

Arcane Erotica and National ‘Patrimony’
Britain’s Private Case and the Collection de l’Enfer of the
Bibliothèque Nationale de France

ALISON MOORE

UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN SYDNEY

Across the twentieth century, a tremendous mystique surrounded the erotica collections housed in European research libraries—most infamously, since the late nineteenth century, the Collection de l’Enfer in the Réserve of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and, in the twentieth century, the Private Case of the British Library (once British Museum). That such collections were created and preserved during historic eras characterised by strict state censorship reflected the ambivalent cultural status that erotic representation held throughout this time. On the one hand, erotica collections and their management were part of that shift toward sexuality as a discourse (*‘la “mise en discours” du sexe’*), neither repressive nor liberationist, outlined famously by Michel Foucault as entailing a new medicalised view of sex in opposition to previously florid erotica cultures.¹ The late nineteenth-century *scientia sexualis* represented both an increase in talk about sexual matters, alongside an elaborate categorisation and pathologisation of different desires. Erotica collections followed this pattern of simultaneous validation and regulation of sexuality, in the sense that the very same state that sought to suppress erotic

publications through censorship also preserved them as historic treasures and created a space for them as revered objects within a cultural or national heritage.

But it is also the case that from the beginning of the twentieth century, when the question of public access to libraries emerged amid the massification of politics, library administrations began to exercise their very own systems of social control to determine who could access the collections, and under what highly ritualised conditions. Those changing systems of access privileged the emergent scholarly genre of the erotica expert, who in turn disseminated knowledge of the collections to a larger public in language shrouded with mystique and imbued with its own erotic signification. The erotica archive that was difficult but not impossible to access for the right kind of European gentleman, thus came to stand for a kind of seduction of the scholar into the arcane mysteries of the sexual past.

In this article I consider the broad politics of the creation and maintenance of these two large erotica collections across their histories and in relation to censorship and obscenity, alongside an analysis of the intellectual discourses that have surrounded them and imbued them with a particular cultural mystique as repositories of secret, hidden and privileged erotic knowledge. French practices from the end of the nineteenth century have generated a unique emphasis on national heritage that is not to be found in the British context. However, both in cultural discourses about erotica collections—as articulated by erotica and bibliographic scholars—and in library publicity documents, there are comparable themes which attribute feminine withholding and flirtation to the restricted collections, and present visions of the collections as treasuries of a secret sexual knowledge attainable only to the appropriately class-privileged, gendered and ethnically defined initiate.

The recent attempts by the BNF to revive public interest in its historic erotica is indicative of the rather sudden death of the mystique surrounding such collections in recent decades. Since the nineteen-seventies both the British and the French erotica collections had been incorporated into the larger library catalogues because the mass of pornographic material that had begun to circulate in the publication cultures of both was now so abundant as to swamp the historic materials, making their management within discreet collections both logistically impossible and thematically incoherent. The old volumes were rare books subject to highly

restricted access conditions and surveillance, while the new materials were both abundant in their duplication and in no particular need of delicate handling. By stopping deposits into the collection, these libraries have thus preserved their old books within a general reserve, while distributing all further erotic publications throughout the general library holdings. In 2008 the BNF even opened its Enfer collection to public exhibition. A giant pink digital X symbol adorned the exterior of its external east tower. The century and a half of secrecy and obstruction in access to the Enfer collection could now be made to pay off, enticing new visitors to the library through the allure of its erotic secrets unveiled, and generating profits from the admission fees to the exhibition. Around eighty thousand visitors were estimated to have paid the modest price of €7 (or €5 concession) to enter the Enfer exhibition which alluded to secrecy and obscenity in its publicity and in the exhibition title: '*L'enfer de la bibliothèque, Eros au secret*' ('The library's Inferno, Secret Eros').² Around a half million euro over three months is, after all, hardly trivial income for a state-funded library without need to purchase or rent its exhibition contents or venue.

Before all this, both collections were surrounded by a taunting politics of access and obstruction that had prompted reactions of fascination, frustration, romanticisation and ambivalence among intellectuals ever since the beginning of the twentieth century. Until their contents were incorporated into the general catalogues, access to the collections was difficult since it was virtually impossible to know what was even contained within them. Under these conditions, twentieth-century writers, bibliographers and erotica scholars such as Guillaume Apollinaire, Pascal Pia, Georges Bataille, Patrick Kearney and Gershon Legman were able to gain privileged access to materials held out of reach from the majority of library patrons, and so make their own catalogues and bibliographic summaries. At stake was both a system of privilege and induction in the control of who could view those texts, and a management system based upon the policing of public morals and limiting pornographic circulation. Curiously, this management of morals persisted in library practices even where legality and obscenity were not state concerns applied to the actual publication of such texts. As Naomi Salaman has remarked, the restriction of access employed by the British Library to its Private Case was not a question of consistency with the law in making illegal books inaccessible—on the contrary,

many of the items in the Private Case were not banned, they were merely scandalous and provocative. The library was thus concerned not to be seen to encourage pornographic reading and aid in the cultural proliferation of obscenity.³

Similarly, the BNF underwent a relaxation of state censorship in the republican rebirth of the last thirty years of the nineteenth-century, and yet the Enfer collection in that time remained highly inaccessible. A curt description of the Enfer appears in a guide for readers and visitor to the library's print collections published in 1895. It asserts the general contents of this collection 'are only communicated subject to the opinion of the librarian', and that 'images or other works of null value are not communicated at all'. The bulk of the collection was 'without any interest' and 'most often idiotically obscene'. Moreover, accessing the collection was virtually impossible since, supposedly, no one in the library service even possessed a key to the cabinet in which the obscene works were housed.⁴ Similarly, Jean Paillet complained in 1894 that only one guardian of the collection possessed a key to the cabinet in which it was held, and that one had to know 'how to pronounce the open-sesame otherwise its doors would remain closed'.⁵

It might be tempting then to regard restrictions on access to erotic materials as the mark of an attempt to deter sexual curiosity. But, on the contrary, the creation and maintenance of collections such as the Private Case and the Collection de l'Enfer conformed to Michel Foucault's description of sexuality at the end of the nineteenth century, as a discourse designed not to dissuade or smother titillation and fascination, but one that sought to contain desire, to designate it and to command its parameters while sanctioning sexuality as an inherently validated system of meaning.⁶ The limited and exclusive conditions of access to these collections throughout most of the twentieth century indicates that access has been bound up with systems of class, race, gender, educational privilege, and nepotism but also shows that the guardians of these collections, especially the intellectual enthusiasts of them, have been engaged in propagating a vision of sexual knowledge as necessarily arcane, but propagating sexual knowledge nonetheless. There was a perception of a need to secrete, obscure and contain erotica, to limit its presumed misuse by the supposedly immoral masses and to ensure its preservation as something of great value. From the end of the nineteenth century in France, that value was attributed increasingly to the nation—the Collection de l'Enfer was an

energetic and hermeneutic resource that enriched culture, but only to the extent that it remained hidden.

Knowledge of the Collection de l'Enfer or the Private Case could be achieved but only through true devotion, education and induction, something of which the even the average middle-class library patron would clearly be deemed unworthy. This system of access has regulated public knowledge of erotica not by repressing or reinforcing but by mediating its censorship. Guillaume Apollinaire, the decadent poet and the Collection de l'Enfer's first bibliographer, claimed that the collection's contents had originally only been grouped together in anticipation of single act of destruction to rid the library of all its unsavoury material, and that its name (the Hell Collection) derived from plans for it to be burned once an auto-da-fe was issued authorising the whole-scale destruction of its contents.⁷ But that document was never issued. Another speculative explanation about the name is that it was an abbreviation of the word *enfermée* (shut away), and that it was never in any danger of destruction.⁸

The renowned bibliographer of the Collection de l'Enfer, Pascal Pia, claimed access to the collection was never as difficult as others have made out.⁹ He remarked that no library makes known its possession of a collection that it does not wish anyone to consult.¹⁰ Clearly though, it was not *just anyone* the library wished to seduce with its more exotic wares. Pia's own privileged status as one of the few deemed worthy to study the contents of the Collection de l'Enfer blinded him to the highly exclusive nature of the access, which librarians made possible only under tightly regulated conditions. High social class, gender, educational privilege and specialist induction featured invariably in the criteria that determined who was permitted access.

It is also clear that once allowed into the Collection de l'Enfer, the inner circle of initiates which included Apollinaire and Pia were free to disseminate knowledge of the collection to a wider intellectual public—hence the notoriety that surrounded it in French intellectual milieux from the turn of the century until the nineteen-seventies. Prior to the liberalisation of erotica that occurred in France after World War I, such intermediaries enabled a uniquely modern set of possibilities of access to banned pornographic texts—not the fragile open market access of the text in its

random illegal public circulation, but a very tailored and exclusive access for the right kind of upper-class, educated, intellectual man.

The emergence of the Private Case and Enfer bibliographic intermediary was the apex for the generation of a deep mystique around the collections. The first such exercise was the bibliography of Apollinaire, Perceau and Fleuret in 1913 which sold 1500 copies within the first three years of its publication by the semi-respectable press the *Mercure de France*, a company that also published salacious *romans de mœurs* that recounted tales of adultery, frigidity and obsessive desire, as well as pseudo-medical sexological manuals.¹¹ Its title referred to the collection as 'famous' (*cette célèbre collection*). A re-edited version six years later sold equally well, suggesting that already a much larger public was taking an interest in the existence of secret and hidden collection than the rather tiny group of scholars who actually used it.¹² Before this, access to works in the collection even for scholarly experts was extremely limited because no entries for it appeared in the library catalogue, the practice also of the British Museum's Private Case collection.¹³

Pascal Pia claimed that no one was ever refused access to the Enfer collection, except on one occasion when his own request to consult the *Karma Sutra*, for the purposes of a French re-edition he had been commissioned to compile, was initially rejected by the head librarian. The librarian's reason for refusing was that Pia's re-edition could be of no nature likely to enrich the treasury of French culture. Pia was able to convince him otherwise by pointing out that current French editions were based on English translations.¹⁴ The interaction perhaps suggests something in itself about the priorities of the librarian who may have been convinced as much by Pia's plea for intellectual rigour as by the subtext of his invocation to national pride in competition with English scholarship. The shameful thought of a French edition relying on British accounts triumphed over the fear of proliferating the exotically obscene Indian text and even over the low estimation of its place within the French national heritage. For Pia, the story illustrated just how democratic and accessible the Enfer collection really had been under republican government throughout the twentieth century.

Given that Pia lived through the Nazi Occupation of France, and wrote clandestinely for the Resistance newspaper *Combat*, at grave risk to his life, it is perhaps not surprising to find him dismissive of the indignant claims of others about

the 'censoring' practices of the BNF under the liberal Third Republic. But he also neglected to mention that the likelihood of him personally being denied any access was minor, given his status as a privileged white male intellectual who specialised in the history of literature and was hence authorised to study erotica. Would his *Karma Sutra* request have succeeded if he were less educated, working-class, black, Algerian, a woman or even just a white male intellectual who was not an expert on the kinds of texts in question? Pia also used this anecdote to claim that the BNF policies of access and exclusion were never about an attempt to police morals, that their primary concern was to prevent people from copying out banned pornographic texts and re-publishing them. This disclaimer appears, too, in Gershon Legman's account of the Private Case.¹⁵ Neither Pia nor Legman appeared to consider that there was anything remarkable in libraries restricting the circulation of perfectly legal licentious books. Nor is it clear if restricting access to erotica scholars actually did prevent such texts from being copied. Pia's story suggests even he was indeed morally 'policed' in his request for access, but his position of privilege (as French, as male, as educated, and as an expert) allowed him to negotiate and ultimately secure permission to study the text.

As the literary historian Annie Stora-Lamarre notes, BNF librarians at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth continued to police materials they deemed obscene through testing access policies, in spite of the increasing liberalisation of censorship of licentious publications throughout that period.¹⁶ That was the part of the curious ambivalence of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French republican approach to the management of public morals. Throughout the Third Republic (1871–1940) most erotic texts were legal to produce, sell and read in France, but the conditions under which they could be sold were regulated, and the advertising of them was subject to prosecution.¹⁷ So it was that the publisher Charles Offenstadt faced court sanction in October 1909 since his pseudo-medical treatises on frigidity and sexual perversions written by the likes of Jean Fauconney (aka Dr Caufeynon, aka Jean Fort, aka Dr Eynon), also tended to feature advertisements on the back pages promoting salubrious works of erotic narrative, and were sold in adjacent shelves in the store he owned.¹⁸ As Carolyn Dean notes, in the last decades of the nineteenth century, pornography 'increasingly replaced prostitution as the privileged metaphor of moral decline', although no one

could exactly define what constituted pornography or how it could be distinguished from art, and judgements about what was considered obscene tended to be 'felt' rather than reasoned.¹⁹ The view that women, children and the working classes in particular needed to be protected from the corruption of public morals informed legal and hygienist judgements about obscenity, and BNF policies about public access to its Enfer collection undoubtedly followed suit.

Pascal Pia also claimed that the BNF was only really intent on restricting access to the Collection de l'Enfer in the old days of the library when membership cards were handed out rather more readily than they are today. More liberal approaches to guarding the reserve collection began to occur after World War II because the BNF was, by then, already demanding proof of the applicant's specialised researcher status in order to gain a library patron ID; anyone asking to view items in the Collection de l'Enfer, then, could already be assumed to be of a certain educational privilege, with its associated likely class correlation.²⁰ But it is here, in Pia's justification, the assumption persists that privileged intellectualism (which throughout most of the twentieth century has been largely the domain of upper-class men), would ensure that the texts would only be gazed upon by the right kind of eyes, and that they would be safeguarded against reproduction and hence proliferation in culture.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the only overtly stated signifier of worthiness to view both the Enfer collection and the British Library Private Case was the researcher's expert status and specific research justification. But for both collections such justifications exceeded the demands for obtaining other kinds of reserve items. The British Library's protocol was particularly labyrinthine. To obtain Private Case works, one had first to write to the library and inquire if the particular work sought was contained there, and only then after confirmation of its place in the collection, could the work be requested with justification. As the disgruntled Marxist researcher, Peter Fryer, complained in his account of the obstructiveness of the Private Case system: 'Access to the case represented a freemasonry in itself, with the museum staff sedulously attempting to hide, first the existence of the collection, and then, if a reader proved adamant, the precise whereabouts of individual books.'²¹ Works in the collection were doubly exclusive because no catalogue existed for the texts within it. Works in the Enfer and Private Case collections could be requested

by expert scholars, but only if they could name the particular text they wished to consult. Bibliographies like those of Apollinaire and Pia for the Collection de l'Enfer, and those of Alfred Rose and Gershon Legman for the Private Case, were thus vital in enabling scholars to know what was actually in the collection and via which call number to request items. The fact that librarians in both the Collection de l'Enfer and the Private Case allowed select writers and scholars to compile such bibliographies by providing them with privileged access to secret library records indicates that the very librarians who created and maintained these exclusive collections clearly wanted *certain* people to have access to them. The ability to gain access to the erotic knowledges embedded within such collections was conditional upon having consulted a specialist bibliography. Bibliographers acted as intermediaries between the libraries and a broader intellectual and enthusiast community.

Gershon Legman tells a story that illustrates just how convoluted was the system of exclusivity that operated around the Private Case. He claims the erotica scholar Eric Dingwall who was a long time honorary curator of the Private Case in the early twentieth century, had an excellent sensor for weeding out the dubious voyeur who undeservedly sought access to the Collection for spurious motivations. Gershon claims that an American dentist touring Europe approached Dingwall asking to consult unnamed items in the collection (first clue). On being pressed he asked to see a copy of the widely known erotic spanking novel *Fanny Hill* (second clue, since anyone could guess that the Private Case might contain a copy of *Fanny Hill*). Moreover he could not even name which edition he required (third clue). But the dentist finally gave himself away entirely by revealing that he did not know the meaning of the bibliographic abbreviations 8vo or 12mo listed next to items in Dingwall's registrum and which refer to the paper size of folios based on folded paper printing. At this point the dentist was politely ushered out.²² It is not entirely clear which exact elements in the dentist defined him as the wrong kind of person to gain access—that he was American? That he was a dentist and not a literary scholar? That he had no focused research topic is most likely to have played a role—it is a recurrent theme in such practices of exclusion to this day. But in fact what Legman's anecdote reveals is that the one clear criterion used for determining the unworthiness of the American dentist was his lack of specialised knowledge of how

the collection *itself* worked. Thus it was pre-established initiation into the mysteries of the Private Case that qualified a (preferably European) literary gentlemen for access to it. But that set of attitudes was peculiar to its era. The British Library throughout the nineteen-seventies actually purged its Private Case collection of materials after revising its contents, and found much of it to be no longer offensive to public morals. Around one-third of the collection was thus dissolved into the general collection and catalogue.²³

In the BNF's recent account of itself the origins of the Collection de l'Enfer is described as an exercise in restricting access to 'motivated researchers' only. But it is clear that not just any kind of 'motivation' was required. No new materials have been added to the Collection d'Enfer since 1972, and yet access has remained restricted by several levels of verification of one's expert researcher status. While most of the Reserve section is devoted to rare and old books, the Enfer collection also contains twentieth-century works that remain within it because they were confiscated as censored, obscene publications under the Vichy regime and later too in the era of Charles de Gaulle. Anyone who has worked with texts in that collection can confirm that both the Enfer items and other pornographic items in the Reserve collection have, until recently, required more specific justification of usage than other types of texts, as if the more focused one's project, the greater the guarantee of some 'legitimate' need as opposed to some idle and therefore suspect curiosity. It is probably fair to say that narrow specialisation in French academic custom is more often taken as a mark of quality than many other scholarly cultures. The necessity to prove that one has a precise research agenda operates as the mark of a real scholar as opposed to a vague articulation of interest assumed to belong to the salaciously motivated dilettante. It is unlikely that concerns about vandalism or theft are the cause of this added layer of surveillance and restriction. As reserve items, the Enfer texts are already well protected from vandalism and theft since reserve patrons cannot take bags or pens into the reserve reading room, and items may be perused only one at time in close proximity to the librarian's desk. The ongoing persistence of specific exclusionary practices around historic pornography in the BNF signals a deeper set of attitudes that view not only education, but more particular intellectual specialisation, as the criteria for ensuring an appropriate, non-voyeuristic gaze on sexual historic materials. That these materials are guarded so carefully still now,

even while they are opened to public exhibition suggests that it is no longer a concern about *who* should examine them, but rather about the conditions under which they are studied and the esteem that should surround those ritualised arrangements.

Lynn Hunt, in her introduction to the edited volume *The Invention of Pornography*, made a significant point about the salience and ambiguity of the Collection de l'Enfer, noting both the many obstacles that have kept researchers from accessing the materials within it, but also claiming a central importance for the collection and others like it within the history of sexuality, since the creation of special licentious book collections in European national libraries signalled a turning point in the modern construction of pornography as a distinct category of meaning.²⁴ What Hunt hints at but does not quite elaborate is an account of erotic collections as only partially in the business of limiting access to such materials, and more significantly, effectively segregating erotica as a genre of archive and assigning to it a precise symbolic significance. Further to that suggestion, in the French case we might consider the enshrinement of such texts as cultural artefacts to be part of a simultaneous valorisation and containment of them within visions of national patrimony, as has become increasingly apparent in recent attempts by the BNF to present the collection as a museum.

Since 1537 in France the law of the 'dépôt légal' has obliged publishers to deposit a copy in the Bibliothèque Nationale of all works published on French territory. Historically this law has served the dual function of preserving books for national posterity, as well as supporting state surveillance of publication since any book not deposited in the national library is automatically in violation of the law. Illegal books confiscated by the French state thus ended up in the Collection de l'Enfer, making it a spectacularly inclusive collection of materials both legal and illegal, both lauded and banned. The combination of the growth of police surveillance in an increasingly centralised absolutist state with a flourishing pornographic urban print culture in the final years of the *Ancien Régime*, saw the French state acquire a large collection of pornographic works seized during arrests and confiscations.²⁵ In an era where sexual licentiousness was frequently coupled with political satire and critique, the zeal of the French police for pursuing individuals who published and collected such works was intense. This resulted in a

substantial state collection of pornography, and at some point either under the July monarchy of Louis-Philippe d'Orléans during the eighteen-thirties, or more probably later than this, during the Second Empire of Louis Napoléon, these materials were separated from the larger Bibliothèque and preserved in the special Collection de l'Enfer.²⁶ Here then is perhaps the first way to consider the ambivalence of such collections—both the preservation of the Enfer's materials and the integrity of it as a collection derive *from* state surveillance and censorship. Hence while it was a state repository of seized materials, it also rescued banned materials from oblivion and preserved them as historic documents such that they were available to be incorporated into later visions of the national intellectual heritage.²⁷

But more specifically worthy of consideration is the BNF decision to preserve the integrity of the Enfer collection at the moment its obscenity was clearly acknowledged as irrelevant—sometime around 1970 when the last items were added. The early seventies saw a flourishing of print pornography throughout Western Europe coupled with a widespread relaxation of censorship. Protecting the French public from obscenity thus became a redundant motive for maintaining a system of limited access to the Collection de l'Enfer given that far more graphic texts could be found at large in sex shops and bookstores, an effect now massively reinforced by the growth of internet pornography. Its special and difficult status once suggested a need to protect an arcane erotic knowledge that must be sought, pursued, wooed and approached with the correct class and education, in opposition to the splayed, naked and easy contemporary erotic knowledges available without any special class background or education to the random internet surfer and red-light district *flâneur*. What could possibly be the point of an erotica print collection in a national library in the age of internet porn, with its browsable hierarchies of soft to hard core, kinky to SM, smutty to scat, with each pay site claiming to offer the 'real' edge of what is imaginable if only you have a few dollars spare on your credit or debit card or PayPal account? The erotica collections of the BNF and the British Library are of another era, one where the imagination was thought to be most exquisitely teased by the possible but improbable access to hidden archives of an indiscreet past. In the face of this disjuncture, the apparently pointless obstructive conditions surrounding access to materials in these collections point toward another explanation.

'*La patrimoine*' ('Patrimony') is the precise term used by the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in its description of its reserve holdings, including the Collection de l'Enfer.²⁸ This term must be understood here in that rather unique sense in which it is referred to in French national culture. *Patrimoine* derives from that Latin *patrimonium*—'of the father'.²⁹ Patrimony suggests a paternal inheritance, the nation as a gendered and parental fatherland imbued with a certain cultural wealth. The term is used to refer to all museum holdings and national treasures; once a year on the *journée de la patrimoine*, when most Parisian galleries and museums are free of entry charge, hordes of school children descend upon them. The Paris commune produces gold-toned coin medals for each participating site, and children are invited to spend their pocket money collecting these in a tidy venture that grandly compensates the museums for their lost entrance income on that day, while also fostering civic identification in the miniature future inheritors of the fatherland. In official BNF statements, the preservation of original collections is signalled as one of the library's missions of preserving patrimony. On the BNF website the Collection de l'Enfer specifically is described as one of the 'glories of the Reserve' collection.³⁰ Texts that challenged the standards of obscenity of the French past, for all that these standards may be outdated, are thereby marked as revered national objects.

France has a curiously eclectic appropriation of some rather unlikely aspects of the Parisian urban landscape in its collation of a national patrimony. That patrimony includes a sewer museum, which was enshrined as the mark of civilisation since its opening in 1861 under the reign of Louis Napoléon.³¹ It also includes a section of the underground catacombs where the bones of dead Parisian ancestors have been stacked ever since they were dug up from over-burdened cemeteries at the end of the eighteenth century. That peculiar feature emerged on account of the sudden expansion of the urban landscape necessary for the accommodation of a burgeoning industrial population moving from country to town. Tourist visits have been conducted there ever since, and near the place of Denfert-Rochereau one can enter a small green shed and, on the hour, pay a public attendant a fee and be led along a well-maintained series of tunnels lined with the neatly stacked bones and skulls of those whose graves were emptied.

The catacomb official visit, like the erotica in the Collection de l'Enfer, is just a glimpse of a much grander occulted mass. The catacombs are literally a subterranean mirror of the city. They extend through large sections of Paris beneath the fourteenth, fifteenth and twentieth *arrondissements*; their tunnels follow the above-ground streets that were mapped in the nineteenth century, and they even bear the street signs as if they are a shadow or ghost version of the urban landscape. They are frequented by night-time visitors, mostly young male 'cataphiles' who are inclined to adopt codenames, and make rendezvous through online chat room appointments that may or may not be pursued, in the flesh, underground. The non-official-visit catacombs are strictly illegal and occasionally patrolled by police, though this has not stopped their devotees from decorating the walls of those massive interior chambers with murals both grandiose and grungy, or from building shrines and mud furniture to nurture (judging from the litter to be found there) social gatherings fuelled by canned beer, crisps and hash and tobacco blended joints.³²

Though they clearly each serve different official roles and needs in French society, the catacombs, the sewers and the archived erotica of the Collection de l'Enfer all appear to have a curious bipolar character as both glorious tokens of a state-sanctioned national treasure and as the underground refuse of official culture. They all have the property, too, of a passage or chamber, a bejewelled hollow, a vagina or womb-like hidden secret place. In their official appropriations, one must enter according to precise and controlled ritual (the guided tour, the monitored exhibition or the supervised reserve inspection). They are places of danger and excess, which must be sectioned, contained and filtered in small doses to the public. That such outlying aspects of culture are both treasured and siphoned to the population at all is perhaps worthy of some curiosity, albeit impossible to satisfy in the space of this article. The answer may lie in the general features of French intellectual values throughout the nineteenth century to which elites were educationally exposed, and which were heavily committed to a variety of philosophical eclecticism.³³ That meant incorporating, among a plethora of ideals, the encyclopaedism of Enlightenment intellectuals and aspiring to a universalist vision of French culture that excluded no aspect of the human experience that might be championed as a source of national pride. The taming of the urban unconscious—

the city's moral, cultural and corporeal refuse—was assimilable to a vision of national patrimony because it was taken to be a sign of civilisational supremacy. The French state's commitment to an extreme administrative centralisation also tended to produce a construction of national patrimony that was heavily dominated by Parisian urban achievements.

—THE 'ALLURE OF THE FORBIDDEN' AND THE 'EVIDENTLY UNDESIRABLE'

While the British Library's Private Case is a ready parallel of the BNF's Collection de l'Enfer, there are no apparent equivalents in Britain for the kinds of museum preservation of sewers and catacombs that have existed in Paris ever since the late nineteenth century. From a Kristevan perspective, throughout the nineteenth century both France and England had powerful cultural fascinations with the abject qualities of life and death, as expressed in Gothic and Romantic fiction, scatological humour and public discourses about burial, disease and corpses.³⁴ But France was peculiar in selecting urban underground landscapes of both death and excretion among its state-sanctioned tourist offerings. The Collection de l'Enfer also enjoyed a level of public notoriety from the late nineteenth century onwards, though it was not until the beginning of the twenty-first century that it became temporarily open to public exhibition as a museum. However, the various catalogues of the collection published throughout the twentieth century did advertise its presence and reveal titillating hints of its contents. That was not so for the Private Case, and indeed there was little public knowledge of the British Library's erotica holdings until the publication of the Marxist journalist Peter Fryer's 1966 book, *Private Case, Public Scandal*, which suggested elite vested interests governed practices of secrecy about the collection, in part because it contained scandalous documents that might expose upper-class crimes and moral embarrassments.³⁵ Up until 1962, the library insisted that all its holdings were already listed in the public catalogue, effectively denying the very existence of the Private Case that had resided in the library since the eighteen-fifties. Then, throughout the nineteen-seventies, the British Library actually purged its Private Case collection of materials that had been reviewed and found to be no longer offensive to public morals. It dissolved around one-third of the Case into the general collection and catalogue.³⁶ Not until 1991 was there the publication of anything like an officially sanctioned description of the collection.³⁷

But if France has had some peculiar contents to its vision of national patrimony that find no parallel in British practices, British erotica scholars and librarians did nonetheless employ models of feminine allure, secretion and erotic seduction in their visions of the British Library's Private Case, suggesting that something of a comparable status is attributed to preserved erotic works. There, too, the works formed abject elements of official culture, tamed and contained but also treasured. The secrecy and exclusivity surrounding them was a crucial element of their value.

Intellectual interest in erotica collections promulgated a mystifying and quasi-mystical discourse about them, and hence about their experts as arbiters an arcane body of erotic knowledge. Throughout the twentieth century it was possible, but difficult, to access both the Collection de l'Enfer and the Private Case. And those who succeeded tended to define that privilege as imbued with a special kind of erotic tension all its own. The collection's contents were hidden but could be pursued and captured. They seduced the male intellectual with the promise of both a sexually imaginative excess and an inner access to the secret truths behind works of historical infamy. But they were not for just anyone, and only those deemed respectable and worthy could attain them. That tension was constituted according to a particular assumption of gender, object preference and fantasy disposition. In discussing the Private Case, the erotica aficionado and bibliographer Gershon Legman described what he saw as the 'allure of the forbidden' in the politics of such collections within research libraries. This allure, he claimed, could be understood similarly to his own experience of seeing men on a beach of the Côte d'Azur straining to look up the skirt of a passing woman on a bicycle on the other side of the street, while other beautiful women strolled virtually naked right in front of them.³⁸ For Legman, the exclusivity and labyrinthine processes involved in accessing sexual materials in such libraries formed an important part of the arousing power of the texts held within them.

Legman claimed that the difficult conditions of access to erotica collections in libraries were functionally imperative for the preservation of the forms of sexual excitement he imagined to be normal, and which were threatened by competing perverse influences in society. On the one hand, Legman's analogy about the girl on the bicycle disrupted assumptions about the distinction between scholarly interest and prurient voyeurism: the erotica bibliographer appears both scholarly and

voyeuristic, his seduction and intellectual credibility tastefully enmeshed. But the analogy also situates the gaze of the sexuality researcher firmly within a masculine heterosexual scopophilia. It constructs the library holdings themselves as passive female bodies in various states of dress and undress, enticing through a range of promise, coyness and tease. Legman criticised the past failure of research libraries to protect their erotica collections from theft based on their ill-considered assumptions that any patron consulting them would be 'a gentleman and a scholar'. At the same time, he likened his own frustrations with using such collections to the Old Testament fable of 'the patriarch Jacob blindly courting the wily Laban's daughters'; in other words, through the rubric of a desiring man engaged in a game of polyamorous heterosexual taunting.³⁹

In Legman's vision, the right for 'normal' sexualities to thrive in library collections is championed against the 'evidently undesirable' body of texts representing perverse desires 'inimical to the human race'.⁴⁰ Hence 'normal' sexuality imagined as the active masculine researcher and passive feminine object of study was the model through which he attempted to decode the systems of privilege that surrounded erotica collections. He railed against SM porn, claiming it inspired mass murder, and viewed examples of it as macabre specimens, 'like abortions bottled in formaldehyde in a social pathologist's cupboard'.⁴¹ Similarly, Patrick Kearney worried about the possibility that some members of the reading public might derive erotic stimulation from 'books dealing with Nazi and Japanese War crimes'. He suggested that there was an irrational injustice in the English ban on John Cleland's wholesome, heterosexual *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*, while books 'with titles such as *The Pleasures of the Torture Chamber*, whose purpose is all too obvious', should be allowed unrestricted sale.⁴² Both Kearney and Legman invoked the spectre of the perverse erotica as a part of a protest against the censorship and library access restriction of the kinds of materials that appealed to their own tastes. The difficulties of using erotica collections (for Kearney) and the frustrations of state censorship (for Legman) thus both enabled an invocation of unjust hypocrisy in the repression of wholesome desires at the hands of perverse elites. The nonsensical order in which cheerful antique heterosexual smut remained unlisted in catalogues and locked in a safe in the basement of the British Library while tacky SM pornographic films like *Ilsa, She-Wolf of the SS* could be purchased

from mail-order catalogues, drove Legman and others to speculate that corrupt elites must be responsible for ensuring that their own perverse preferences were publicly circulated while more wholesome erotica lay out of reach.⁴³

For Legman 'normally erotic art and literature'—a large proportion of the kinds of works that filled the Private Case—were ever vulnerable to 'the sadists who are running the show owing to the tremendous monetary and power advantage their cold immorality gives them over the majority of normal people'.⁴⁴ This is clearly a rather loaded remark, suggesting that sexual perversion cohabits necessarily with the highest of political elites and that a lack of all morals, which is necessarily indicated by an SM erotic disposition, is indeed even the very source of power for political elites who control state institutions. It is curious that Legman and Kearney attributed privilege to those 'other' desires, given that it was they themselves, with their self-assumed 'normal' sensibilities, who were precisely the ones to gain privileged access to the exclusive Private Case at the height of its inaccessibility.

This type of view about sadomasochistic desire as the cause and foundational pathology of authoritarian power was ubiquitous in postwar European cultures, and ensured that such fantasies both suffered from, and enjoyed, a level of taboo and exquisite unspeakability. As the work of Kriss Ravetto, Marcus Stiggleger, Andrew Hewitt, Carolyn J. Dean, myself and others have shown, the attempt, in one form or another, to create connections between aberrant sexual desire and Nazism has been a recurring theme throughout expression of World War II memory, in historical, philosophical, cinematic, media, political and literary forms.⁴⁵ Legman's and Kearney's concern to assert a normative pleasure in association with their struggle for greater freedom from censorship and restricted access to erotic archives must be seen with the context of that larger *Zeitgeist*. But the assertion helped to suggest a view of erotica collections as secret, mysterious and arcane: if perverse elites were so keen to stop the masses from accessing their contents, then something both precious and forbidden must surely be contained within.

When the BNF opened its Collection de l'Enfer for public exhibition in 2008, the sexual content of its texts was revealed in all its antiquarian splendour. Although the themes and acts depicted in works such as the 1749 *Memoirs of Fanny Hill* or the 1771 *Venus En Rut* are explicit and varied, they could hardly compete in the stakes of obscenity compared to the vast array of freely available pornography now available

to anyone with an internet connection. But in a more subtle regard, the knowledge of old erotica may indeed unsettle modern assumptions, namely the still-common myth that the late twentieth century has brought more imaginative liberation into sexual practices and fantasies in the post-industrial world through the greater availability of sexual imagery and the collapse of social mores relating to sexual and bodily containment. This is the teleological myth of sexual progress mentioned by Foucault.⁴⁶ Pre-nineteenth-century erotic fiction in particular has the capacity to diversify appreciation of sexual possibilities through the fundamentally differing visions of pleasure and technique that can be found in many early modern erotic texts. As the work of Peter Cryle has shown, the pleasure structures of eighteenth-century libertine arousal lacked all concept of 'foreplay' and of the sudden climactic finality of the modern concept of orgasm.⁴⁷ Many of the works contained in the Enfer collection are of that genre Foucault described as the '*ars erotica*', in opposition to the later, medicalised '*scientia sexualis*' of nineteenth-century texts. Although we now have a range of diverse views of sexual possibility, normality, necessity and satisfaction at our global electronic disposal, the understandings that contemporary erotica suggests are also still conditioned by a range of continuing medical discourses of sex. The Enfer and the Private Case texts may not deliver on the promise of forbidden secrets that their reputation has so long suggested, but perhaps in their vision of playful games, rebounding pleasures and artistic techniques of seduction and arousal, there is nonetheless an antidote to the banality of post-industrial porn?

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Alison Moore is a senior lecturer in modern European history at the University of Western Sydney.

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¹ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. 1: *La Volonté de savoir*, Gallimard, Paris, 1976, p.20.

² <<http://www.hotels-paris-rive-gauche.com/blog/2007/12/12/lenfer-bibliotheque-eros-secret-exposition-classee-x-bnf/>>, viewed 22 October 2010.

³ Naomi Salaman, 'Changed Press Marks on the Private Case: A Study of Microfilm', *Journal of the History of Collections*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2002, pp. 301–2.

- ⁴ Henri Bouchot, Louis Morand et Mme Hervian, *Le Cabinet des estampes de la Bibliothèque nationale: guide du lecteur et du visiteur, catalogue général et raisonné des collections qui y sont conservées*, E. Dentu, Paris, 1895, p. 17.
- ⁵ Cited on <[http://edicas.quatrevents.fr/site/jge.cgi?Type\]=20080318165024&journal_id=20080319100742](http://edicas.quatrevents.fr/site/jge.cgi?Type]=20080318165024&journal_id=20080319100742)>, viewed 12 March 2010.
- ⁶ Foucault, pp. 34–5.
- ⁷ Annie Stora-Lamarre, 'Plaisirs interdits: L'Enfer de la Bibliothèque Nationale', in Pascal Ory (ed.), *La censure en France à l'ère démocratique (1848–)*, Editions Complexe, Paris, 1999, p. 44.
- ⁸ Wayland Yong, *Eros Denied: Sex in Western Society*, Grove Press, New York, 1964, p. 37.
- ⁹ Pascal Pia, *Les Livres de l'Enfer du XVIème siècle à nos jours*, Tome 1, C Coulet et A Faure, Paris, 1978, p. 11.
- ¹⁰ Pia, pp. 11–12.
- ¹¹ Guillaume Apollinaire, Fernand Fleuret and Louis Perceau, *L'Enfer de la Bibliothèque nationale. Bibliographie méthodique et critique de tous les ouvrages composant cette célèbre collection*, Nouvelle édition, Bibliothèque des curieux, Paris, 1919.
- ¹² Pia, p. 8.
- ¹³ Gershon Legman, 'The Allure of the Forbidden' in Martha Cornog (ed.), *Libraries, Erotica and Pornography*, Phoenix, 1991, pp. 43–4.
- ¹⁴ Pia, pp. 10–11.
- ¹⁵ Legman, pp. 59.
- ¹⁶ Stora-Lamarre, 'Plaisirs interdits', p. 43.
- ¹⁷ Annie Stora-Lamarre, *l'Enfer de la Troisième République: Censeurs et pornographes (1881–1914)*, Imago, Paris, 1990, p. 133.
- ¹⁸ *La Gazette des Tribunaux*, 26 November 1909, p. 1028.
- ¹⁹ Carolyn J. Dean, *The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality and other Fantasies in Interwar France*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 2000, pp. 37–40.
- ²⁰ Pia, p. 10.
- ²¹ Peter Fyer, *Private Case, Public Scandal*, Secker & Warburg, London, 1966. Cited in Jonathan Green and Nicholas J. Karolides, *Encyclopedia of Censorship*, Facts On File, New York, 2005, p. 457.
- ²² Legman, pp. 59–61.
- ²³ Patrick J. Kearney, *A History of Erotic Literature*, Macmillan, London, 1982, p. 62.
- ²⁴ Lynn Hunt (ed.), *The Invention of Pornography: Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500–1800*, Zone Books, New York, 1996, p. 9.
- ²⁵ See Hunt, *The Invention of Pornography*, pp. 18–19.
- ²⁶ There is some ambiguity about this. Lynn Hunt supports the 1830s' claim of Apollinaire. See Hunt, *The Invention of Pornography*, p. 13. Pascal Pia dates the collection from the 1870s when the Larousse

- dictionary first contained a reference to it. Pia, p. 12. The BNF itself admits both possibilities. See <http://www.bnf.fr/pages/collections/coll_res.htm>, viewed 5 April 2007.
- ²⁷ As one group of enthusiasts proclaimed, 'what an historical shame' it would have been if the *Enfer* works had been destroyed rather than enshrined in the national library. Delphine Descaves, Gwenna Briant, Katell Chantreau and Stéphane Corcoral, 'L'Enfer de la bibliothèque nationale', *L'Oeil électrique* 13, <<http://oeil.electrique.free.fr/article.php?numero=13&articleid=108>>, viewed 7 February 2007. A point Legman suggests, too, about materials in the Private Case, Legman, p. 41.
- ²⁸ Bibliothèque Nationale de France, <http://www.bnf.fr/pages/collections/coll_res.htm>, viewed 5 April 2008.
- ²⁹ *Le petit Larousse illustré*, Paris, Larousse, 2004, p. 796.
- ³⁰ <http://www.bnf.fr/pages/collections/coll_res.htm>, viewed 5 April 2007.
- ³¹ See Donald Reid, *Paris Sewers and Sewermen: Realities and Representations*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Mass., 1991, pp. 37–52.
- ³² Patrick Saletta, *A la découverte des souterrains de Paris*, Sides, Paris, 1993; Guides Gallimard, *Paris Secret: Paris souterrain, Paris insolite*, Editions Nouveaux-Loisirs, Paris, 1997.
- ³³ Donald R. Kelly, *The Descent of Ideas: The History of Intellectual History*, Ashgate, Aldershot, 2002, pp. 20–2.
- ³⁴ Jonathan Dollimore, *Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture*, Routledge, New York, 1998.
- ³⁵ Peter Fryer, *Public Case, Private Scandal*, Secker & Warburg, London, 1966.
- ³⁶ Kearney, p. 62.
- ³⁷ *The Library of the British Museum*, The British Library, London, 1991.
- ³⁸ Legman, p. 36.
- ³⁹ Legman, pp. 38–9.
- ⁴⁰ Legman, p. 51
- ⁴¹ Legman, p. 68.
- ⁴² Kearney, p. 7.
- ⁴³ See Marcus Stiglegger, *Sadiconazista: Faschismus und Sexualität im Film, Gardez! Verlag*, Remscheid, 2000; see also Alison Moore, *Sexual Myths of Modernity: Sadism, Masochism and Historical Teleology*, Lexington Books, Lanham, 2011.
- ⁴⁴ Legman, p. 52.
- ⁴⁵ Kriss Ravetto, *The Unmaking of Fascist Aesthetics*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2001; Stiglegger, *Sadiconazista*; Andrew Hewitt, *Political Inversions: Homosexuality, Fascism and the Modernist Imaginary*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 1996; Carolyn J. Dean, *The Fragility of Empathy After the Holocaust*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2004; Moore, *Sexual Myths of Modernity*.
- ⁴⁶ Foucault, pp. 209–11.
- ⁴⁷ Peter Cryle, *The Telling of the Act: Sexuality as Narrative in Eighteenth and Nineteen-Century France*, University of Delaware Press, Delaware, 2002.