My paper, “A Pornographic Avant-Garde: Boys in the Sand, LA Plays Itself, and the Construction of a Gay Masculinity,” examines two landmark gay hardcore pornographic films, arguing that, at the time of their release, these films aggressively positioned themselves as both serious works of art and pornography, garnering unprecedented mainstream attention and bringing new, post-Stonewall images of gay masculinity to a wider public during the brief era of “porno chic” in the early 1970s. I wrote this paper for Dr. Whitney Strub, while taking his class, “The Politics of Pornography.”

I began by searching out scholarly writing about LA Plays Itself, curious as to how this strange, aesthetically innovative film fit into a wider story of pornography and its reception in the 1970s. In researching LA Plays Itself, I quickly came to appreciate that its history is deeply entwined with that of the Wakefield Poole film, Boys in the Sand, another groundbreaking gay hardcore feature, released just months before it. I realized that my research would have to delve into the histories of both of these films and their respective filmmakers, Halsted and Poole.

I also sought out work by many of the leading scholars writing about pornography and representations of sexuality on screen, such as Linda Williams, Richard Dyer, and Jeffrey Escoffier. Searching online journal archives, such as JSTOR and Project Muse, I discovered invaluable scholarly articles by José Capino and Jack Stevenson, which placed these films in the contexts of queer history and queer theory. An intriguing citation in the endnotes of one of the Capino articles led me to David E. James’s The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles. Searching for relevant materials on WorldCat, I discovered an indispensable source of information on Halsted and the gay S/M milieu he inhabited, Patrick Moore’s book, Beyond Shame: Reclaiming the Abandoned History of Radical Gay Sexuality, which I was then able to find at Paley Library. I was also pleased to discover that Paley Library had a copy of Wakefield Poole’s autobiography, Dirty Poole.

Patrick Moore’s book led me to Drummer, the first major American gay S/M magazine. Jack Fritscher, who interviewed Halsted and Poole and reviewed their films for the magazine, maintains an archive of his contributions to Drummer on his own website. These interviews and reviews allowed me invaluable insight into how these films were understood by their filmmakers at the time they made them, as well as how they were received and discussed by members of the gay S/M subculture developing at the time.

In researching Fred Halsted and LA Plays Itself, I noticed that many of the secondary sources I was consulting cited the same 1975 dissertation from the University of Southern California, The Beginnings of Gay Cinema in Los Angeles: The Industry and the Audience, by Paul Siebenand. With the help of a librarian at Paley Library, I was able to obtain a bound copy of this dissertation through UMI Dissertation Publishing. The dissertation includes two separate, lengthy interviews with Fred Halsted, which not only offered me a wealth of information about LA Plays Itself, but also gave me a greater sense of the personality behind the film. These interviews with Halsted, who prided himself on his role as a provocateur, were full of so many quotable, fascinating statements, I was sometimes saddened that I had to limit myself to only making use of the statements relevant to my own argument about his film.

As I continued my research, my argument came to focus increasingly on the ways in which Poole and Halsted self-consciously positioned themselves as artists, rather than mere pornographers, in order to attract greater mainstream attention. As I discovered, to my own surprise, the unusual amount of mainstream attention their films had received, I decided that I needed to consult more primary source documents from the time. I needed to discover for myself how these provocative, pornographic films had been received in the pages of The New...
York Times, Variety, or The Village Voice. I found articles and reviews, in these and other newspapers and magazines from the time, through citations in scholarly writings about these films, as well as in consultation with Dr. Strub, whose own work on this era of American pornography had left him with helpful notes on possible dates or issues to pursue. Seeing first hand how these films were received and presented in the mainstream media of the time proved both fascinating and immensely valuable.

My most exciting discoveries, however, took place at the Museum of Modern Art Archives, in New York. When I had searched for material on Fred Halsted on WorldCat, I came across an intriguing entry for a reel-to-reel tape recording of a presentation of LA Plays Itself at the museum in 1974, with Halsted in attendance. I contacted the museum and was informed by an archivist there that the tape had been lost back in 1987. She offered to have any paper records relating to the program set aside for my consultation, however. I came to the museum without a clear idea of what I might find and was surprised and excited to discover a wealth of material relating to the controversial screening of the film at the museum. The Museum of Modern Art had in their archives a number of letters, many handwritten, others riddled with typos, from Halsted himself to the director of their Department of Film and Media, both then and now, Laurence Kardish. It was truly fascinating to peruse these sometimes astonishingly personal letters. Often in Halsted’s own inimitable handwriting, these letters offered me a more intimate view of the filmmaker. The museum also had letters and pamphlets from gay activists and gay attendees of the event, taking sides both for and against their controversial screening of LA Plays Itself. Reading some of the testimonials written to the museum by grateful, newly liberated gay men, who praised the museum for courageously screening such a film, was quite moving. More importantly, perhaps, the documents in the Museum of Modern Art Archive gave me a sense of the bitter controversy within the gay community itself regarding LA Plays Itself, giving me a new perspective on the historical role of the film and adding further nuance to the argument of my paper.

My paper began with an interest in a rarely seen, but groundbreaking film, LA Plays Itself. As I began my research for the paper, I learned of the important role Boys in the Sand played in the history of both queer cinema and pornographic cinema. In seeking out further primary source documents, to better understand the ways in which these films were received by the public at the time, I gained a much deeper understanding of the important role these films played in shaping a burgeoning gay community.