Introduction: bound together

Soon, the written history rejoins—has to rejoin—the insistent, tireless, repetitive beat of a cognitive form that has no end. The written history is a story that can be told only by the implicit understanding that things are not over, that the story isn’t finished, can never be finished, for some new item of information may alter the account that has been given. In this way, history breaks the most ordinary and accepted narrative rule, and in this way also, the written history is not just about time, doesn’t just describe time, or take time as its setting; rather, it embeds time in its narrative structure.

Carolyn Steedman¹

The purpose of history, guided by genealogy, is not to discover the roots of our identity, but to commit itself to its dissipation [...] to make visible all those discontinuities that cross us.

Michel Foucault²

This book considers historic gay and lesbian leather communities by way of two interrelated lines of enquiry; addressing the archives where leather histories and their attendant visual and material objects currently reside, while also examining the projects of contemporary artists who bring leather histories to the fore, making an implicit argument for their potential queer political force in the present.

Leather sexualities and cultures are, at their core, profoundly visual, having developed and transformed an astonishing set of visual signifiers. From the leather (and denim) garments that a leatherperson might wear—vest, pants, harness, cap, gauntlets, boots—to the darkened, yet nevertheless image-heavy, architectural spaces of the leather bar, nearly everything in the embodied performance practices of power exchange so central to leathersex’s sexual expression are designed to visually declare their perverse, affinitive capacities. Historically, leather communities fostered and supported a number of artists, many of whom built artistic careers exclusively making work for other leatherfolks’ eyes, libraries, and dungeons. For example, Dom Orejudos, a prolific leather artist working out of Chicago under the Europeanized pseudonym
Etienne, completed illustrations for leather publications (magazines, novels, catalogs, and newsletters), murals and logographics for leather bars, as well as original drawings and art prints derived from the former. Outside of leather communities his work is not recognized as artistically significant. It is a wonder and a shame that more scholastic attention has not been paid to the prolific visual productions of leather artists like Orejudos. I can only speculate that this is partially or fully the product of a sex-negative culture wherein images, photographs, and films representing sadomasochism and queer sex have been subject to intense and egregious litigation and censorship. Such juridicial overreach (which is by no means limited to the United States, even though this study is) has broadly chilling effects, which can still be felt today from the newsstand to the academy.

This book seeks to change that in some small way by taking cues from contemporary artists who have quarried the archives, art, and visual and material cultures of historic gay and lesbian leather communities. They have been on the frontlines of research, and in my mind are greatly, if not wholly, responsible for the incipient recuperation of historic leather aesthetics we are witnessing today. It is through the work of artists like Dean Sameshima, Monica Majoli, Nayland Blake, Patrick Staff, A. K. Burns and A. L. Steiner, and the artist collective Die Kränken, that leather archives and certain strands of contemporary queer artistic practice are bound up with one another, and that each gives the other meanings that enrich and deepen their respective significance to their own times, communities, and, even, to culture at large.

My line of thought is really an extrapolation of Raymond Williams’s observation that each generation constitutes and is constituted by its own structure of feeling forged in relation to a selective tradition of cultural touchstones. Such affinitive relationships—Williams imagines them as lines—are never simply arbitrary, but inform the emergence and resultant interpretations of contemporary culture. About this process he writes,

In the analysis of contemporary culture, the existing state of the selective tradition is of vital importance, for it is often true that some change in this tradition—establishing new lines with the past, breaking or re-drawing existing lines—is a radical kind of contemporary change. We tend to underestimate the extent to which the cultural tradition is not only a selection but also an interpretation.

I make this argument at a moment when gay and lesbian leather aesthetics are being absorbed, often uncritically, into contemporary visual and popular culture. In 2015, for example, the pop singer Taylor Swift was photographed sporting a gray leather harness while out shopping with fellow celebrity singer Selena Gomez in Los Angeles. Such tabloid gossip is, on the surface, unremarkable in its quotidianness—a famous person went shopping with another
famous person. Yet the coverage of the event didn’t neglect to point out that the harness that Swift wore was produced by the American clothing brand Free People (the irony should escape no one), signaling that someone (or a group of someones) in some room decided that a leather harness would be an ideal fashion accessory for a young, bohemian fashion consumer. Leatherwear has, in other words, already been successfully commodified within a non-leather consumer market that trades, in large part, on the social and cultural capital of young people. One tabloid covering Swift’s fashion choice was predictably alarmist in its headline: “I’m Ready to Get Extreme!” Taylor Swift Explains Her Bizarre Harness Accessory as Fans Question Her Fashion Choice.”

The authors of the story cycle between astonished and consultative tones, noting that if emulators wish to follow in the fashion footsteps of Swift, that they do so only with some caution, as the ‘trend’ of wearing harnesses ‘can easily swerve into dominatrix territory.’ Implicitly positioning leatherwear as signifying sex work, which the authors believe should be avoided, is, I would argue, a common and uncritical elision (not to mention moral valuation) regarding leather aesthetics and sex work. As in many other instances where the sexually explicit comes into contact with the machinations of capitalism, the coverage of Swift’s harness toggles between titillation and revulsion. Still, the harness is not without its charms—the author continues: ‘While these leather harness [sic] serve no real function, they do manage to toughen up what would be a rather boring look.”

This example of leatherwear appearing on the radar of pop-celebrity culture is not singular, and it points to the wide semiotic chasm separating the supposedly non-functional ‘fashion choice,’ and the garment that signals an overt and deep affinity with a particular culture (here leather communities). Indeed, the column misappropriates the garment as being intrinsic to sex work (the dominatrix), rather than leather communities and their visual and material cultures. Implicit in this bit of tabloid gossip is the fact that the authors’ anxious frettings wouldn’t be necessary if they didn’t believe, on some level, that this gap was not yet wide enough.

Roy Martinez’s *Sup Foo? #3* (2018) (figure 1.1) serves as a correlative and, in some ways, corrective to the glib mainstream flirtation with the visual and material cultures of gay and lesbian leather communities—of which fashion is only one component. Martinez, who also sometimes exhibits and sells clothing under the pseudonym Lambe Culo (literally ‘lick-ass’ in Spanish), offered the work for $150 on their website, where it was positioned promiscuously between the discourses of fashion and fine art in its description as a ‘numbered and signed’ shoulder harness. The pricepoint is equally evocative in its ambiguity, as the item is not much more than what a leather shoulder harness would otherwise cost in a leather shop, and not much less than an artist’s multiple at a museum bookstore or gallery. Importantly, *Sup Foo? #3*
is not made of leather, but cloth belting and plaque buckles riveted together. Martinez’s two buckles are incised with the letters L and C (for Lambe Culo, no doubt) in the modernized Blackletter typeface colloquially known as ‘Old English.’ Akin to Swift’s Free People folly, Martinez specifies on their website that the garment is ‘not recommended for play,’ perhaps due in large part to the structural fragility of the plaque buckles (unlike their more common, tongued counterparts in leatherwear). Whatever the reason, Martinez nonetheless collapses the current appeal of contemporary leather aesthetics to a middle-class, white fashion consumer and the hallmarks of cholo fashion, a subcultural and politicized mode of dress that delineates, among other things,
a refusal to look and act like the ideal participant in white neoliberal capitalism.\textsuperscript{10} The work, via its title, greets its viewer with culturally specific terms of endearment, and likewise proposes a cholo revision of the ur-material of kink: leather. At the same time it complicates what the artist identifies as the ‘cis[-gender] heterosexual cholo subculture’ as one in need of revision and a more inclusive reclamation for queer and gender non-binary people.\textsuperscript{11} Picking up on Gayle Rubin’s insight that ‘fetishism raises all sorts of issues concerning shifts in the manufacture of objects, the historical and social specificities of control and skin and social etiquette, or ambiguously experienced body invasions and minutely graduated hierarchies,’ Martinez refashions sadomasochism’s reliance on leather as a primary material signifier of sexual power exchange.\textsuperscript{12} Identity and its politics of contingency are central to any reasonable interpretation of this sculpture, which is cleverly photographed by Martinez in a state of suspension between strength and precarity, hanging from a rugged chain, which in turn is delicately pinned to the wall with a clear thumbtack. \textit{Sup Foo? #3} conjures a kinky brown body—perhaps the artist’s own, but also perhaps a more phantasmic one—and perversely plays with branding, adjustment, accommodation, and a history of racialized dress. In fashioning a particularized item of kinky dress and reimagining it within the parameters of latinx and gender non-binary cultural production, Martinez evokes ‘tha multifaceted histories within a material / collective memory,’ while also leveling a profound critique on a subculture that the artist identifies as too white and too narrowly masculine.\textsuperscript{13}

I join artists like Martinez in insisting upon the depth and complications of the particular histories they access as a key component of claiming a politics of identity variously considerate of and irresponsible to a sense of a collective past—an acknowledgment that the ‘then’ of queerness is of enduring and foundational importance as one of the suppliers of metamorphic potentiality to queer life. Elizabeth Freeman suggests such archeological digging might even be intrinsic to the constitution of leather sexualities, as ‘S/M relentlessly physicalizes the encounter with history and thereby contributes to a reparative criticism that takes up the materials of a traumatic past and remixes them in the interests of new possibilities for being and knowing.’\textsuperscript{14} With epistemic and ontological projects deeply concerned with representing and imagining a kinky past, the artists discussed in this book access archives, or, sometimes, assemble them in the absence of publicly accessible archives while in pursuit of such queer possibility. Therefore, to fully think through their work demands a concomitant consideration of the joys and vicissitudes of archival work itself.

My methodology regarding the access and use of archives in this study has two interrelated components: by examining material and visual culture made by members of gay and lesbian leather communities, I trace their contextual
meanings at the time of their making, as well as their continued ability to produce community-specific histories in archival repositories that may or may not be solely dedicated to leather communities. I also identify instances where the themes, materialities, and/or histories of like objects have become part of the work and politics of contemporary queer artists. This twofold methodology is represented in the structure of this book, as some of the following chapters combine readings of particular archives and the objects they contain with readings of contemporary artistic projects that are either tangentially or directly related to them and their histories.

I seek nothing less than to challenge, and potentially unseat, the orthodoxies of writing, structuring, and historicizing communities and artists that have heretofore been ignored, erased, destroyed, and decimated by the vagaries of discipline, illness, and a sex-negative society that stubbornly refuses to understand their contexts. My work does not sit alone in this task. The hard-won work of authors and cultural producers such as Gayle Rubin, Tony DeBlase, Pat Califia, Viola Johnson, Guy Baldwin, Larry Townsend, and Jack Fritscher has provided a foundation for thinking about leather cultures and communities, and I hope my work in turn opens out possibilities for other scholars and artists.

I have opted not to provide a comprehensive or encyclopedic history of gay and lesbian leatherfolks in the U.S.—in the vein of George Cauncey’s *Gay New York* or Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons’s *Gay L.A.*, each of which is remarkable for its thorough chronological accounting of geographically sited LGBTQ histories. Instead, I stress something else, namely the state and scope of the archives of leather history, and the myriad ways in which that history has been accessed, understood, and remade by contemporary artists largely living and making work in the U.S. Tracking the sexual and racial politics of contemporary art alongside the visual cultures of historical leather communities is meant to illuminate the interconnected work of scholars, artists, and leatherfolks—bringing them into rare dialog. I have tried to structure this text to speak to each of these constituencies, knowing that some readers will claim membership in one or perhaps all of these groups.

On ‘leather’ and ‘fucking’

There are many ways to linguistically name the sex discussed in this book. I have chosen ‘leather’ as the term under which I organize the heterogeneous and multitudinous sexual practices discussed herein, ones that sometimes incorporate sadomasochism, power play, bondage, fisting, discipline, humiliation, flagging, flogging, fucking, and much more. To wit, leather also encompasses kissing, hugging, flirting, talking, and other practices that are often seen as sexually normative. Within contemporary BDSM communities
these seemingly benign activities are positioned as ‘vanilla,’ but I would argue that these less-sensationalistic corporeal performances of the flesh become part-and-parcel of leathernesssexualities when coupled with practices usually associated with leather, or embodied by a self-identified leatherperson. A kiss means something different when it comes before, during, or after a consensual flogging. And as with all sex, it matters who is doing what with whom, and what they make it mean together.

I consistently use leather, instead of another term, for its broad applicability and elasticity; as Rubin has aptly noted, many fetishes are housed under the umbrella of ‘leather.’ The term enjoyed wide dissemination during the period of leather’s expansion and popularization, roughly 1964–84. It is to this period, non-coincidentally, that many of the artists discussed in this book turn when mining the ephemera and embodied practices of leather. There are many examples of ‘leather’ as the preferred term of this community. Drummer magazine, for example, one of the most remarkable repositories of information regarding leather communities in the late 1970s and 1980s, proclaimed its allegiance to ‘leather’ as a preferred term: from its earliest incarnation as an affinity organization called the ‘Leather Fraternity,’ to its masthead—‘The one publication dedicated to the leather lifestyle for guys.’ Another example would be the International Mr. Leather (IML) contest, which got its start in the late 1970s, and indexes leather as its preferred terminology via its title—sending-up the popular beauty contests of the era (such as the Miss America competition, or the earlier Groovy Guy contests put on by The Advocate), while simultaneously cohering fairly segmented and city-specific leather cultures. Both of these institutions of leather culture centered artists and their work as integral and necessary components of sexual lifeways. Drummer, for instance, published the artwork and illustrations of almost every leather artist working during its nearly 25-year-long run, marking it as an indispensable source for any visual historian of gay and lesbian leather communities. I would argue that IML’s success could be attributed in large part to Etienne, who created the visual identity for the contest, populated the stage with giant, painted, cut-outs of leathermen, filled its programs and brochures with playful black-and-white illustrations, and not least of all served for over a decade as the contest’s ‘head judge.’

‘Leather’ is also a preferred archival term, and it is the most common descriptor used by institutions dedicated to displaying and preserving these histories. The Leather Archives & Museum in Chicago is the most obvious example (and is explored in greater detail in Chapter 4), and the same with the Carter/Johnson Leather Library (which is the subject of Chapter 6).

But leather was not the only term used in the 1970s; sadomasochism and its many initialisms (S&M, SM, S/M) were prevalent, too. These terms have their roots in a classificatory system that sought to pathologize sexual acts
of dominance and submission—bringng them into a discourse that named and classified sexual normalcy and its constitutive aberrations. As many historians of sexual communities and cultures have rehearsed before, the terms sadism and masochism were the brainchild of Austro-German sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, who first used them in his 1886 aggregation of case-studies, *Psychopathia Sexualis*.\(^{17}\) In grouping together what he perceived to be similar pathologies, Krafft-Ebing created new taxonomic categories based on a sequence of eclectic case studies. Krafft-Ebing named two related, but (in his eyes) distinct desires—the desire to cause ‘pain’ through ‘force,’ and the desire to be willfully subjected to pain. In designing these paraphilias (the term for psychopathologies tied to sexual expression and sexuality), he name-checked the authors he felt most exemplified such desires in their literary works—the Marquis de Sade (1740–1814) and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch (1836–95), respectively. But Krafft-Ebing’s formulations became, and in a more limited extent remain, orthodoxy within contemporary mental health diagnostic practice; the current DSM-5 contains entries for ‘sexual sadism disorder’ and ‘sexual masochism disorder’ as paraphilias.\(^{18}\) It was only twenty years after Krafft-Ebing published *Psychopathia Sexualis* that Sigmund Freud wrote of sadism and masochism as related, continuous desires.\(^{19}\) Eventually, his insight was clarified and popularized in the linguistic portmanteau ‘sadomasochism.’

If I push against using sadomasochism because of its psychopathological roots, others within leather communities of the 1970s and 1980s believed that it should be used precisely because the term indicates something about leather’s outlaw, and thus radical, status. Such voices are worth paying heed to. One particularly compelling counterargument is furnished in a book review of Geoff Mains’s seminal leather text *Urban Aboriginals*. Published in *DungeonMaster*, the reviewer—most likely Tony DeBlase, who edited the periodical from his home in Chicago—excoriates the author’s choice to use ‘leather’ over ‘S&M,’ stating that such a decision ‘softens what he’s writing about. “I’m into leather” could be easily viewed as a statement of a harmless quirk (Woody Allen got a joke out of that very quote in *Annie Hall*); “I’m into S&M” is a statement of radical politics.’\(^{20}\)

That particular review was published in 1984, and now the terminology in the leather landscape is vastly different. I would refer any reader interested in more contemporary terminologies to the ‘Note on Terminology’ that opens Margot Weiss’s performative materialist ethnography, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality*.\(^{21}\) The thoroughness with which she traces the lineages of a variety of contested terms helped to further clarify the one I privilege in this study. In her book Weiss uses BDSM as her preferred term, as her study is focused on more contemporary, pansexual kink communities clustered around Silicon Valley. She notes that BDSM’s etymology is of ‘relatively recent (and, many suggest, Internet) coinage.’\(^{22}\)
I also prefer ‘leather’ because it names one of the primary materials in the erotic arsenal of sexual practices that falls under its purview. Many leatherfolks have described leather as a ‘second skin’ and contemporary theorists have made much of this—especially in relationship to corporeal performances and embodiments of racialized bodies. As a material used for garments, toys, equipment, and accessories, leather is still the clearest, but certainly not the only, material signifier of sadomasochistic practice (denim—particularly the wheat-colored denim used by early bike clubs—rubber, latex, and many other materials have had historic importance within leather communities). I also follow the lead of some of the most prominent writers within leather communities, such as Geoff Mains and Larry Townsend, and use portmanteaus such as ‘leathersex’ and ‘leatherwoman,’ connecting leather directly to what it describes or modifies. In this way I hope to tie together material and corporeal practices with identities via an already performative linguistics.

It may be useful here to briefly set up some of the language I use to describe leathersex, language that is largely taken directly from the archival material I work with. I do not always affect a researcher’s ‘objectivity’ and cloak my discussions of sex in polite euphemism, or clinical, academic language. I use the word ‘fuck’ to generically cover a variety of embodied erotic practices, and this word comes with as much cultural baggage as does more seemingly benign phrasing. So let me be clear as to its meaning herein. To some, fucking may imply only penetrative sex—an interpretation I refuse for its limitations. To others, it may come to monolithically mean uncaring, unsympathetic, or anonymous sex—another association that in my estimation is too limited, and I reject it along with the moralizing tone that often accompanies this kind of usage. Fucking encompasses these things and more. I use ‘fuck’ as an umbrella term (not unlike ‘leather’), inclusive of many kinds of affective sexual relationships. In this way I hope to extend Lauren Berlant’s helpful framing of sex as ‘not a thing of truth but a scene where one discovers potentiality in the abandon that’s on the other side of abandonment.’ Within the imaginative possibilities of leathersex, fucking takes on a truly dynamic range: from a consensual agreement to sit in a chair while your lover(s) are in another room; or a devoted attention to the activity of shining a boot; to the piercing and suturing of flesh. Although I liberally use ‘fuck/ing’ throughout this book, I am also careful with such positionings of graphic language, for as Linda Williams points out in her overview of the field of pornography studies, there is a difference between sexualized terms and the comfortability or criticality they evince. Therefore I theorize leather and fucking in terms of their most generous meanings and associations so that they might continue to be generative for leatherfolks, artists, and historians alike.

Positioning a wide variety of erotic activities under the linguistic sign of ‘fucking’ has its downsides, too. Once, while presenting some of the material
contained in this book, a leatherman approached me after my lecture, and scolded me: ‘You know,’ he said, ‘we make love too.’ His point is not left unconsidered, especially in light of enriched theoretical reconsiderations of love—the writings of bell hooks and Sara Ahmed come to mind—and I hope that this book finds him, and that I’ve done justice to a myriad of sex practices as he (and others) experience them within leather communities. It is in this book’s conclusion that I will circle back to love, as a potential and productive site for surrogacy, encasement, and the reformulation of sexuality.

Finally, I concentrate on ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’ leatherfolks, which is to say those people who most often had contacts with same or similar-gendered people. This may seem odd given that leathersexuality, in a profound way, questions the very foundations of affiliative and coalitional categories such as gay and lesbian. As Patrick (then Pat) Califia so clearly put it, ‘Most of my partners are women, but gender is not my boundary [...] If I had a choice between being shipwrecked on a desert island with a vanilla lesbian and a hot male masochist, I’d pick the boy.’ Some gay and lesbian leatherfolks fucked people of the opposite gender, while choosing to align themselves within the field of gay and/or lesbian identitarian categories that would seem on the surface to preclude such erotic affiliations. In writing a history of gay and lesbian leatherfolks I do so under the assumption of such fungible definitions of identity and their dynamic relationship to fucking—including processes of self-naming and affiliation.

In short, leather, for the purposes of this book, is proposed as a diverse sexual ecology that privileges fucking and improvisatory play, genital and non-genital pleasure, rules and their effacement—all under the rubric of a seemingly static visual iconography, which in actuality is always in the process of being amended, shored, repurposed, and obliterated. It is a live system of relationality, varied in its address. Powerful symbology—in the material form of leather and the visual forms of representation developed by artists, magazine editors, filmmakers, and others—aids a great deal in imagining the uses of the sensorium of the body, including, but not limited to, broader discourses of pain and haptic touch. Notice that my working definition above says nothing of what is usually identified as leathersexuality’s most prominent feature, the presentation of strictly dyadic relationships (top/bottom, sadist/masochist). While common ingredients in leathersexuality’s presentation and enactment, these relationships are not ossified identities, but temporary agreements that invest erotic significance in an agreement’s terms and potential limits. Even the most rigid top or bottom would admit that within the relationality of fucking, dyadic positions are altered, transformed, and even flipped.

What Michel Foucault terms the ‘strategic relationships’ of leather have been read in a multitude of ways. Leo Bersani, for instance, usefully
describes leathersex as an ‘X-ray of power’s body,’ while Geoff Mains places ‘shared ritual and apotheosis’ at the center of his definition. I’ll have much more to say about these ideas in the chapters that follow, but for now I want to suggest that we invest in both authors’ notions as only a slice of a complicated terrain mapping out each person’s relationship to fucking, power, and visual representation. This can be the foundation for addressing leather’s ‘interconnected social archipelago’ with openness. In response to Bersani, who famously surmised that sex’s big secret is that ‘most people don’t like it,’ I suggest a shift in the rubric of what counts as sex so as to supply a more expansive ground from which ‘possibilit[ies] for creative life’ (as per Foucault) might be built. Then the question wouldn’t be whether people like sex or not, but how it might address what Berlant identifies as the ‘ongoing question of how living might be structured.’ It is this living that most interests and excites me.

Archives, not ‘The Archive’

Many have offered insights into the nature of archives. Archives are situated most basically as a ‘non-random collection of things,’ which are ‘grouped […] composed […] maintained,’ and which articulate ‘memory’s potential space,’ a place where scholars can revel in the ‘deep satisfaction of finding things.’ They are variously a ‘centre of interpretation,’ or potentially a ‘communication medium,’ in and of themselves. For some, archives engender a kind of disciplinary melancholy in that purgatorial present ‘between the not-yet-known and the what-has-once-been.’ Others see them as fragmented sites that provide ‘keys that unlock the door of historical background,’ and yet we are often called upon to be wary (or at least aware) of their ‘seductive’ qualities and their ‘daunting and distracting amount of information.’ Despite this, or, depending on whom you consult, precisely because of it, they are ‘an everyday tool’ of a radical politics that is ‘inherent, practiced, and natural.’ An archive’s work, broadly conceived, is to manage the ‘morass of memory,’ where ‘the remnants of someone’s life’ are ‘numbered, filed, boxed and preserved for future generations.’ But maybe, in the end, they are just ‘gigantic machines,’ which are more or less organized, more or less agential, and we should therefore be more or less suspicious of them.

An archive is both a ‘temple and a cemetery.’

In other words, archives are many things to many people—and the figuration of ‘the archive’ is by now overgeneralized to the point of requiring consistent clarification—a process Carolyn Steedman calls ‘archivization.’ The preceding collage of statements, culled from a variety of disciplines, is meant to destabilize any singular claim that I, or any other, might wish to make.
about archives—while also pointing to some of the tropic language attached to writings focused on archives and archival work. How to make sense of it all? ‘Theory is the price we pay,’ historian Kathy E. Ferguson muses, ‘to bring order to the archive, to make the archive speak.’ Indeed, theory supplies one answer for what many authors grapple with (and I am no exception), which is the unruliness of even the most strictly ordered archive. Part of this is our own fault: in accessing archives we enliven them with meaning, bringing their contents into the present—often in ways their creators and caretakers didn’t intend. The historian Joan Wallach Scott worried about precisely this when she quipped, ‘I’d rather be dead than misread.’ Archives consistently dramatize this prospect, and this is what my discussion of the appearance of the color yellow across the Leather Archives & Museum’s collections (Chapter 4) is meant to reveal.

The implications of all this should be clear, that archives present a set of problems for any methodology that would seek to enact a standardized procedure for accessing, describing, and interpreting them. After years of research, the only thing I can say with any great certainty is that each archive I have encountered during the course of my research for this book is utterly unique, and demands to be taken on its own terms, with a set of methodological tools that can meet and convey its particular abilities to invigorate body and mind. Therefore, throughout this book I generally eschew the metonymic linguistic figuration of ‘the archive,’ even though many of the authors I have cited above use exactly this phrase. I find it difficult to use because it compresses that which only expands, singularizing that which I’ve always found to be multiple. By concertedly discussing particular leather archives and putting them in concert with contemporary artistic projects invested in accessing, reconstructing, repurposing, and exhibiting leather archives, I endeavor to impart some of the strangeness and satisfactions that accompany the temporal shifts at the foundation of archival work.

This book is caught between two disciplinary forms of thinking about archives. On the one hand, art historians have long used archives as sites for producing original scholastic contributions within their field(s). Roland Barthes describes the figure of the author in the popular imaginary as someone who nourishes a text, and in art history, at least operationally, archives are conceived of in similar terms—as nourishing scholarship. Ernst van Alphen lays this out more schematically: ‘what fieldwork is to anthropology, the archive is to art history.’ The importance of the archive is undeniable, even when it is unremarked upon within the body of an art historical text. Archives are, in this view, things that must be disciplined or mastered in some way to serve an author’s argument (how’s that for some academic S/M?!). This is especially true of the ways in which young scholars are made to account for the originality of their work, and it has now become a rite of passage for
young art historians to consult archives, navigating and ultimately taming their pleasures and frustrations, thereby proving themselves methodologically worthy.

Hayden White, for example, famously critiqued this common understanding of archives as repositories of evidence, ceremoniously turned into ‘the fictions of factual representation.’ Echoing White’s suspicions, Alexander Nemerov counsels that when making sense of archival materials in all their heterogeneity (a process he usefully names ‘envisioning the past’) a historian needs to take both ‘intuition and sentiment’ into account. Some of the research that grounds this text has been guided, at least in its early stages, by affect and by my desire to be transparent to a reader about how I have encountered, processed, and assembled the pieces of various archives that run throughout this study.

Queer, feminist, and POC projects are painfully aware that narrow definitions of archives increase the probability that racialized, queer, and gender non-conforming lives will be left uncollected, and therefore unconsidered in traditional scholarship. David Román, in writing about those who are ‘undocumented and unexamined,’ proposes that many archives exist ‘in oral history, cultural memory, social ritual, communal folklore, and local performance—media that do not rely on print culture for their preservation.’ He adds, ‘because this archive often exists outside of official culture, it is frequently undervalued or even derided. So too are most efforts to recover it.’ Whenever possible I have attempted to be attentive to these more embodied forms of archiving (what Diana Taylor terms a repertoire); when, for example, Viola Johnson identifies her primary role as a griot, or storyteller in the West African tradition, it means, in turn, that oral storytelling takes a central role in my chapter dedicated to her and her mobile archive.

Román’s text could be included as part of the recent ‘archival turn’ in feminist and queer studies, which has usefully revisited what the archive might be, giving it new epistemic life. The net results of these inquiries have reinforced that we might better think of archives as a function or mode more than a discrete object of study. This view has an impact on how histories are told or written, and Leah DeVun and Michael Jay McClure point out that feminist and queer approaches to archival work can render the historical imagination ‘promiscuous, multiple, and beyond finite reckoning.’ Making archives more inclusive by expanding upon what could potentially be considered an archive—often done by connecting the ‘stuff’ of particular archives to embodied knowledges of activism, pleasure, and the somatic sensorium of the body—means that feminist and queer enframings of archives thus claim a kind of radicality by centering performances of collecting, of reading and researching, of writing and presenting as enunciative and connected acts.
For some critics, this kind of openness pushes the utility of ‘the archive’ as an analytic category toward the outer limits of comprehensibility. But in many ways this gesture of expanding what an archive might be makes sense as an outgrowth of feminist, queer, and critical race scholarship and methodologies which not only name, but reimagine the operations of power in a way that might better center the lives of folks who are consistently denied its claim. In attempting to reroute what exactly an archive can be, feminist, queer, and brown and/or black historians and archivists respond directly to the problem laid out in 1977 by historian Howard Zinn, who remarked that ‘the most powerful, the richest elements in society have the greatest capacity to find documents, preserve them, and decide what is or is not available to the public.’ The connection between those with the power to access or assemble archives and what archives hold are enduring interests for queer, feminist, critical race, and postcolonial scholars.

Many of the queer, feminist, and POC critiques and expansions of ‘the archive’ foreground the reading of one particular text, Jacques Derrida’s *Archive Fever*, which, since its oration (in French) in 1994, and its publication (in English) in 1995, has continued to position the archive as an important node of power. Carolyn Steedman handily summarizes the common use of Derrida’s argument: ‘the *arkhe*—the archive—appears to represent the *now* of whatever kind of power is being exercised, anywhere, in any place or time.’ Power is apparent in the institutional act of collecting, and in the ways in which one might access and subsequently make use of the contents of an archive. But for many people working in queer, feminist, brown and/or black archives, this analysis is not enough. An archive’s control is evident in its lists of collections, but also in those collections that go unaccessioned, unaccessed, and/or remain unprocessed. In most cases this is the result of sustained and systemic financial precarity. This is an important facet of power’s relation to archives and archival processes, but one that reveals extrinsic cultural undervaluation and stigma, rather than the power that might issue forth from an archive.

Steedman, who carefully reviews Derrida’s text and its implications, usefully rebuts Derrida’s worry that archives are only accessed to find originary knowledge, and thus to solidify formations of power. She writes,

> Archives hold no origins, and origins are not what historians search for in them. Rather, they hold everything in medias res, the account caught halfway through, most of it missing, with no end ever in sight. Nothing starts in the Archive, nothing, ever at all, although things certainly end up there.

And so we might also attach to archives and archival work a certain queer quality that José Esteban Muñoz writes about as the ‘not yet here,’ an open-ended proposition that whatever the work, it is never complete. In thinking
through the various archives discussed in this book, I take the advice of Kathy E. Ferguson, ‘to give less credence to the alleged “eternal war” and more to the riotous unpredictability of archival excess.’ Ferguson’s work, and the writings of Arjun Appadurai and Ann Cvetkovich, have helped me to conceive of the archive as ‘an aspiration rather than a recollection.’ Therefore I see my task as drawing out the affective dimensions of archival work as a politically necessary activity tied to building non-reproductive genealogies of/for creative life.

If there is a gripe I have about queer, feminist, and critical race evaluations of archives, it is that beyond a cursory footnote, or a few lines in the acknowledgments of a book-length study, rarely are the labors of archivists and other cultural workers deeply acknowledged and made meaningful within the structure of an author’s arguments. I am also guilty of this. Archivists are the ones most likely to have the clearest sense of the value, organization, and quotidian drudgery of archives, yet it is rare in the realm of academic publishing to hear directly from them. Kate Eichhorn and Lisa Darms, one an academic and the other an archivist, lay this out in a special issue of Archive Journal dedicated to ‘Radical Archives.’ There, Eichhorn notes that academic peer-review limits and discourages participation from archivists, who may not be as invested in enduring scrutiny from non-archivist peers unfamiliar with the ins and outs of archival practices.

Although this might seem like inside baseball, the implications are profound. Grappling with this asymmetry requires some soul-searching on the part of academics who value and privilege certain kinds of knowledge over others, certain kinds of credentials over others, and certain kinds of labor over others. In my view this can lead to an abstract thinking about archives, declarations of archives as only unruly, or as simply another configuration of power/knowledge. By subscribing to these beliefs about archives, uninformed by the experiences of those who work within them day in and day out, I worry about inadvertently missing an opportunity to remark on all the ways that archivists interrupt these staid, and often falsely dichotomous, patterns of thinking. Yet archivists do this all the time, anyway, regardless of whether they are given credit or voice in academic journals and presses: sometimes through the important act of guiding a researcher toward content that would complicate pat theses, sometimes through the process of strategizing acquisitions, and through acts of refusal. Because archivists aren’t typically given the room and/or resources in academic journals and presses to grapple with the philosophical implications of the knowledge projects they continue to contribute to (because, as mentioned above, archives face the pernicious and continual existential threat of defunding within educational and/or governmental organizations obsessed with tangible deliverables), their voices remain underconsidered. And this near silence from archivists intellectually impoverishes scholars and archivists alike.
One of the primary questions this study asks, and attempts to answer in turn, is: what are the archives of gay and lesbian leather history, and where can they be found? The easiest response would be to simply point to the Leather Archives & Museum (LA&M) in Chicago and be done with it. The LA&M is a grassroots institution founded upon the personal collections of the Chicago activist and photographer Chuck Renslow, and his primary partner for many years, Dom Orejudos. Since its founding in 1991, its scope has grown considerably, as evidenced by its mission, which is ‘the compilation, preservation and maintenance of leather lifestyle and related lifestyles [including but not limited to the gay and lesbian communities], history, archives and memorabilia for historical, educational and research purposes.’

By its own count it has over 15,000 books, journals, and periodicals and over 60 collections of personal, organizational, and conglomerate records, all related to ‘leather, fetish, kink, and alternative sexualities.’ I will return to this archive in Chapter 4—but for now I will only remark that it remains a focal point and a pilgrimage site for many leatherfolks and historians of leather cultures and communities.

Gay and lesbian leather history also exists in archives dedicated to preserving a broader swathe of LGBTQ communities. Archives such as the GLBT Historical Society (San Francisco), ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives (Los Angeles), and the Lesbian Herstory Archives (Brooklyn) contain the personal collections of leathermen and leatherwomen, as well as some organizational records and periodicals of interest to anyone wishing to write about leather communities and cultures. In such venues one is always highly aware of how leather sexualities are understood within the context of broader LGBTQ histories—an enframing that can be useful, but which can also minimize or subdue the voices and lives of gay and lesbian leatherfolks within the larger panoply of LGBTQ life.

Leather history is also kept hiding in plain sight—places where more official histories are told, often exclusive of any sustained consideration of leatherfolks and their lives. For example, two such places are the film collections of the Museum of Modern Art and UCLA’s film and television archive, each of which contains a print of Fred Halsted’s ‘sadomasochistic, fist-fucking faggot film,’ L.A. Plays Itself (1972). How it came to be in these collections, and how it was re-edited to conform to its archival home in MoMA, is the subject of my eighth chapter.

The sites where leather histories are kept and displayed—places that I’ll be calling leather archives, regardless of whether their primary mission is to save or preserve leather history—are incredibly fragile. Feminist, queer, and black and brown perspectives on archives have consistently pointed to their contingent nature, highlighting their elusive and volatile conditions, aligning all too predictably with the fugitive and denigrated identities they
Martin Manalansan, for example, in focusing on the ‘un-HGTV dwellings of several undocumented queer households,’ describes such archives as ‘atmospheric states of material and affective disarray,’ and understands that even the most quotidian object is subject to removal and destruction. Leather archives, in particular, are at risk because the contents they often hold align with what Michel Foucault terms ‘subjugated knowledges,’ meaning ‘a whole set of knowledges that have been disqualified as inadequate to their task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located down the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity.’ In plain terms, this means leather archives face very real challenges in making an appeal for funding, space, and scholastic attention. They are more susceptible and vulnerable to changes in political regimes, to the destructive forces of natural disasters, and/or to the slow drain of resources, capital, and perhaps more ephemerally, engaged publics.

That there are leather archives at all is a miracle. There is an archive that disappeared during the course of my research, and it now serves as an example of the existential threats that many leather archives face, no matter their scale, or national or institutional affiliation. In the first years of researching this book I repeatedly consulted a website called ‘The Colors of Leather.’ The brainchild of Gwen Hardy, a Florida leatherwoman and a bootblack title-holder, ‘The Colors of Leather’ was a clearinghouse for information on leather clubs, their colors and pins, prominent leather artists, bars from across the United States, and a timeline of important events in the histories of gay and lesbian leather communities (amending Tony DeBlase’s well-meaning, but sometimes specious, ‘Leather History Timeline’). I found it indispensable for its hodge-podge of information—what year a particular club was founded, for example, or a random scan of a bar advertisement. It had the same mission that many archives do, which was ‘to preserve the past, present, and future.’ What it gave me was a sense of the enormous scope and growth of leather communities during the 1970s; and so I came to value it for its gestalt as much as for the specifics I gleaned. I took its existence for granted.

One day I opened the website and was greeted with the following message: ‘This web site is no longer being maintained. Any questions sent to the email may or may not be answered. Sorry but I am burned out.’ Admitting to being brought up short by the onerous demands of the archival labor she was performing—unpaid and unthanked—Hardy thought it better to cut her losses. By the summer of 2009 Hardy had taken the website down entirely. Today only a portion of the site’s vast holdings can be retrieved from digital archeological sites such as the Internet Archive’s ‘Wayback Machine.’ Hardy’s decision to stop, and to let her site lapse, flew in the face of my (at the time, admittedly limited and naïve) conception of digital durabilities,
as well as in opposition to Hardy’s own utopic framing of her project as ‘never-ending.’

I miss ‘The Colors of Leather’ and feel loss in the wake of its disappearance. This is the death that Derrida described as underpinning archival enterprises, the potential death that foregrounds so many appeals for funding. This book, in many ways, is a product of this and other archival absences in the present, of the possibility of archival extinction in the future, and of the pasts almost certainly already lost. For some this anecdote might provide proof that the only stable kind of archive exists within the framework of an institution and away from the whims of any single person; but that line of thinking misses what was so useful about Hardy’s site, and specifically why it was valuable as a non-institutionally-affiliated archive. Arguably the Leather Archives & Museum in Chicago had much of the same material in its holdings, but at the time its website was difficult to navigate, and the amount of hard data was limited. I was a cash-strapped graduate student who couldn’t afford a plane ticket to Chicago. Poverty circumscribed my research. Hardy’s website was a much-needed, accessible, and dependable source in the face of the ever-present obstacles of class and mobility.

Gwen Hardy’s ‘Colors of Leather’ is also a continuing reminder for me as to the presence and importance of women within historical leather communities. Throughout the period discussed in this book women played sometimes central and vital roles within leather social spaces, publications, and archives. Take, for example, the musician and performance artist Camille O’Grady, who performed her incantatory poems (the most famous of which was entitled ‘Toilet Kiss’) in some of the most popular leather bars on the East and West Coasts. With her friend and lover Robert Opel, she was a constant presence at his gallery, Fey-Way Studios, and did much to support and encourage her fellow artists. In Los Angeles, Jeanne Barney was the first editor of Drummer magazine, and in her role she crystallized the form and content of a magazine that would enjoy a nearly 25-year print run. In San Francisco, Cynthia Slater integrated women into the private, and up until that time exclusively male, play space of The Catacombs. She also founded the Society of Janus, a pansexual leather education and support group. Agnes Hassett, who married Chuck Renslow so that he could obtain a liquor license for his bar the Gold Coast, was a frequent patron and continuing presence in the early history of the well-known leatherspace. The list could go on; but the upshot is that women were a solid, if sidelined presence in leather communities that are often imagined (when they are imagined at all) to be only male. I have tried to be attentive to this as I assembled the roster of artists and archival sources for this book, while also remaining careful of overstating the presence of women in mostly male spaces and groups.

Archival dramas are always unfolding, even as this book goes to press.
On a Saturday in January 2019, Jeanne Barney’s estate went up for sale. Many who knew Barney were caught off-guard, and only heard about the sale after the fact. The estate sale company that put Barney’s belongings up for auction generated advertising copy to lure in potential buyers. It read (in part):

500+ RECORDS, MOSTLY ROCK & ROLL […] ACOMA PUEBLO POTTERY COLLECTION, STERLING SILVER, COSTUME JEWELRY, TONS OF VINTAGE CLOTHING, SHOES, PURSES … OVER 400+ VINTAGE SWEATERS OMG!! […] 1000 BOOKS, LOTS OF EPHEMERA & VINTAGE POSTERS, ONE ENTIRE ROOM OF GAY/BONDAGE ARTWORK, PHOTOS, BOOKS, VINTAGE 1970’S ORIGINAL GAY MOVEMENT T-SHIRTS, MAGAZINES ETC. … OUR CLIENT WAS AN EDITOR FOR THE ADVOCATE MAGAZINE, DRUMMER MAGAZINE, NFL, TV GUIDE AND OTHER PUBLICATIONS. […] PACKED HOUSE AND EVERYTHING MUST GO.

There are many reasons why a person like Barney (whom the estate sale copy names as ‘our client’) would hire a company to liquidate their belongings, not the least of which is the real need for money in a country that still does not guarantee affordable physical and mental healthcare for the people within its borders (citizens and non-citizens alike). Or, like Hardy, she could just be over it—done with living in a house filled with accumulated stuff. It turned out that Barney had died, and her remaining family had put her effects up for public auction. Over the next few next weeks I was by turns enraged, disappointed, and mournful over the way in which Barney’s archive of leather materials (including original photos, copy-edited issues of Drummer magazine, typescripts, and other ephemera) was put up for sale by eBay sellers named buffyoz123 (who posted his haul on Instagram a short time after he visited the estate sale) and sweetpickensvenice_2 (figure 1.2). A small group of friends and admirers of Barney (myself included) tried to purchase as much of her dispersed collections as possible, so that they might be donated to an archive. Because many eBay sellers were in Los Angeles and its surrounds, I visited a couple of them in their homes and tried to communicate my worry that Barney’s effects would disperse and disappear, leaving a profound gap in our understanding about her role in coalescing national leather readerships and communities. My despair was all-consuming: didn’t these people know what they were doing—the transaction became an obscenity too much to bear. For women, brown and black people, poor people, disabled people, and those otherwise on the margins of national politics and LGBTQ communities, this mourning and rage is more of the same; a story that illuminates whose lives are (de)valued and by whom.
The unlaid

Nostalgia is a powerful drug and I am wary of any overly utopic rendering of leather history—those that represent these sexual livelihoods of the past as unmarked by pervasive societal homophobia, or pre-AIDS leatherspaces as uncomplicated sexual playgrounds. A comic published in Drummer magazine has reminded me many times of the vicissitudes of social sexual life (figures 1.3–1.5). Simple in concept and baroque in its execution, the comic trails a man across three multi-paneled pages as he cruises the busy interior of a leather bar. The artist, Bill Ward, virtuosically represents dozens of figures in each panel, densely populating a sexualized space whose actual architectural limits are only faintly discernible. Most are dressed in leather, although this is hardly the only fashion on display.

Our protagonist in this, and nearly every other comic drawn by Ward and published in Drummer, is a man by the name of Drum. He is depicted twice on the first page, once with his back to us, and once again to the right of the title, an autonomous figure in a well-defined panel. Ward enables his reader to follow Drum through this playspace by endowing him with a consistent iconography—a ‘10’ patch on his left arm of his jacket, and the line of fringe running horizontally along the back of it.

The three pages of Ward’s comic are a riot of bodies in motion. Men pose and dance, but hardly anyone—save for the bartender on the first page—is
talking. This is a noisy but wordless space, a place for looking and being seen, a site for what John Paul Ricco has dubbed the art of the consummate cruise. Later, in the bathroom, signaled by an erect cock logogram on the door, Drum stands with other men at a piss trough. Lights blaze and cocks drip,
and Drum looks out at a reader, as though cementing some pre-established bond. He continues his cruise from panel to panel, navigating the bodies that creep in from other registers. Sometimes we see him at a distance, and at other times close up, reminding a viewer of the uneven proximities and spatial
choreographies of nightlife. We are deep in the cruise—navigating the tricky terrain of a bar. In this space filled with music and bodies, psychic and sensorial sagacity is shaken loose and reordered, evincing the ‘voluptuous panic’ of ilinx (vertigo) that Roger Caillois names as one of the four forms of play. 80


1.5
But all of this sensuous abandon is upended in the final panels—a revelation foreshadowed by the boxed-in appearance of Drum on the first page. Here, in the last three frames, Drum breaks the fourth wall and speaks directly to the reader. He addresses us as a close confidant. He says, ‘I’m sure you’ve had the same experience! You spend all weekend cruising the bars and clubs … then finish with nothing!’ The last frame depicts Drum walking away; black of night, void exaggerating solitude.

Ward’s comic is a reminder to be critical of fantasies solely filled with fucking—to cut off at the knees nostalgia about the ‘glory days’ of yore. It may be obvious, but not everyone got laid. Filled with loneliness and frustration (see those exclamation points?), Drum walks away from the action and goes home. His response comes at the end of a string of unlucky nights, and represents a puncture in an otherwise seamless and pervasive leather fantasy. This runs counter to nearly every other Drum comic, where he is the center of remarkable sexual escapades that confirm him (and in this he is like his forebear, Tom of Finland’s Kake) as the embodiment of everything a leatherman should be: handsome, bearded, muscled, and with a closet at the ready and filled to the brim with leatherwear.

These pages were a departure, in both story and structure, for Ward and his beloved character. Going home alone is not how Drum’s night is supposed to end, and subsequently not how the hypersexualization of leather culture is typically understood. This is why, in my mind, Ward’s comic is an opportune object to think with, in that it entreats more questions and a more sophisticated sense of the lived experiences of leatherfolks. We know about the people who got laid—their tales are told in the pages of Drummer, in the pins dotting a leather vest or sash—but what of those who did not? Drum leaves the cacophonous space of the leather bar in the middle of the night, alone, not because he can’t get laid (150+ comic strips prove otherwise), but because this time he doesn’t. For whatever reason the explanation never comes, and likely never will.

* * *

The chapters that follow track the archival repositories of U.S. gay and leather histories and the projects of contemporary artists interested in those histories. Two of the chapters are dedicated to institutions whose sole mission is to collect, preserve, and display leather history—the Leather Archives & Museum in Chicago (Chapter 4) and the mobile Carter/Johnson Leather Library (Chapter 6). In each case I detail the archives’ history and propose methodologies for reading their collections. In the first instance I take the hanky code, a color-coded sexual signaling system developed in the 1970s, as an organizing principle, reading the appearances of the color yellow across the collections of the Leather Archives & Museum. What emerges, I hope, is
a sense of both the depth and breadth of the institution’s collections as well as a more atmospheric portrait of leather lifeways, particularly those tied to the erotics of pissing (golden showers).

In the chapter dedicated to the Carter/Johnson Leather Library I invest in the oral tradition that structures Viola Johnson’s understanding of her role as archivist, librarian, and ‘grandmom’ to an array of ‘kinklings.’ As she travels the country with a group of POC familiars, setting up her books, magazines, and assorted ephemera at regional and national leather conferences, she transmits a notion of a shared history, and the importance of archival practices. Her leather pin sash (a piece of leatherwear of Johnson’s own devising) is a metonymic object, serving as a reminder of these histories, some of which were experienced directly by Johnson, and others not. I read out the historical significance and context of one of the hundreds of pins and buttons that appear on and around her sash, a black button reading ‘The L.A.P.D. FREED the Slaves April 10, 1976’—memorializing an especially devious police raid on a charity slave auction held at the Mark IV bathhouse in Los Angeles. The racial and sexual underpinnings of the auction provided the necessary cover for the L.A.P.D. to bust the event, and the ensuing public relations campaign waged by a broad coalition of Los Angeles’ gay and lesbian communities ensured that the L.A.P.D. and their homophobic police chief, Ed Davis, were publicly shamed for their waste of public dollars.

The rest of the chapters here present archival collections (many nested within non-leather institutions) in both direct and indirect coordination with contemporary artists’ works. In the following chapter I discuss an installation by the artist collective Die Kränken, who made use of the Blue Max MC papers (owned by ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives) in a wide-ranging installation that purported to translate a theatrical production staged yearly by the Southern California bike club. Performed for a group of familiars, the Blue Max’s play, entitled ‘The Rose of No Man’s Land,’ dramatized a popular early twentieth-century song extolling the bravery of Red Cross nurses during World War I. Invoking history, care, and relationality Die Kränken invests in the nurse as a figure of historical stewardship, providing intergenerational healing in the face of enormous loss.

Chapter 3 discusses the recent reception of Tom of Finland, perhaps the best-known artist within and outside of leather communities, and asks the question: What does Tom of Finland’s work gain when it is collected by major art museums in the U.S.? In exploring a potential answer to this question, I explore the historical influences, reception, and distribution of the artist’s work; a history that is now primarily told by the Tom of Finland Foundation. The Foundation, located in the artist’s former Silver Lake house, is the primary subject of a video by artist Patrick Staff entitled, fittingly, The Foundation (2015). In it Staff explores the limits of normative leather
masculinities, through vérité footage of the daily activities at the Tom of Finland Foundation and a constructed studio scenario, wherein Staff and an older gay man (roughly fitting the ‘gay daddy’ type) dance together and explore their differences.

Dean Sameshima’s painted appropriations of erotic connect-the-dots activities that appeared in the pages of Drummer magazine are the subject of the fifth chapter. Reading his interest in ‘numbers’ broadly—including the direct reference to John Rechy’s 1967 novel of the same name—I discuss the work’s capacities to frustrate handy readings of archival objects. One work in particular, Bodily Fluids (2007), is emblematic of these efforts, and I use it to read across Sameshima’s oeuvre.

Attachments to historical and archival sources are at the center of Nayland Blake’s 2012 installation at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts in San Francisco. Entitled FREE!LOVE!TOOL!BOX!, the components of the exhibition, as well as one of its public programs (a piercing demonstration conducted by Blake and their long-time friend Lolita Wolf), is the subject of the seventh chapter. As a young artist Blake was a participant in San Francisco’s changing arts landscape, and their relation to the massive development of the South of Market area (where YBCA is located, and also where many leather bars and institutions were established), structures their questions about San Francisco’s leather histories. By literally attaching themselves to a reproduction of an iconic mural decorating one of San Francisco’s earliest leather bars, Blake stages an encounter with history, exhorting their audience to participate in claiming historical networks and lineages.

Chapter 8, the longest in the book, discusses Fred Halsted’s pornographic leather film, L.A. Plays Itself (1972), and traces its editing and exhibition history. Composed of two dissimilar sections—one focusing on urban cruising and fisting and the other on penetrative sex in the natural grandeur of the Malibu hills—Halsted switched the ordering of these sections in the early years of the film’s exhibition history. His 1974 screening at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and his subsequent gift of L.A. Plays Itself and two other films to the museum, became a point of pride for the director, who likely reordered his film to suit the narratives of Modernism pervasive in the museum’s permanent collection installations. Decades later the artists A. K. Burns and A. L. Steiner watched Halsted’s film in MoMA’s screening room and it inspired the pair to make their own pornographic art video (also now owned by MoMA), Community Action Center (2010). In a sequence of polymorphously perverse scenes, Burns and Steiner directly quote L.A. Plays Itself and incorporate its gritty, experimental attitude with lesbian-feminist, queer, and trans performers and sources, assembling a heterogeneous pornographic archive in the process. In tracing the exhibition history of Community Action Center I argue that the switching and flexibility that
marked the early exhibition history of *L.A. Plays Itself* is also a conceptual hallmark of the relationships depicted in Burns and Steiner’s film and its earliest installations.

My conclusion ruminates on two series by the artist Monica Majoli, who sees her works as both ‘surrogates’ and ‘envelopes’ for herself. In luminous oil paintings of gay male piss orgies and monochromatic gougaches of suspended rubbermen, Majoli visualizes leather scenarios that center the masochist’s body and experiences. Each extrapolates from an archive of lived experiences of an other, forcing Majoli to grapple with questions about subjectivity and sociality. Like Majoli, these paintings have become, over the years, ‘surrogates’ and ‘envelopes’ for myself as I think about the work of collecting, archiving, and entering the scene of leathersex. Connection begets connection, and the transmission of sexual gifts is discussed as a hallmark of leather and queer cultures more broadly.

Taken together I hope that the chapters of this book consistently ask a viewer to consider archives and contemporary artistic practice in dialog with one another—thereby situating how archives come to matter in the present, and how the present is unquestionably shaped by the past.

Notes

3 Currently in the United States something can be considered obscene if it passes the three-pronged test developed from the 1973 Supreme Court case *Miller v. California* (413, U.S. 15, 24–25). Using imprecise terms such as ‘average person’ and ‘contemporary adult community standards,’ it holds that if the matter under question, as a whole 1) ‘appeals to prurient interests,’ 2) ‘depicts or describes sexual conduct in a patently offensive way,’ and 3) ‘lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value,’ then it will be considered obscene and thus illegal. Famously, sadomasochism was one of several kinds of sexual activity (including ‘homo-eroticism,’ ‘the sexual exploitation of children,’ and the more generic ‘individuals engaged in sex acts’) specified for disqualification for funds disbursed from the National Endowment for the Arts, the national arts funding program for visual and performing arts. For more, see Section 304(a) of the Interior Department and Related Agencies Appropriation Act, 1990 (Pub. L. No. 101–121, 102 Stat. 701, 741, 20 U.S.C. § 954).
5 Ibid.
6 As part of the global URBN group of brands (which includes Urban Outfitters and Anthropologie), Free People imagines its customer in the following way: ‘a 26-year-old girl, smart, creative, confident and comfortable in all aspects of her being, free and adventurous, sweet to tough to tomboy to romantic. A girl who likes to keep busy and push life to its limits, with traveling and hanging out and everything in between. Who loves Donovan as much as she loves The Dears, and can’t resist petting any dog that passes her by on the street.’ Free People, ‘Our Story,’ https://www.freepeople.com/help/our-story (accessed 10 October 2018).
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
11 Roy Martinez, email correspondence with author, 20 November 2018. The artist continues: ‘For me it also referenced tha overall “bondage” black and brown people navigate under white supremacy … and in particular when it comes to identity … what imposed … what erased … what accepted … what deconstructed and made anew with its remnants … being assigned male at birth … also has it kind of bondage to masculinity. It’s def really complex … but I like how it could mean a singular thing to one … but also tha multifaceted histories within a material/collective memory.’
13 Roy Martinez, email correspondence with author, 20 November 2018.

18 American Psychological Association, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th edn (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2013). While this is a happy change from previous DSMs where sadism and masochism were listed as diagnosable paraphilias, the current edition is still not yet subtle enough. For example, in regards to what it terms ‘Sexual Sadism Disorder,’ it states that ‘acts of sexual sadism may occur with a consenting partner, or as assault on a nonconsenting individual.’ The gulf between these two is wide, non/consent being the fault-line between a leather scene and violent sexual assault. The entry for ‘Sexual Masochism Disorder’ seems to be more circumspect, as it remarks that, ‘if the patient is not experiencing anxiety, guilt, shame or other negative feelings related to masochistic sexual desires, it is considered a sexual interest, not a disorder.’ Still, in this definition there is no admission that it might be the person’s cultural, religious, familial, and social contexts that may be the cause of such ‘negative feelings.’ Some queer theorists have turned this around—as Ann Cvetkovich asks, ‘What if depression, in the Americas at least, could be traced to histories of colonialism, genocide, slavery, legal exclusion, and everyday segregation and isolation that haunt all our lives, rather than biochemical imbalances?’ Ann Cvetkovich, Depression: A Public Feeling (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), p. 115.


21 Weiss, Techniques of Pleasure, pp. vii–xii.

22 Ibid., p. vii.


25 Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, Sex, or The Unbearable (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), p. 56. Throughout her dialog with Edelman, Berlant uses the terminology of the scene, which in her view is ‘a setting for actions, a discontinuous space that appears navigable for moving around awkwardly, ambivalently, and incoherently, while making heuristic sense of what’s becoming-event’
Bound together (pp. 99–100). I find that language to be incredibly useful because scene also prag-
matically names the consensual agreement between sexual partners regarding the
genre of their interaction: for example, a cop scene, or a sailor scene.


34 Berlant and Edelman, Sex, p. 104.


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47 Steedman, *Dust*.
55 Ibid.
58 Howard Zinn, ‘Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest,’ *Midwestern Archivist*, 2:2 (1977), pp. 20–1. Zinn’s proposed fix was to ‘open all government documents to the public,’ and to insist that archivists ‘take the trouble to compile a whole new
world of documentary material, about the lives, desires, needs, of ordinary people’ (p. 27).


60 Steedman, *Dust*, p. 1.


63 Ferguson, ‘Theorizing Shiny Things.’


65 Eichhorn, ‘Introduction: Radical Archives.’


68 Tyburczy, *Sex Museums*, p. 178.


74 Ibid.


77 Carol Truscott, ‘San Francisco: A Reverent, Non-Linear, Necessarily Incomplete History of Its SM Community,’ *Sandmutopia Guardian*, 8 (1990), pp. 6–12.

