

Purging the Queer Archive: Tumblr's Counterhegemonic Pornographies

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Look, we've taken a pretty hard line on freedom of speech, supporting our users' creation, whatever that looks like, and it's just not something that we want to police. (Karp 2013)

the failure of the speech act to do what it says is not a failure of intent or even circumstance, but it is actually what the speech act is doing...the nonperformative does not 'fail to act' because of conditions that are external to the speech act: rather, it 'works' *because* it fails to bring about what it names. (Ahmed 2006, 105; original emphasis)

For queers, a broken promise comes as no surprise. The promises of happiness, liberation, equity under law, and adequate support from the state have all repeatedly fallen short on their word. For those of us attuned to the dissimulative workings of queerphobia in our homonormative–homonationalist age, suspicion towards the statements of institutions is imperative for survival. In this time, when networks of queer community and interpersonal relation are so often digital, the self-effacing hegemony of tech companies, like Tumblr, demands our queer suspicion more than ever.

It is within this digital landscape that the closet comes to be refashioned, its emergent epistemology coded in data and algorithms that are themselves dissimulative. Yet we are no longer in the closet alone, we do not chose to be there; it is our virtual selves, the likes and the virtual connections, that are denied to us and work to undo the archival mapping of 'queer history in the making' (Halberstam 2005, 170). Our relation to the digital and the extensibility of our identities and desires are undone in a moment – 17 December 2018 as it happens. Here, we are reminded of how precarious the immaterial is for queers when we consider the myriad ways in which our social, cultural, and political lives, and through porn our desirous lives, are archived as pleasures and experiences, made meaningful through the interface of self, screen, and sociability. The library is now closed! As Jack Halberstam notes, the queer archive 'is not simply a repository; it is also a theory of cultural relevance, a construction of collective memory, and a complex record of queer activity' (2005, 169– 170).



Tumblr's move to eradicate all porn content through an algorithmic clean-up has hit queer users with moral castigation. Tumblr, we argue, existed as an unofficial digital archive of queer pornographic heterogeneity, curatorial practice, and counterhegemonic pleasures and bodies. The wilful eradication of what Tumblr's algorithm deems porn content (cover yourselves up 'female-presenting nipples'! The algorithm, like Justice Potter Stewart, knows it when it sees it!) has put queer sexuality and expression under digital chastity and thrown away the key.

[p.351] One of the qualities specific to porn on Tumblr was how a user's interface allowed for counterhegemonic taxonomies that unfurled in curated, composite feeds. Pornhub and many other tubesites operate strict divisions between 'gay' and 'straight' porn, consequently rendering a user's access contingent upon a binaristic choice. An obvious limitation evident here is the prerequisite to make a monosexual choice, a demand that precludes the possibility of a non-monosexual, bisexual, or queer approach to porn consumption. The sub-categorization of transgender bodies and bisexual MMF sex within this dichotomy has subsequently been a source of contention, revealing the cissexist and monosexist limitations of these tubesites' gay/straight imperatives. For users interested in viewing porn's multiplicities of genders, assemblages, and acts within one platform, the monosexual choice is an encumbering regulatory apparatus that marshals desire into two distinct, and highly assumptive, categories.

Maria Pramaggiore articulates the capacity of a bisexual epistemological position to 'reframe regimes and regions of desire by deframing and/or reframing in porous, nonexclusive ways' (1996, 3). This bisexual approach of erotic deconstruction or reorganization was made structurally possible by Tumblr's digital architecture, which allowed a spectrum of gendered objects and sex acts to be queerly presented within one abundant feed. Lauren Berlant reminds us that the social order 'teaches you to renounce your desire's excess so that you can be intelligible under the discipline of the norms that make hierarchies of social value seem natural' (2012, 52). Most tubesites codify this renunciation through the regulatory monosexual imperative and their specialized subcategories (BBW, twink, MILF, daddy, etc.). The curated Tumblr queer porn feed offered an alternate modality where the excess of one's desires need neither be tapered nor ordered within hegemonic taxonomies.

It is well established that Tumblr has been home to queer (and feminist) pornographies that dissent from the standards of mainstream porn (Mondin 2017). We would like to suggest two counterhegemonic examples of Tumblr's queer porn reframings: 'small'/ 'average' penis appreciation microblogs and Fuck Yeah! Friendly Fire (FY!FF). Given the preponderance of 'large' penises across many pornographic loci, microblogs including heartsmall, ilikedicklets, and normalsizepenispride reframed the 'small'/'average' – and often flaccid – penis as desirable. bell hooks (1999) describes her personal process of 'letting go my erotic fetishization of the hard penetrating dick, to embrace an eroticization of the penis that was more wholistic...I enjoyed learning how to be sexually aroused by the sight of a non-erect penis'. hooks' articulation of reframing her desire towards the penis in a way that resists patriarchal, phallogocentric, hard-bodied myths is particularly apposite to our consideration of these microblogs. Through her account of learning to be sexually aroused otherwise, hooks addresses, first, the ways in which our desires are constituted by what we consume and, second, the mutability of desire itself. In reframing the 'small'/'average' penis within the locus of desire (rather than comedy or medicine, for example), these Tumblr microblogs recalibrated the symbolic economy of desirable bodies.

The phenomenon 'friendly fire' refers to moments in straight porn in which a man cums on another man, often by accident. FY!FF was a preeminent platform for editing and collating these instances. By isolating these awry ejaculations – the 'collateral damage' straight men 'risk' when engaging in group sex with other men – viewers could find unintended queer pleasures. FY!FF thus engaged in a curatorial–editorial practice that performed a hermeneutic shift, one that gave straight porn queer meaning. FY!FF was [p.352] removed by Tumblr without explanation on 9 April 2018 after six and a half years of operation (Lyon 2018). The pre-'porn ban' deletion of FY!FF forewarned the crackdown that would follow, itself collateral damage in the formulation of the so-called 'better, more positive Tumblr' (D'Onofrio 2018).

The labour involved in organizing and curating Tumblr's queer porn microblogs, which often took place over several years and with daily updates, must also be understood as a type of queer archival practice. This worked in tandem with the counterhegemonic sentiments of the sites mentioned earlier, what Abigail De Kosnik refers to in a feminist context as a 'rogue archive'. She goes on to say:

One of the greatest political potentials of rogue digital archives is that groups that have occupied the margins of 'mainstream' society, and have consequently been largely marginalized by traditional memory institutions, can build their own robust cultural memory sites. (De Kosnik 2016, 135)

The queering of digital media, implicated in the 'archival turn', gestures towards the unofficial, the clandestine, and the rogue, questioning what constitutes an archive and what the function of an archive is when its creators are not, professionally speaking, trained archivists. Equally, bloggers may not think of themselves as creating archives out of their porn practices of threading together images, videos, and gifs which operate as a feed and are chronologically stored via Tumblr's archive widget. Archives are contingent upon politics and power, the lesson we have taken forward from Michel Foucault ([1969] 2002) into the digital age and with which official gay and lesbian archives are routinely implicated vis-à-vis porn. Yet archiving as practised through Tumblr is queered through mutable, multiple, illegitimate, and non-traditional methods of selection and curation. Yoking together content and curatorial practices in queer ways, queer archives' roguishness renders them spaces for experimentation in the sense that Ann Cvetkovich details in *An Archive of Feelings* (2003, 8). Tumblr's queer porn networks were important loci of experimental archiving that resisted the normalizing and regulatory practices of official archives and mainstream porn. Tumblr afforded new ways of articulating and refining queer porn in the truest sense of reifying 'outlaw sensibilities, self-made kinships, chosen lineages, utopic futurity, exilic commitment, and rage at institutions that police the borders of the normal' (Getsy 2016, 12). From those microblogs we have already mentioned to singular porn feeds like proteinmouth (a curated feed of men gorging on other men's cum), queer porn blogs foregrounded desires, bodies, feelings, and passions defined and shaped by communities of queer bloggers, users, masturbators, and rogues. The difficult lesson we have learned from Tumblr's porn purge is that algorithms can be utilized for sex-negative, censorious, and queerphobic protocols. Our precarious digital queer porn exists as data to be purged and swiftly dealt with – a queer *Fahrenheit 451* if you will. Confirming Jacques Derrida's (1995/1996) perspicuity, the archive being a process of simultaneous preservation and destruction, the digital exacerbates and expedites the destruction of our queer porn counterpublics. Equally, Tim Dean has stressed that digital porn is somewhat paradoxical anyway:

...each image encodes precise metadata that enables both unlimited reproduction of the image and forensic tracking of its provenance. However, the production of such images serves a broader tracking function by intensifying surveillance of our bodies and sexualities. (2014, 9)

[p.353] Tumblr's halcyon days of facilitating queer porn as an empowering and validating digital repository of feelings, pleasures, and visibilities has been abruptly expunged. Karp's (2013) assurance that he would support his 'users' creation, whatever it looks like', enabled Tumblr, as illuminated through Sara Ahmed's (2006) analytic of nonperformativity, to do just the opposite. A lesson for us all that, in making public a digital archive of our pornographies and desires, we are subject to an ephemeral, unsafe, and precarious situation that makes our archive not just rogue but also at risk of being abjured and eliminated. The removal of porn from Tumblr with little advanced warning is a tremendous loss for queers already compromised by the global right-wing renaissance. The queer content, the attack on the queer labour of archival porn curation, the wholesale aversion to our sexual publicness, the destruction of virtual communities, the sex workers, artists, and nascent queer teens finding their way in a digital world that otherwise does not address them – 17 December 2018 was testament to the fears that queer visibility can still be intolerable and unintelligible when we choose to vaunt that which makes queers horny.

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This article's version of record can be found here: <https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2019.1623067>.

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