

**Glimmers of the forbidden fruit:  
Reminiscing pornography, conceptualizing the archive**

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## **Abstract**

The article explores theoretical and methodological understandings of the archive drawing on a research project that investigates reminiscences of using and encountering pornography in Finland. The contributors' reminiscences of what they have done with porn can be seen as forming an archive of feelings, which sheds light on attachments and practices often considered ephemeral and hidden, and focuses attention to the queer significance of those practices. We further consider the blurred boundaries between an archive, a collection, and a stash in terms of their secrecy, publicness, and affective intensity. Finally, we propose that the notion of somatic archives allows for analysis of how encounters with pornography layer through time in our bodies, contributing to forms of sexual knowledge. The article thus examines interconnections between memory work archives, personal porn stashes, and somatic archives while analyzing the importance and power of pornography in and for everyday life, sexual histories, and cultural memory.

## **Keywords**

pornography, archive, porn studies, queer theory, cultural memory, sexuality, affect, media history

**Word count** 7988

*Porn has always involved despicability and the taste of the forbidden fruit. It's also connected to a positive feeling of excitement. Just the acquisition of porn and the feelings provoked by that process have always been important to me as well. I still sometimes dream of getting or trying to get my hands on porn magazines... But now, anything can be found on the internet. (male, born 1970)*

This excerpt from an essay, written in response to a call for written reminiscences on encountering and using pornographic materials in Finland, describes what porn is and means for the author. The author, like many of the 45 respondents who contributed to the project, enthusiastically and vividly recalls his experiences of finding porn, purchasing it, hiding it, storing it, reading and watching it, searching for it, preparing to use it, and masturbating to it. The reminiscences are indeed often more about *how* the contributors have acquired and used porn than what bodies and acts the porn in question may have entailed. As such, the contributions form a small yet rich archive of memories of doing things with porn—an often overlooked aspect of porn archives.

The author of the quote above identifies himself as a porn collector. This becomes strikingly evident in the rest of his long, detailed, and thoughtful contribution: 36 typed, single-spaced pages, including lists of the collected literature, images, videotapes, and web pages. As he points out, the amount and selection of available pornography and the effort required for accessing it have undergone dramatic transformations with online access—as have his personal archives and practices of porn use. Here we arrive at a second aspect of archives connected to porn use, namely the personal stashes and

collections that people create from that which is available at a given moment, and which they curate, edit, reminisce, and revisit over time.

The contributor's visceral memory of how attempts to acquire porn magazines had entered his dreams is also telling of a third dimension, or aspect, of archives connected to pornography—namely how the uses, experiences, and personal collections of porn contribute to and draw on somatic archives (Paasonen, 2011, 2013) concerning sexuality. The notion of somatic archives is descriptive of how encounters with sexual acts and scenarios—be these lived, represented, or imagined—accumulate, actualize, and resonate as embodied memories and sensations. Layered somatic archives form patterns of carnal knowledge that are both highly personal and culturally shared and that orient ways of encountering bodies, media technologies, scenarios, and fantasies in the present and the future. (E.g. Sobchack, 2004; Narvaez, 2006.) Considering memories of porn use through the notion of somatic archives helps to understand and explore the role that pornography—as well as the transformations in media technology connected to it—play in everyday practices of living and imagining sex and sexuality.

In what follows, we explore these three frames connected to pornography and the archive: 1) *the memory work archive* which we conceptualize as an archive of feelings (Cvetkovich, 2003) that contributes to a contextual understanding of sexuality in connection with the uses of pornography; 2) *personal porn archives* as both collections of material and as personalized navigational strategies within pre-existing archives, and 3) *somatic archives* which allow for analysis of how engagements with porn gather affective charge and contribute to forms of sexual knowledge. By doing so, this article

develops theoretical and methodological understandings of the archive in the context of porn use, following up on Tim Dean's (2014: 1–3) suggestion that porn challenges traditional notions of the archive, while there is no pornography without archives. Drawing on queer theoretical writing that emphasizes openings, resonances, and ephemeral traces over fixed, closed, and safely stored archives (e.g. Muñoz, 1996; Cvetkovich, 2003; Przybylo and Cooper, 2014), we investigate the interconnections between memory work archives (as created through research), personal porn archives (as created by users/collectors), and somatic archives as the embodied accumulation of sensation with the aim of examining the importance and power of pornography in everyday life, cultural memory, and sexual life histories. As such, this article contributes to the still partly emergent field of porn studies which has called for more qualitative empirical research and experiential knowledge production on porn use (e.g. Smith, Attwood and Barker, 2011; McKee, Albury and Lumby, 2008), and to cultural studies of media, memory, and sexuality (e.g. Kuhn, 2002; Cvetkovich, 2003).

Personal practices and experiences of porn use, acquisition, and storage, as well as the ways in which they become embedded in the body, remain inaccessible for cultural investigation without empirical inquiry, such as the memory work project that this article builds on (Paasonen, Kyrölä, Nikunen, and Saarenmaa, 2015). We further suggest that while empirical inquiry facilitates alternative ways of thinking about archives and knowledge in the context of porn, a similar three-fold understanding of archives may also be useful in making sense of people's engagements with other cultural materials, events, or practices—especially ones that are considered intimate, personal, sensitive, subcultural, minoritarian, or otherwise mutable, hidden, or transient.

The memory work material that this article draws on was collected for the research project *Remembering sexual imageries: Pornography, memory-work and Finnish media history* (abbreviated REXI), lead by Susanna Paasonen, in collaboration with the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literary Society (FLS). FLS is a national public organization specializing in the collection of literary, oral history, and memory material. The call for contributions, open from April to October 2012, asked people to write about how they define porn; how they had experienced porn in different stages of life; where and how they had encountered, acquired, discussed, and stored porn; and how it may have affected their views of gender, body ideals, or sexual preferences, among other things. One of our specific sub-areas of focus inquired after memories of acquiring, sharing, and collecting porn, and this is also where the key focus of this article lies.

The call for contributions produced fewer submissions than we had initially hoped, 45 in total. While this material affords no possibility for generalization, it does offer plenteous accounts of experiences of and preferences related to porn over several decades, and reflections on its overall changing cultural and personal significance. The method of collecting written reminiscences enabled the contributors to quite freely decide what to write about, how, and in what detail.<sup>1</sup> Out of all contributions, 14 (31.11 %) were self-identified women, 31 (68.89 %) men,<sup>2</sup> a gender division similar to that of larger scale porn surveys (e.g. Smith, Attwood, and Barker, 2011). The REXI contributors were born between the 1920s and 1990s; they represented diverse educational and professional backgrounds, and identified as heterosexual, gay, bisexual,

sexually ambivalent, and undefined, even if these identifications did not necessarily correspond to their preferences in porn consumption.

### **Archives of memory, archives of feeling**

*When I was younger, little things were enough to get me excited. A single torn page of a porn magazine, wet from the rain, could be a treasure I'd keep for a long while. But the longer I collected, the more carefully I selected what stuff is merely worthless junk and what counts as documents of almost cultural historical significance. (male, n.d.)*

*I visited ... a cousin, and when the parents were away, she laughingly introduced me to her father's porn video collection. There were only a couple of films, and they were placed on a bookshelf behind a money collection. Children weren't allowed to touch either of these, so of course that cabinet was especially carefully raided when the parents weren't there. ... Well, they also had The Hite Report on masturbation, I remember reading it with utmost interest and being relieved that okay, we're actually talking about a perfectly normal phenomenon. (female, born 1973)*

Memory work and the partial, anecdotal, and experiential archives that it comprises can be a means of bringing forth unheard and silenced perspectives into media historiographical investigation. Indeed, the consumption of and experiences with

pornography in the past have been particularly difficult to examine, as references are often scattered over various private and public collections, forcing scholars to become ‘archival magpies’ (Bull, 2014; also Mercer, 2014). Contributing to the difficulty of access, public discourses on pornography are fraught with concerns over its harmful and distorting effects on the gendered dynamics connected to sexual practices, body images, and general attitudes. Much of this ‘truth archive’ (cf. Przybylo and Cooper, 2014: 299) on porn’s effects has been produced through psychological and statistical research where porn—and media imagery more generally—is seen as exterior and foreign to viewers’ ‘natural’ sexuality; as something they are ‘exposed’ to (Barker, 2014: 143–144; McNair, 2014: 163; McKee, 2014: 57–58). Recollections, such as those cited above, where women and men fondly describe how they searched for, found, and treasured pornography during childhood and adolescence provide alternative insights into the roles and meanings that pornography has played in the production of sexualities throughout the respondents’ lives.

Following Ann Cvetkovich, memory work on pornography can be understood as *an archive of feelings*. For Cvetkovich (2003: 244), ‘[t]he archive of feelings is both material and immaterial, at once incorporating objects that might not ordinarily be considered archival, and at the same time, resisting documentation because sex and feelings are too personal or ephemeral to leave records.’ Cvetkovich’s work is connected to creating and preserving lesbian, gay, and queer memory within historiography that regularly bypasses or erases such voices. While the issue of porn consumption is not political in the same sense—after all, porn users hardly form a marginal or subaltern group whose history requires documentation in order to facilitate

and affirm their future—an archive of porn memory can be seen as an archive of feelings that renders perceptible ephemeral, culturally devalued, and often hidden attachments, intensities, and practices (cf. Dean, 2014: 9–11, 13). Much like Cvetkovich’s queer archives, porn memory work material entails intimate experiences, feelings, moments, acts, and objects that might otherwise be easily lost.

All in all, the archive of porn memory work conveys a great deal of affective intensity in accounts of the role that pornography has played in sexual and life histories. We suggest that such reminiscences need not be explicitly queer in a non-heterosexual sense in order to be productively conceptualized as an archive of feelings. Rather, understanding memory work material as an archive of feelings invests its ephemerality, affectivity, and trajectory of possibility (cf. Muñoz, 1996: 6) with a queer significance resistant to sexual normativity.

*Videotapes were also in use during the military service. We used to watch them during weekends when the superiors weren't around or they were on duty. ... There was a room with a table and the lowest drawer of the table had a pile of porn magazines. You could jerk off while browsing through them without taking off the fatigue pants since they only had pocket holes but no pockets as such. Who knows if they were especially made for that purpose. ... They knew what we did in there.*

*When I was around twenty I watched some porn videos and magazines with gay guys who were happy to treat a young man to some alcohol and*

*get him aroused and have him jerk off by showing him porn movies. (male, born 1973)*

This straight-identifying contributor fondly remembers his experiences of homosocial porn watching and sharing during military service, and willingly tells of masturbating to porn with gay men. He never actually mentions the content of any of the porn consumed while the contexts of porn use that he describes certainly blur any easy boundaries between heterosexuality, homosexuality, and homosociality. As Dean (2014: 13) notes, porn ‘enables ostensibly straight men to come together in ways that don’t always reinforce heteronormativity.’ It is in fact noteworthy that most REXI respondents—few of whom self-identified as queer—addressed pornographic and sexual experiences that could be called queer in the sense of being resistant to normative heterosexuality (e.g. Warner, 1993: xxvi), whether they were incidental, accidental, or purposeful. For example, the reminiscences of sharing porn, being aroused by it, and masturbating to it together with others call into question the rigid boundaries of normative heterosexuality as well as any straightforward linkage between sexual identity and capacity to enjoy wide-ranging sexual pleasures in solitude or socially.

*In the half empty wardrobe of my aunt’s former room I discovered a few old Regina magazines which I browsed with interest since at least one of the covers featured a half-naked woman... That if anything was soft porn but quite sufficient jerk-off material for a tween. I still remember how the first story went, I even remember direct quotes.*

*... momentarily I found an arena in queer porn that featured my kind of sex. But the first attraction pretty soon passed and I went back to the porn I'd watched earlier, which is pretty ordinary straight porn. Queer porn feels somehow more laborious, and therefore it's difficult to use as casually as ordinary porn. And apparently ease and casualness of watching are central to what suits jerking off.* (female, n.d.)

This contributor's memories of her early accidental porn encounters are still precise and vivid, even if the materials themselves are long gone. She reflects on how her preferences for porn later changed from straight to queer and back due to the amount of effort she felt that queer porn required, and on how her preferences for sexual practices with partners did not necessarily coincide with her tastes in porn. Like the excerpt cited above, this account highlights the blurring of the queer–straight binary both in terms of the porn accessed and in terms of what the contributors consider as most worth telling and sharing as parts of the memory work archive.

Memory work material can be seen as forming archives of ephemera whose function is first and foremost performative in the sense that they do not contain things inasmuch as do them (cf. Muñoz, 1996: 6–7). José Esteban Muñoz's (1996) notion of ephemera as evidence is highly useful here. He bases his discussion on queer performance art—on the power of acts to function as evidence of queer lives and possibilities, despite their resistance to documentation and traditional archival practices. Looking at ephemeral acts as evidence implies 'following traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things' (Muñoz, 1996: 10) of the kind that can also be seen as characteristic to the method of

memory work (e.g. Haug, 1992; Kuhn, 2002, 2010). Such glimmers, like those outlined in the quotes above, can bear powerful evidence to the unpredictable trajectories of sexual preferences, experiences, and desires.

Empirical research on the personal uses of pornography—much like research on media consumption and fandom more generally—is necessarily shaped by the contributors’ will and ability to narrate their experiences, and a range of perspectives is bound to be left out (cf. McKee, Albury, and Lumby, 2008).<sup>3</sup> As we had little control over who chose to account for their experiences and how—and since our questions were posed as mere suggestions—REXI’s focus lies on how memories of porn use are performed in the contributions sent to us. Following Annette Kuhn (2010: 299), we are interested in how these personal recollections ‘may embody, express, work through, and even unpick, interconnections between the private, the public, and the personal.’ As a method, memory work challenges views of scholarly research as producing transparent windows to authentic experience: instead, it examines how memories are staged and what meanings this involves (Kuhn, 2010: 303). Accordingly, we see the REXI material as stagings of memory that open up routes for interrogating the role and meaning of pornography on both personal and collective levels.

Overall, REXI contributors were quite willing to reminisce about encounters and experiences with porn that challenge sexual normativity particularly in connection with age and sexual orientation: it is interesting and significant that such stagings of memory were not only possible but recurring throughout the contributions we received. In particular, the respondents repeatedly recounted their childhood and teen encounters

with porn with nostalgic tenderness and wry amusement (see also Paasonen, Kyrölä, Nikunen, and Saarenmaa, 2015). The process of writing and staging one's memories involved both affective and temporal investment. Some contributors carefully reflected on every question in the call for submissions, generating rich autobiographical accounts. A few contributions, on the other hand, were easily definable as pornographic in themselves, detailing the (straight male identifying) respondents' real or imagined sexual adventures. Although not answering any questions we asked, they too testify to the affective charge of staging memories about porn. As a specific archive of feelings, the REXI material thus provides insights not only on the memories of porn use but equally on the practices of and investments involved in reminiscing about sex, sexuality, and bodily engagement.

### **Dynamics of secrecy and availability: archives, collections, and stashes**

*When I started ordering porn films through the mail my porn archives began to grow. ... I stored them under the floorboards in the attic of my house. At some point it occurred to me that what if I die and future generations will find the materials I've collected. Then I trimmed down the volume so that it fit in a couple of cardboard boxes and put them on the top shelf of the wardrobe behind other stuff. ... The next storage place was a box under the bed where I stored my porn materials under clothing. My wife never liked this box. I'd bought it especially for storing porn, not clothes. It included films, magazines, and toys. ... About a month ago I made an inventory of my porn equipment once again and cut down the*

*volume so much that it fits in my personal cabinet by the bed. It only includes VHS tapes, Jenny Everleigh's book series, one Private magazine, and an artificial vagina. And a couple of tubes of lube. (male, n.d.)*

An archive is usually understood as an organized collection of documents and data that is selected, preserved, and rendered accessible for posterity and that aims to overcome the passing of time (cf. Derrida, 1996). A collection can signify a more disorganized, random, and temporary accumulation of documents or objects selected on the basis of personal preference or what has been available for acquisition. A collection can be a part of an archive or become an archive of its own. Both archives and collections—be they private or public—necessitate practices of selection and curating, classification, and organization (Stewart, 1993: 151). The physical products and objects reminisced in the memory work material are often not considered worth safekeeping. As in the excerpt cited above, the idea of future generations finding such collections may in fact inspire the collector to hide them even more carefully, or to partially destroy them.

Most of the pornographic objects that REXI contributors used and kept were addressed as *stashes*. Sometimes a stash was carefully maintained, kept safe and hidden in a specific place, other times it involved a half-accidental assemblage of fragments: in both cases, the physical pornographic objects remain inaccessible for our analysis. They only become archives or parts of archives in the more traditional sense through the memory work narratives. The stashes are likely to remain accessible to future generations *only* as an archive of feelings and memories, similar to the ‘traces’, ‘glimmers,’ and ‘residues’ that Muñoz (1996: 10) addresses<sup>4</sup>—otherwise they would simply vanish from view, or

be thrown out. Pornography is generally excluded from archival practices and documentation that govern forms of historical memory and knowledge (Dean, 2014: 3–4; Steedman, 2002: 2), and its cultural value is often perceived as being next to none. The porn materials included in personal collections had often been trash in a literal sense: many contributors detail searching for and finding porn magazines in recycling bins, trash bins, and dumps.

*For a little boy, discoveries were really discoveries—but back then it was relatively easy to find ... [magazines] in paper bins or discarded in the woods. Later I discovered my father’s small VHS collection by accident really, which enabled seeing hours of material in secret. In high school it was already possible to buy magazines at a kiosk and sometimes also to visit sex shops when in a larger city. ... These days there is really no sense to even visit (Finnish) sex shops since they offer such basic bulk. The time has passed when interesting magazines, old vintage stuff, and such could be found on dusty shelves. (male, n.d.)*

The contributor self-identifies as collector, connoisseur, and pornographer focused on vintage and fetish imagery. He specializes in the works of certain publishers and periods—as he puts it, “‘collections’ which means that I don’t merely buy some random material to jerk off to.’ He explores the nuances of curatorial practices involved in building a large personal porn collection, and motivates his porn accumulation with aesthetic and historical concerns rather than masturbatory titillation. These curatorial criteria are further connected to the degree of privacy warranted to the collections:

*I haven't hidden my collections or seen it necessary and, on the other hand, when collections are so vast that we're talking about roomfuls of stuff as well as art in the form of pornographic paintings, it's no longer of the scale that could be hidden in some box in the attic. (male, n.d., same as above)*

The collector's narrative points to the complex dynamics of secrecy and sharing connected to pornography as well as to the importance of context in drawing lines between archives, collections, and stashes, since what once was trash can later become a vintage collectible. As Susan Stewart points out, stories of collecting are narratives of discovery and accumulation over time. When incorporated into a collection, the objects are detached from their other, more mundane uses. In other words, their use value becomes aestheticized. (Stewart, 1993: 151, 165.) In contrast, with exceptions such as the connoisseur-collector cited above, REXI contributors describe their personal porn collections as resulting from far more random accumulation. The value of their stashes is markedly that of use value. The connoisseur-collector's collection practices bear indeed little similarity to those of the contributor cited in the beginning of this section who stored and hid only a few pornographic objects, an artificial vagina, and some lubricant in his personal stash. Differences between 'the collector and the ragpicker' remain (Dean, 2014: 13). Distinctions between a stash and a collection concern not only volume but acquisition, editing, and storage practices. Such practices afford value and purpose to accumulation even more than the content of that which is accumulated (cf. Mercer, 2014).

REXI contributors mostly recall compiling their personal porn stashes from whatever was available: the stashes' significance derives from their use value in a particular space and time. Overall, the respondents recount the intensities of discovery and secrecy connected to porn stashes in detail, and as pleasurable acts in their own right. The practices of possessing and curating personal porn collections can therefore be seen as driven by passions that exceed the sexual titillation involved in the pornographic objects themselves (cf. Gamwell, 1996: 2). At the same time, stashes are transitory in ways that conflict with conservation drive, archive desire, or 'fever' connected to preserving the collections against forgetfulness and temporal finitude (Derrida, 1996: 19; Steedman, 2002: 1–2). Most of the personal porn collections accounted for in the memory work material lack a sense of futurity as well as that of publicness: quite the contrary, practices of hiding and secrecy are central to their appeal as stashes.

While the connoisseur porn collector mourns over specialized porn supplies dying out and mass-produced bulk taking over the shelves of sex shops, the REXI material overall speaks of a transition from a so-called age of scarcity to an age of plenty (Ellis, 2000; Paasonen, Kyrölä, Nikunen, and Saarenmaa, 2015) in the availability of pornography. This transition involves a shift towards digital distribution and transformation in ways of collecting and using pornography. At the same time, the increased availability of porn seems *not* to have amped up the affective intensities involved in searching for and storing it. Some contributors even implied that porn was more titillating when it required more effort to access and hide—when it had more of the scent of forbidden fruit.

While peer sharing was described as a common way of gaining access to porn during the age of scarcity, especially among adolescents, sharing had also occurred occasionally and accidentally, as in accounts of discovering porn stashes in the woods, in paper recycling bins, or hidden somewhere inside the house. Especially in the memories of contributors born in the early 1980s and before, both the discovery and accumulation of porn stashes was fondly remembered and colorfully described.

*We also discovered [my friend's] father's porn stash (which was relatively easy to find, i.e. not much of a stash at all) which we consumed in secret for several years. I also collected movies already back then so hiding porn tapes in my immense collection at home wasn't all that hard—my closets were full of movies recorded from my friend's TV channels on exactly identical tapes so it would've been nearly impossible for my parents to find them without going through all of them. [... M]y father ... got caught watching a tape he discovered in my closet. He's still embarrassed about it, and my indifferent attitude about it at the time was probably one of the first occasions when the power relation between my father and I got somehow turned upside down. (male, born 1975)*

*My porn consumption moved from catalogues to a whole new context after I found my father's stash of men's magazines and videotapes. ... The videotapes ... fully enthralled me. ... The slowly proceeding exploration of the stash was exciting business and it would continue first more intensively*

*and later more casually for as long as I lived with my parents. I remember especially vividly how one had to carefully remember the place of the video tape in the stash, and which way the tapes were facing in their boxes when pulling them out, and how one had to rewind the tape to exactly the same spot where it had been before I took a peak. (male, born 1983)*

In the former quote, the personal porn stash of a friend's father is secretly shared between minors while the personal stash of a son is also secretly—at least momentarily—shared by the father. In the latter excerpt, the contributor shares his father's porn stash in secret, and the practices around secrecy gain a special affective charge. Many respondents detailed the nervous, exciting, and often indiscriminating practices of acquiring films, searching for porn in the trash, trying to find pornographic scenes in library books, and buying porn magazines at kiosks with trembling hands when still underage. In these recollections, accessing porn is described as laborious and memorable—if not necessarily in terms of content, then at least in terms of context and affect. The contributors recall the sensuous intensities of feeling connected to porn acquisition and storage even after several decades have passed.

Much of this intensity is tied to secrecy: the titillation of forbidden access, of hiding traces of one's activities, and discovering the hidden acts of others. Such affective dynamics are key to the notion of a stash and help to separate it from an archive as that which involves the preservation, organization, and accessibility of the materials archived. A stash is rather characterized by the dual push and pull of preservation and secrecy.

*When living at home, I printed out some A4 size large pictures of men and after looking at them for some time, I tore them to tiny shreds and hid them in the recycling bin between heavy newspapers and advertisements. I went through a lot of effort ... not get caught. Some pictures and drawings of my own I hid on my shelves, in the bottom of boxes, and in the drawer of my bedside table. (male, born 1986)*

For this contributor, the reasons for the considerable trouble put into hiding and destroying his porn may have had to do with his homosexuality and the fear of getting ‘outed.’ However, like many other authors, he also hid porn in order to safeguard it. While contributors mainly detached their memories of porn use and collecting from a sense of shame, it was nevertheless present as the potentiality of exposure (cf. Ahmed, 2004: 104). Shame and embarrassment were connected to potential or actual moments of being found out and one’s secret acts being revealed—as in the anecdote of the father being caught watching his son’s tapes. This potentiality or risk animates the impulse of hiding or destroying porn stashes, while also being elementary to the appeal and excitement connected to the uses pornography (cf. Paasonen, 2011; Kipnis, 1999). Practices of hiding are therefore not merely a matter of cultural norms concerning sexuality and the fear of social punishment, but also tactile, affect-intensifying routines that further contribute to the sensuous pleasures of collecting porn.

With online access and the gradual transition to the so-called age of plenty, earlier practices of acquiring porn by physically ‘getting one’s hands on it’ lost their appeal for

many contributors, even while these remained their favorite moments to reminisce. It is important to note that practices of collecting have since undergone drastic transformations: for many authors, the current abundance of freely available and endlessly varied online porn seems to have rendered the older stashes of paper, magnetic tape, and disks mostly obsolete. There is little fear of losing access to porn altogether, and good reason to trust finding one's favorite materials online at will.

Physical, personal porn collections have given way to navigating online porn archives, and finding, bookmarking, and downloading the materials that arouse the user's interest. Massive, horizontal video sharing sites modeled after YouTube (e.g. PornTube, YouPorn, RedTube, PornHub, Xhamster) can be seen as heterogeneous audiovisual archives that accumulate unpredictably yet steadily through the efforts of collective curators (e.g. Gehl, 2009). The skill of maneuvering these can be seen as an issue of sexual media literacy. At the same time, online porn distribution facilitates the creation of personal collections and archives of a scale unimaginable a few decades ago—as was the case with the male contributor (born 1970) quoted in the very beginning of this article. At the time of writing, he had gotten rid of his porn magazines, yet owned some books and VHS tapes. In addition, he had downloaded some 300 gigabytes and 4000 files of videos to his personal archive, as well as 500 megabytes of erotic stories, 130 gigabytes of images and websites, and approximately 3 million porn-related files. The contributor also detailed his specific strategies of navigating, bookmarking, downloading, curating, and recombining online material.

*When I search for porn with a Google image search I compare hits by bringing the cursor on the image in order to see more information such as the URL. From the URL I can see if the page is worth visiting. And if I search for a topic that I know to involve lots of amateur pages, I first google some and go through their link pages and then again the links of the link pages of their link pages and continue this until there are no new interesting pages on the link page. (male, born 1970)*

The contributor is both a collector and a curator who carefully selects and organizes his preferred materials, revamps and edits them. Other collectors may possibly share them online through tags, recommendations, and links, by generating animated GIFs, or by uploading selected content onto blog platforms. Physical porn collections—forest stashes, hidden boxes, memory sticks, hard drives, and openly displayed collections—and those accumulated through action such navigational and curatorial practices, are equally subject to constant and radical change and editing over time. It is noteworthy that most REXI contributors did not mourn over the loss of particular objects in their collections, even if they fondly remembered them in great detail, and even if many mourned over the loss of exciting porn acquisition routines and the thrills of discovery connected to them. Old magazines and tapes were rarely kept for sentimental reasons only—and if they were, they were not frequently accessed.

### **Somatic archives: porn use as layering sexual repertoire**

REXI respondents were often able to recall specific images and text excerpts even when these had been encountered only in passing, or had been parted with some decades ago. In these instances, images and texts can be understood as having become part and parcel of the respondents' somatic archives, consisting of layered recollections and animated by affective intensity (Paasonen, 2011: 202–205; 2013: 360, 364). Bodies are shaped by historically acquired and accumulated skills, experiences, and sensations that orient ways of relating to other bodies, sexual acts, and images (Sobchack, 2004: 58–61; also Ahmed, 2004). Encounters with people, places, and imageries layer as somatic archives and generate sensations of arousal, excitement, shame, and disgust alike. This carnal knowledge facilitates sensing and making sense of the world through corporeal histories. Somatic archives are both retrospective, involving that which one has previously encountered (specific bodies, scents, tastes, textures, acts, rhythms, camera angles, framings, and sounds), and prospective in the sense of orienting, opening up, and closing down bodies vis-à-vis future possibilities (cf. Narvaez, 2006: 52). Encounters with pornography therefore become incorporated as carnal capacity—as that which we can imagine our bodies enjoying and being capable of, or not enjoying and being capable of. This incorporation can occur when a single image, sound, or sensation makes a lasting impression, whether expectedly or unpredictably, or it can happen through repetition, as we seek out and return to particular types of gestures, acts, or bodies that gradually form patterns of preference. In both instances, somatic archives are dynamic and perpetually on the move.

Even though it is impossible to examine precisely how porn contributes to embodied patterns of pleasure, dislike, and preference, it remains possible to analyze how people

articulate such relations. In particular, REXI respondents considered the practically limitless online archives as resources for expanding, diversifying, and experimenting with their understanding of what sexual desire, desirability, and embodiment may mean—in other words, for expanding their somatic archives. This resonates further with our earlier discussion of how archives of porn use memories can gain queer significance as an archive of feelings. However, whereas our earlier point concerned how porn use *practices* queer the memory work archive, here we want to focus on how the contributors saw the *content* of the porn as affecting them on a personal level and becoming part of their sexual know-how or repertoire. If queer is understood as proliferating desire and opening novel possibilities and connections—without these possibilities being automatically ‘positive’ or liberatory (cf. Butler, 1993: 226–228)—then experiences with a range of pornography involve a potential queering in terms of the respondents’ somatic archives.

*I was already a teenager, and the magazines interested me much more [than as a child]. Now we looked at them in complete silence without giggling, probably in the hopes of learning something. It was the 80s, and I especially remember my friend’s older sister’s Regina magazines and their soft core short stories ... Porn has influenced my notions of sex but it has also proved wrong the teen girl fallacy that porn alone is real sex. My personal fantasies which usually include two or three men in addition to myself have also developed through porn movies and Regina’s soft-core. ... And gradually I have started to feel that it’s possible to add the element*

*of porn into a romantic relationship—as the icing on the cake, so to speak—once the time is right for my partner. (female, born 1975)*

This contributor recounts her somatic archives as building up and layering to their current state from early experiences of soft-core to later sexual experimentation and encounters with hardcore film. She fondly recalls some images in detail from her teenage years, and sees porn both as a resource for personal fantasy and as the potential ‘icing on the cake’ in a relationship. These connections between past encounters, current preferences, and future potentiality are not simple or direct: what registers in somatic archives is ‘a feeling, an instance, a trace, a resonance’ tangled in ‘the personal archive we carry’ (Przybylo and Cooper, 2014: 298).

Linda Williams (1999: 262–3) has suggested that pornography, and especially its private uses detached from a sense of being observed or judged, can facilitate female sexual self-discovery and exploration. In the REXI material, both women and men, identifying as heterosexual, bisexual and homosexual alike, make a similar point. While many describe their experiences of navigating online porn archives and organizing their personal collections according to specific preferences, almost all respondents, regardless of age, gender, or sexual orientation, had encountered diverse kinds of pornography featuring a notable range of acts and bodies.

*I have seen all kinds of porn. Sado-masochist, young-old, basic USA, amateur porn, hentai, Asian lesbian porn, etc. (male, born 1986)*

*I've come across all kinds of stuff. Pure in-and-out films are quite boring, also I don't care for these weird different kinds of rubber, bondage, gay, foot fetish, and those kinds of films. Films should have a plot and at least some sorts of characters. (male, born 1955)*

*I'm okay with watching almost any kind of porn, but what I find most interesting is the kind of porn that includes themes that interest me in fiction in general: sci-fi, machines, fantasies, and people or other creatures who are not either men or women. (unidentified gender, born 1994)*

*I feel like I've seen all kinds of bodies and body parts [in porn]. These days I can appreciate female bodies of all looks and sizes.... I've noticed that I like some specialties (teenagers, fat, ladyboys, amateurs, anal, panties etc.) but I'm not fixated on any one kind of porn. It's probably because of the way so many websites work. Subgenres and preferences are very specifically separated, that of course gets you hooked and deepens the experience. (male, born 1982)*

The body constantly learns and becomes surprised as its sensations, palates, and tastes alter: a sexual act once experienced as titillating may, for example, later turn one cold or even nauseated, and vice versa, depending on the layered embodied experiences and new associations created (cf. Thrift, 2008: 2). Sexual tastes change and evolve in accordance to what is available and accessible, as well as in connection with personal

and living situations, experiences, routines, and a desire for variation. Somatic archives are therefore not mere reservoirs of extra-cognitive sensation but also knowingly curated, reflected upon, and reworked: they are simultaneously material and semiotic, intimate and culturally specific, affective and open to representation. Encounters with porn contribute to contingent somatic archives. These archives in return orient ways of experiencing pornography, embodiment, and sexuality. In the REXI material, some respondents reported rather stable, so-called mainstream preferences ('in women I like blonds, in men the most important thing is large enough "equipment"' [woman born 1989]) despite having had access to lots of variation, but many others saw porn as having taught them to think of sex and bodily variation and capacity more broadly. In other words, while porn encounters did not necessarily alter one's preferences, they did transform personal somatic archives as the repertoire of what is imaginable and desirable, and how one's body might react to these broadening realms of possibility.

### **Possibilities of 'impossible' archives**

Now included in the FLS Folklore Archive, REXI memory material is a small collection of texts addressing everyday encounters with and experiences of pornography, as narrated by Finns of different ages in the early 2010s. The material broadens the existing scope of the Folklore Archive and facilitates insights—no matter how specific and limited—to personal practices of using, collecting, and living with pornography. As an archive of feelings, the memory work essays render personal practices, views, and associations connected to pornography perceptible and available to future analysis. What emerges from the archive is a complex field of associations connected to porn,

everyday life, sexuality, and normativity that affords for knowledge production in terms of the role that pornography has played in the lives of Finns, and how the transformations in the availability and the cultural status of pornography have been perceived.

The fragments remembered as torn pages of porn magazines wet from the rain, erotic stories that once commanded silent attention, or VHS tapes discovered and stashed away in closets, could simply be seen as personal archives. As we have suggested, they may however be more productively conceptualized as contingent collections and hidden stashes with instrumental use value, given that their accumulation is mainly not driven by an archival impulse to indefinitely safeguard and preserve. These stashes become integrated into REXI's archive of feelings as narratives while being materially inaccessible and often already discarded. Recurring accounts of hiding and discovery speak of the centrality of secrecy, and the scent of the forbidden fruit, in the uses of pornography. These memories may attain considerable affective charge long after the actual stashes themselves have disappeared. Personal stashes or collections may in fact be 'impossible archives' in the sense of remaining hidden, being easily erased, and not being intended for sharing. With the shift towards online porn consumption, physical stashes have largely disappeared while the forms of and the need for secrecy have similarly undergone drastic transformations.

This shift from material to immaterial, or at least digital, collections can also be understood as a shift from curating and accumulating personal porn stashes (often in cumbersome ways) to navigation practices guided by one's somatic archives. In other

words, rather than collecting that which happens to be available, as was the case during the ‘age of scarcity,’ people search for and download porn online according to that which catches their attention, interests and sexually arouses them. This is a matter of resonance as a dynamic affective relation between the viewing bodies and the acts, bodies, and scenarios depicted on the screen.

Somatic archives are an issue of temporally layered carnal capacity and modes of engaging with both the bodies of pornography and those of other people: they are both based on personal experience and inseparable from cultural representations and social norms (cf. Berlant, 1993: 551–552). In the context of porn, the materiality of the bodies depicted (on the screen or on a page) meet the materiality of media recordings (magazines, tapes, and files saved on external drives) and the materiality of the user’s body. The feedback loops between these bodies generate intensities of feeling that layer and accumulate in somatic archives as personal and cultural knowledge systems concerning embodiment, desire, and sexuality.

Methodologically, memory work narratives—as an archive of feelings—facilitate partial access to personal collections and somatic archives as the two other archival aspects of pornography addressed in this article. The memory work mediates glimmers and residues of vernacular porn culture that media historiography has long failed to account for, hence complicating understandings of pornography’s effects on sexual practices and preferences. Conceptualized in terms of an archive of feelings and somatic archives, memories and experiences of pornography are resonant elements that contribute to the affective fabric of the sexual self.

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<sup>1</sup> For a more extensive discussion on the affordances of memory work as a method in porn research, see Paasonen, Kyrölä, Nikunen, and Saarenmaa (2015).

<sup>2</sup> One contributor had marked themselves as male although in the text referred to themselves as of undefined gender.

<sup>3</sup> However, there is no possibility of studying experiences of people unwilling or unable to reflect on their porn encounters in an ethical way.

<sup>4</sup> While broadly connected to Michel Foucault's (1972: 128–130) conceptualization of the archive as a discursive formation and a system of enunciability that 'emerges in fragments, regions, and levels', these are glimmers and traces of another order that make it possible to examine fleeting experiences and moments easily excluded from cultural memory and systems of knowledge.