Rogue Performances: A Review of Abigail De Kosnik's *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom*

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Abstract

In *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom* (2016), Abigail de Kosnik establishes the idea of *rogue archives* as easily available, copyright-agnostic, and amateur-run digital archives that preserve non-traditional material. More than just a concept, De Kosnik's interdisciplinary and wide-ranging *rogue archives* are used as a framework to understand shifts in media, internet culture, and as sites of individual and community social media performances. This review, which was originally livetweeted, also considers its own performance, situating Twitter reviews as a continuation of eighteenth-century book culture.

This review was originally livetweeted. You can read the original threads here: https://twitter.com/historyofporn/status/1107292610597515266 and here: https://twitter.com/HistoryOfPorn/status/1107388760868704257

When I began reading Abigail De Kosnik's *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom* (MIT Press, 2016) with a professional eye, I was struck by the number of ways that it connected and resonated with my personal life and practice. Although I work at the Kinsey Institute Library and Special Collection as a graduate archivist and I am receiving the benefits of a traditional archival education, I have also been involved in independent and community archives for a number of years. Particularly, I have been working to preserve the communities and materials of marginalized groups from the generalized decay of the internet. *Rogue Archives* then, was a self-discovery. It also became an exploration: this book review was originally livetweeted as part of a year-long experiment to engage with authors and their communities while reading their work. As a result, this journal review will conclude with some thoughts on what the experience of a performative livetweet "remix" of an academic work is like for both the reviewer and the reviewed. [1]

Beginning in a way that is now almost traditional for archival studies, De Kosnik proclaims that "memory has gone rogue ... memory has *fallen into the hands of rogues*. From the late nineteenth through the late twentieth century, memory — not private, individual memory, but public, collective memory — was the domain of the state" [De Kosnik 2016, 1]. Her work, she declares, is not about outdated and possibly moribund analog archives, but about a new type of digital archive that she sees as avant-garde, a precursor of what is to come across all of the humanities. Although archival scholars might take exception at some of her characterizations, De Kosnik is deliberately setting her *rogue* archives in definitional opposition to *traditional* ones — and also drawing heavily on media studies criticism. [2]

The difference between *traditional* and *rogue* archives, is sometimes hard to express as is witnessed by De Kosnik's varying definitional approaches and levels of emphasis on one or more aspects throughout. Although another reader might complain about this drift, my feeling is that the subjects of the book are difficult to define and are sometimes deliberately boundary-challenging and queering. Regardless, the traits of rogue archives that are the most persistent from chapter to chapter are that they are: (1) largely run by people that do not have training or expertise in library and information studies, but dub themselves archivists; (2) available 24 hours a day, seven days a week to anyone with an internet connection; (3) nominally barrier-less to access; (4) ignorant, purposefully-ignorant, or maliciously ignorant of copyright laws and restrictions; (5) homes for "content that has never been, and would never likely be, contained in a [3]

traditional memory institution;" (6) home as well to people that have never been or would never likely be traditional; (7) identity-and culture-generating; and (8) achrontic and intertextual sites of identity and community performance, inspiration, reaffirmation, and repertoire [De Kosnik 2016, 2–4, 75–6, 152, 161, 255, 276, 288]. I will explore these traits further below.

There are a number of quibbles that can be taken with individual aspects of this definition. For example, one could argue that figures such as Henry Spencer Ashbee, the Victorian businessman-bibliophile who maintained an apartment in London filled with erotica and pornography and provided 24/7 access to select people, meets at least a few of the aspects of a *rogue archive*. However, it would not be possible for *any* physical archive to meet all of the requirements to become a De Kosnikian *rogue* archive. That, I would argue, points us to one of the most essential features of rogue archives: they *must* be digital. Copyright also emerges as a central differentiator of rogue archives. Though De Kosnik includes some discussion of archives that limit themselves to public domain material (i.e. The Gutenberg Project), the majority of the book is aimed at the historical senses of rogue: "vagabond, mischievous, wayward, and anomalous" [OED 2019]. As many *DHQ* readers know, *traditional* institutionally-affiliated digital archives like the Internet Archive or Whitman Archive cannot throw their concerns to the wind — they must be careful and sometimes overly-cautious about copyright infringement. However, they also have robust digital preservation frameworks and infrastructure in place to ensure the survivability of material for decades.

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Rogue Archives is structured in a rather unique way: each chapter is separated by what De Kosnik calls "breaks", which "are more informal, some are more experimental, and the rest are simply less rounded-out and more fragmentary than the chapters," which she says are more structured and written in a "straightforward academic style" [De Kosnik 2016, 21]. For example, Chapter Two considers archival "styles", which De Kosnik breaks down into a taxonomy of universal, community, and alternative. Universal archives "seek to replace canonicity and selective archiving" and the critics and experts that support and enable canons, with "comprehensive archiving, a process that strives to collect as many cultural texts as possible, to make all the texts equally accessible to the public, and to present all the texts as equally valuable" [De Kosnik 2016, 75]. Community archives, by contrast, support the "canon-expansion work that was begun by university reformists, striving to assemble and preserve texts that originate from, or bear direct relevance to, cultures that have been historically marginalized" [De Kosnik 2016, 75]. De Kosnik's alternative archiving style, however, ignores this binary, proposing "new canons, canons of new types of objects or objects that are ignored… assemblies of odd, strange, controversial, nongeneric, or radically new texts stand alongside those older sets of privileged works" [De Kosnik 2016, 75].

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The "break" between Chapters Two and Three, called "Archive Elves" was identified as particularly moving by several practicing archivists and students. This break describes the constant, unyielding, and academically-unexamined work that goes into maintaining an archive. After a few pages of description of the endless, thankless, and repetitious tasks undertaken by archivists, De Kosnik points out that users, unaware of the amount of work that goes into digital projects, just assume that things work like magic:

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> the nature of online infrastructuring is such that the infrastructure builders aim to make themselves
> and their work invisible, ghostly, and immaterial. If using a networked digital archive feels like using
> a magic memory machine, this is in part because both the server that stores data and serves it up
> on command, and the *servers* (archivists) who serve the archive users (on demand) and maintain
> the integrity of the archive, are concealed from the user's view. [De Kosnik 2016, 127]

As any reader that has undertaken a significant amount of technical work can attest, this is true. Infrastructure also includes, I would point out, the text you are reading now: the eye-pleasing paragraphs that you are reading were worked into the screen via the TEI-encoded 'magic' of the editors of this journal. This review article is built on top of more than a decade's worth of work by *DHQ* editors, volunteers, and archivists.

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By positing a meditation on the nature of archival work between arguments about types of archival style and culture, De Kosnik cleverly and subtly reinforces her argument, which goes something like this: rogue archival work, which is carried out in specific ways by minoritized groups, *is* work, and it *is* different because *they* are different and *they* are

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preserving *their* cultures. That these meditative breaks when combined with chapters would serve as effective teaching modules, speaks to the strength of De Kosnik's model. The result is a book that is an excellent teaching text for a number of disciplines and which may be of interest to DH educators.

The following chapters move away from theory and taxonomies in order to focus on a diverse series of case studies. De Kosnik's examples range from file sharing networks to more-traditional (in content) digital archives like the South Asian American Digital Archive, FAMA Collection, the Radfem Archive, and others. Most important for *DHQ* readers and larger audiences is her examination of fan fiction, represented mostly by Archive of Our Own (AO3). This chapter documents a long history of internet fan fiction and fan culture, from the 1990s to present, which occurs in roughly three different phases: centralization (1990s-early 2000s), de-centralization into social media (early to mid 2000s), and re-centralization into queer and feminist fan-controlled archives (late 2000s to present). 9

The establishment of these queer and feminist sites, she convincingly argues in her closing chapters, provided homes and sites of discovery for minoritized individuals. For a number of reasons, these communities especially embraced "archontic production", which is to say, in her first (2006) definitional attempt: 10

> fictional writings based on source texts, that is, texts that have been published; the writers of archontic literature are readers-turned-authors. Each source text is the foundation and core of an archive from which reader-authors make withdrawals (elements they wish to use) and into which they make deposits (their stories that incorporate those appropriated elements), thereby augmenting and enlarging the overarching archive. [De Kosnik 2016, 275]

Rogue Archives expands this definition to include "digital derivations", encompassing "appropriative writings, soundtracks, still and moving images, audiovisual works, games, and codes… constitute[ing] a vast swath of digital culture today" [De Kosnik 2016, 276].

By engaging with these materials, minoritized groups "perform" and "produce" the archive, and the support they receive encourages the production of new performances. This chapter showcases De Kosnik's insightful scholarship at its best, justifying the book's $45.00 hardcover price. *Rogue Archives* breaks new ground in its documentation of a desperately under-researched topic and provides valuable insight to fields as diverse as fan studies, media studies, archiving, sexuality, history, archival theory, and internet culture — to mention a few. 11

Finally, De Kosnik strikes at the heart of modern and digitally-mediated humanity: social media. In De Kosnik's view, social media — and perhaps even social identity — is a performance that can and should be studied. To extend that a little bit further, the irony that my livetweeted review of *Rogue Archives* can be (and was) read as a performance is not lost on me. Since the beginning of 2019, I have documented a number of book reviews that I have read through the lens of Twitter (much of which is available under the hashtag #tweetvaluation). The phenomenon of conference livetweeting has been examined, but I do not know of any other live-tweeted book reviews [Further Reading]. 12

Part of the purpose behind the ongoing experiment is that I personally engage and learn better when in conversation with an audience — even an imagined one. Another reason is that it has allowed direct engagement with authors such as in this particularly poignant reply from the author herself: 13
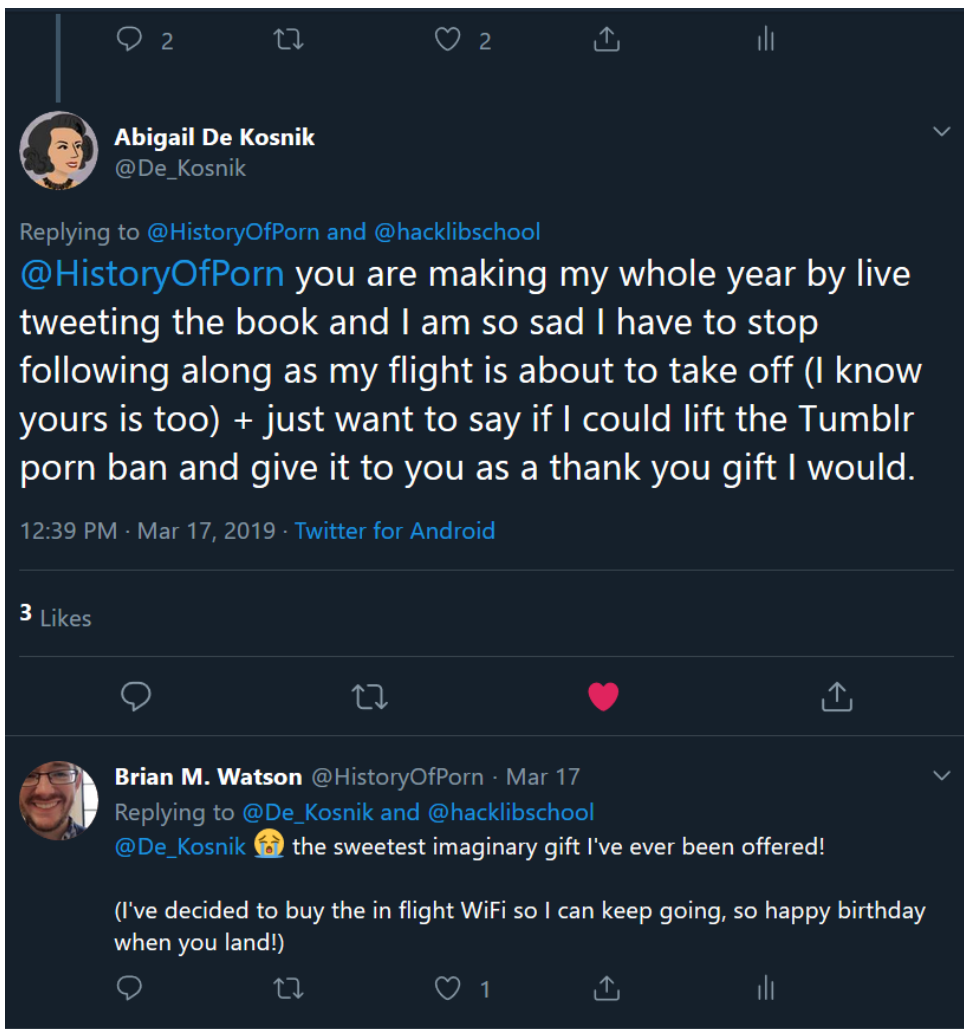
Figure 1.

Additionally, De Kosnik noted in a private message to the author that she enjoyed the experience of being livetweeted, and saw it as "an amazing archontic/remix work." The review triggered other events, including book purchases or further authorial replies:

Figure 2.

Figure 3.

Figure 4.

Most critically, live reviewing digitally recreates the experience of obsolete book culture. As historians of the book have noted, the reading of books prior to the twentieth century was a social, communal, and cultural experience. For example, in *The Social Life of Books* (2017), Abigail Williams documents how books were "the basis for communal entertainment, performance, and discussion" [Williams 2017, 58, 64]. Even though solitary reading became increasingly popular through the century, 14

> there were many reasons why individuals continued to read together. Some of these had to do with practical concerns [like lack of oil and candles, but also with] control over what was being read, and how…Women's reading became associated with sofas and softness rather than with the intellectually rigorous upright reading of men, and young women were castigated for this unbecoming lounging. [Williams 2017, 64, 51]

To reword this into De Kosnik's language, live reading is an 'achronological archrontic production.' This is the final point that I would like to demonstrate. One replier to my livethread remarked on the importance of the book to her own work: 15

Figure 5.

Indeed, this was taking place two days after the Christchurch Mosque Shootings, which demonstrated the result of rogue extremist archives, as I noted:
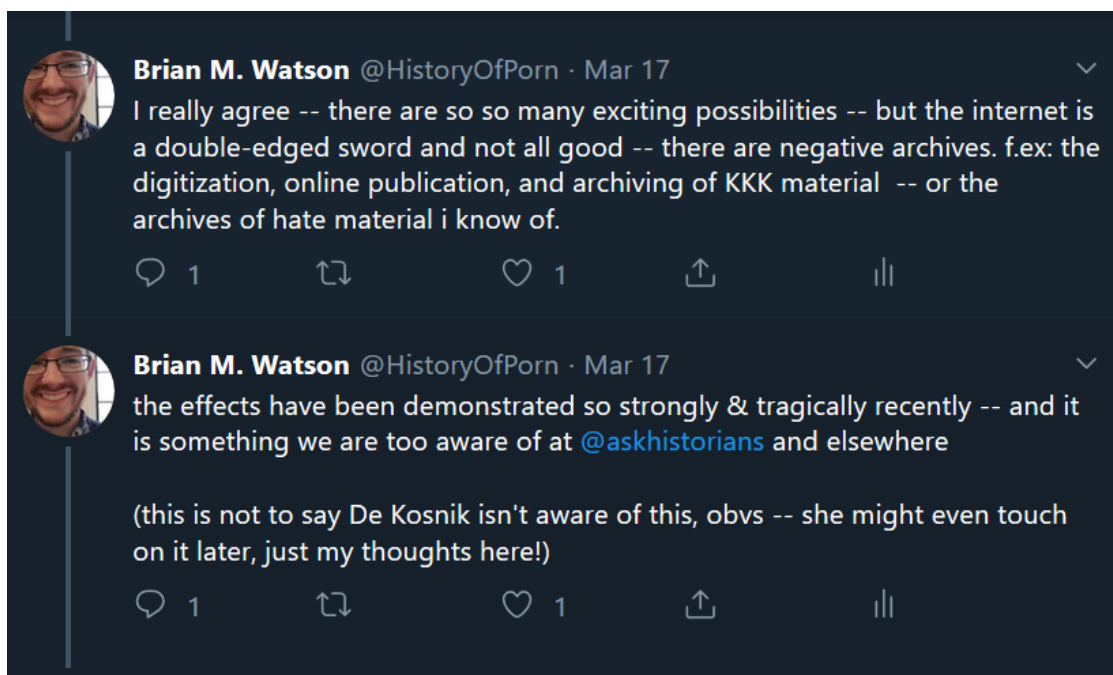

Figure 6.

The tweets demonstrate in a powerful way the double-edged nature of the internet. My only critique of *Rogue Archives* is to point out that such double-edgedness is overlooked. De Kosnik is perhaps too optimistic about the internet and rogue archives. For example, in discussing "The Promise of Democratization", she offers a number of "exciting political possibilities":

> vast quantities of cultural content [could] be preserved and made accessible to a broad public — marking an end to…"the selective tradition," which always grants priority to the culture that supports the narratives and identities of the dominant group… The possibility for "mass audiences" to invert the sociocultural hierarchy that places them at the bottom of the power structure of media, and to exhibit, en masse, their ability to treat the culture industries' products as the incomplete, often impoverished, basic matter from which they construct meaningful texts for themselves and their affinity-based communities. [De Kosnik 2016, 9–10]

It would be unfair to De Kosnik to criticize her for failing to see the future — *Rogue Archives* was written before the election of Donald Trump. A contemporary "performance" of it, though, is haunted by a spectre, a perverse Upside Down, where radicalized right-wing archives have also gone rogue. Rather than being a flaw, however, its autarchic world, more than anything else, is powerful evidence for the contemporaneity and even relevance of *Rogue Archives*: the understandings, tools, histories, and groundings laid out in this book can be used to understand the dark as well as the light. If memory, which is to say the humanities, has gone digitally rogue, then we must all beg, borrow, and steal in constructing the digital humanities. Rogues, after all, can steal from the rich as well as the poor.

Works Cited

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