography, and to make it accessible to scholars and the general public, is inspired by the collection’s survival, over decades, thanks to the efforts of faculty, students, and donors, in the face of what at times seemed like overwhelming odds. That the collection survived at all is itself a form of queer survival, and perhaps one of the reasons why so many queer student workers over the years have felt such an attachment to it. Perhaps this explains, too, why such large pornography collections exist in LGBT archives, such as the ONE Archive in Los Angeles, CA, USA or the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archive in Toronto, Canada. The SRC remains a queer labour of love.

Crammed into two small rooms in the basement of the oldest building at the University of Toronto sits Canada’s largest university-based collection of pornography. The room’s 10-foot brick walls and thick, Victorian wood doors, adorned at the top with wood-engraved Canadiana, including a pinecone and maple leaf, give the collection an importance that belies its history as a counter-archive at the university. University administrators only reluctantly accepted it as a gift in 2001, after efforts by a group of professors, students, and alumni who were simultaneously working to found the university’s LGBS studies
programme, now the Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies. The SRC, as it came to be known, is not part of the University of Toronto Libraries, the system of 50 libraries and archives that make up the core of information services at the university. Instead, it is administered by the Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies, an academic unit in the Faculty of Arts & Science. A memorandum of agreement acknowledging the gift sets out a lengthy list of policies and procedures for accessing the collection. Among the many restrictions, no funding to make the collection accessible can come from the university’s operating budget.

Yet the SRC is one of the most meticulously and carefully processed collections of pornography anywhere. Its walls are lined, from floor to ceiling, with archival-quality white boxes, which are filled with rows of files of archival-quality folders containing a range of materials, including 3000 VHS videocassettes and DVDs, 1000 magazines, 500 pulp novels, hundreds of 35-mm slides, floppy discs, 8-mm films, 8-mm cassette tapes, and 267 linear feet of personal papers, legal documents, reports, art, kink objects, and unique ephemera dating from the 1950s to the present. In addition, it includes a significant collection of materials related to the social and legal regulation of sexual representation in Canada. Each collection has been processed to the item level, containing its own collection lists, fond descriptions, and finding aids, including relevant information on provenance, scope notes, content notes, and notes of arrangement. VHS, DVD, and book jackets have been painstakingly removed and preserved in their own archival-quality folders. Every metal staple and every paperclip has been removed and replaced with archival-quality clips. Every folded letter has been neatly unfolded. Every binder has been unbound and rebound to archival standards. Because no university funds could be put towards making the collection accessible, Lord Morpheous, a Toronto-based kink sex educator, author, and photographer, generously donated funds to process the entire collection. The excessiveness of such meticulous processing reveals the labour of love that went into caring for the collection’s survival over many years. It represents more than a decade of tedious work, done largely by a team of queer students, many of whom had the enthusiasm of learning archival processing for the first time. It is a pornography historian’s wet dream.

The SRC’s mission is to aid in the recovery and preservation of pornographic materials, and materials related to their social and legal regulation, production, circulation, and consumption. It acquires, preserves, organizes, and gives public access to information and materials in any medium about sexual representation, with particular attention paid to feminist, queer, and kink material.

The SRC began intentionally but informally in the 1990s when Brian Pronger, a professor in what was then the Faculty of Physical Education and Health at the University of Toronto, began growing a collection of commercially-produced pornography on VHS as part of a research project. Later, Pronger acquired the personal collection of Max Allen, a former producer at the Canadian Broadcast Corporation and an avid activist on issues related to pornography, sex education, sex work, and censorship. Allen’s files and materials provide extremely detailed holdings on a number of major issues related to social and legal regulations of sex and pornography, such as legal decisions, reports, and promotional and educational materials, as well as records from the Canadian Committee Against Customs Censorship, an activist group in the 1980s and 1990s that influenced changes in Canadian laws and culture.
By 2000, Brian Pronger, Mariana Valverde, a professor in the Centre for Criminology & Sociolegal Studies at the University of Toronto, and Tom Waugh, a professor in the School of Cinema at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada, secured funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada to further build and process the collection. After some controversy about the existence of the collection at the university, Pronger and Valverde worked to ensure the collection became an official gift to the University of Toronto in 2001, administered by the newly formed Sexual Diversity Studies Program. The SRC remained largely dormant as the Sexual Diversity Studies Program grew into the current Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies. The collection’s location moved around the university before eventually being housed on the lower level of University College, where the SRC Reading Room and workspaces are located today.

Under the stewardship of Nick Matte, then a PhD student in the Department of History at the University of Toronto, the SRC secured funds to further process and describe its materials to archival standards. Matte is also responsible for growing the collection’s feminist, queer, and kink materials. As part of his public outreach efforts, Matte organized the first exhibition of the collection, in cooperation with the University of Toronto Art Centre, entitled ‘Archiving Public Sex’ (University of Toronto Art Centre 2014).

The SRC has grown to include collections donated by sex-positive feminist activists, including Annie Sprinkle and Tristan Taormino. Likewise, Carlyle Jansen, who owns the Toronto-based sex shop Good for Her, has donated materials related to the International Feminist Porn Awards and the Toronto Women & Trans Bathhouse Committee. Donations from Lord Morpheous form the heart of our kink collection, along with materials from Carey Gray, a queer FTM Toronto-based pornographer, photographer, and BDSM sex educator and the owner of ASLAN Leather and StudioTen.

The SRC is particularly strong in materials relating to censorship and legal issues, pornography, and sex education. Researchers can access television programmes that discuss sexuality, censorship, feminist pornography, and materials originally censored by the Canada Customs and Revenue Agency. Some of our collections shine light on niche activities or activism around pornography and sex education. The SRC has approximately 230 pulp novels from 1953 to 1986, many of which focus on sexual taboos, such as fetishism/BDSM and group sex. In addition to our vast VHS holdings, the SRC has a nearly complete run of Playboy from 1963 to 2000, Screw from 1974 to 1978, Gai Peid from 1983 to 1992, and Nude from 2007 to 2010. We also have a complete run of the Body Politic from 1971 to 1987, one of Canada’s first gay publications. In 2008, we acquired 700 books, pamphlets, VHS, DVD, magazines, and catalogues donated by the producers of SexTV after that Canadian television channel (previously programme) ended production. We have a significant collection of materials documenting the technical and commercial histories of how sexually explicit materials have circulated, including a large collection of pornography industry trade publications, such as AVN, Adult Gay Video News, The X-Rated Video Tape Star Index, Erotic Video Guide, and Adult Film World Guide Directory of Adult Films. These publications provide insights into the relationship between sex work, pornography, and commercial cultures at the moment just before and after the internet became publicly available. There is a vast range of materials that would benefit researchers interested in the legal and cultural differences
between the United States and Canada in the production, circulation, and regulation of sexual knowledge and pornography.

As patterns of immigration helped make Toronto a culturally diverse city, businesses catering to a variety of sexual tastes provide evidence of consumer interests from around the world. One of our largest video donations, from a pornography retail shop in Scarborough (a former municipality within Toronto), arrived with numerous VHS tapes of commercially produced pornography from India and Pakistan. Some of these titles are in Hindi, having been produced in India for local markets and bearing classifications from the Government of India’s Central Board of Film Certification. Others were produced for British or North American markets, and many are copies. These may be useful for researchers interested in sexual racialization and diasporic sexualities. There is also a small collection of Japanese-language materials. Brian Pronger’s VHS collection features a variety of commercially produced gay pornography from Mexico, the United States, and Canada during the 1980s and 1990s.

The SRC regularly organizes talks, panels, and workshops that provide a public forum for engaging social, cultural, and legal issues related to pornography. These events bring together established and emerging scholars, people who have worked in the sex industry or are sex workers, and members of the community to develop a conversation that extends beyond the archive. In addition, the SRC regularly partners with cultural institutions and university courses, particularly MSL4000: Exhibition Project, a practicum course in the Master’s of Museum Studies at the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto to exhibit highlights from the collection for a broader public. These exhibits rethink the politics and performance of public display and expand traditional ways of telling stories about archival objects.

Pedagogical engagement and a commitment to praxis are crucial to the SRC’s mission. Highlights from the collection feature in a range of undergraduate and graduate courses in history, cinema studies, gender and sexuality studies, media studies, archival studies, and museum studies, to name a few. In addition, the SRC annually hires work-study students and serves as an experiential learning opportunity for SDS490: Engaging Our Communities, an undergraduate practicum course at the Centre for Sexual Diversity Studies, and INF2173: Information Professional Practicum, a practicum course for students enrolled in any of the master’s programmes in the Faculty of Information.

The SRC is a non-circulating collection. Before visiting the SRC, we ask researchers to consult our list of finding aids, available on the Centre’s website. Most material is made available within 24 hours. Material held by the SRC is open to the public; however, some collections may have restrictions based on individuals’ privacy, donor-specific restrictions, and the condition of the material. The SRC’s Reading Room contains a shared desktop computer with internet access, a scanner/printer, a television with VHS and DVD players, an 8-mm film projector, an 8-mm cassette player, and a floppy disc drive. Researchers are strongly encouraged to bring their own laptops. For long-term visitors, wifi can be made available through the Centre.

The SRC has a number of long-term goals to preserve, expand, and make the collection more widely available. We actively accept archival donations relating to sexual representation and its social and legal regulation, production, circulation, and consumption, with particular attention paid to feminist, queer, and kink material. Our most recent acquisition is a collection of kink zines from the 1960s and 1970s that features MTF trans dominatrices.
and illustrated stories of forced feminization. We are currently in the process of digitizing as much of our collection as possible, starting with materials related to customs censorship. Over the coming years, we hope to fully digitize the moving image collections by working with ‘Archive/Counter-Archive’, a large, federally funded research project based at York University, Toronto, Canada led by Janine Marchessault, that aims to digitize and preserve vulnerable media collections across Canada. While copyright will prevent us from making some of these materials available online, we will nevertheless be able to supply researchers with free digital copies for research purposes. Our goal is not to pass on the costs of digitization to researchers, but to think creatively and collaboratively about ways to make the collections available freely and openly. To that end, the SRC is collaborating with other archival organizations to make its finding aids or digital copies widely available. Some of our finding aids and digital copies of our collection can be found in: the Digital Transgender Archive, led by K. J. Rawson at College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, MA, USA; Alternative Toronto, an online archive that traces the history of Toronto leftist activism in the twentieth century, led by Lilian Radovic at the University of Toronto; and the Leather Archive and Museum in Chicago, IL, USA. We are working with Peter Alilunas and Dan Erdman to make our digital collection available as part of the Adult Film History Project with Archive.org.

In the near future, I hope to persuade university administrators to provide space for the SRC in the library’s purpose-built, off-site storage facility, located about an hour from the university by subway, and to provide retrieval services as they do for other collections at the university. This will eliminate spatial constraints that currently prevent us from acquiring large donations. It will also provide us with better long-term preservation for the collection. Its current storage, the basement of a Victorian building, is not conducive to preservation, particularly for film and video materials, given dramatically fluctuating temperatures, humidity, and worries of flooding year-round. In addition, I hope university administrators will allow me to hire students from the Faculty of Information’s Library and Information Science programme to catalogue our finding aid, VHS, DVD, 8-mm cassette, and print collections in the University of Toronto Libraries catalogue and the Online Computer Library Centre’s World Catalog, a union catalogue that itemizes the collections of libraries and archives worldwide. Finally, I hope to work with librarians to develop a process for the preservation of born-digital materials, so they can be available in both their original media formats and accessible in different media formats in future.

Librarians and archivists at the University of Toronto have been endlessly solicitous in helping to accomplish the work of the collection, from assessing the collection’s preservation challenges to helping develop policies and procedures for new media formats to making books from the SexTV Collection available in the University of Toronto Libraries. My goal is to enhance the collection with University of Toronto Libraries’ world-class infrastructure while maintaining the Centre’s autonomy of the collection. In this way, the SRC serves as an institutional (queer) parasite, not only because it contains ‘bad’ content that administrators have historically viewed as risky to the university, but also because of the ways it benefits from the infrastructure of its host.

Note
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Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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