Embodied Archives

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In a profound meditation on the complex genre of autobiography, W.E.B. Du Bois, toward the end of his extraordinary life, wrote: 'What I think of myself, now and in the past, furnishes no certain documents proving what I really am. Mostly my life today is a mass of memories with vast omissions, matters which are forgotten accidentally or by deep design' (cited in Sundquist 3). Situated in the context of Du Bois' haunting meditation on loss, memory gaps and historical omissions, I want to ask the following question: What if some of these vast omissions, forgotten accidentally or because of the violent historicidal forces of assimilation, were recuperable through the staging of an archaeology of one's body, through the reflexive examination of the self as repository of so many dense cultural sedimentations and as archive of accumulated histories and practices? The question, then, that I want to pose in the course of this paper is: In what ways may our lived bodies be seen as living, corporeal archives, repositories of historical practices and inventories of almost invisible traces?

In attempting to answer this question, or at least to delineate its expansive contours, I will draw upon Alan Sekula's essay, 'The Body and the Archive.' In this essay, Sekula draws attention to the historical reservoir of images that functions to construct the enabling conditions for the emergence and cultural intelligibility of any image. Sekula, in a brilliant move, names this historical reservoir of images a 'shadow archive' (10). Encoded in this term are two critical dimensions that pivot on questions of power and the effacement of the historicity of images. Sekula succinctly articulates the intersection of these two dimensions when, in another essay devoted to examining the archive, he asks: 'How is historical and social memory preserved, transformed, restricted and obliterated by photographic means?' ('Reading the Archive' 182). In raising this question, Sekula brings into focus what is produced and consumed within what he calls 'an imaginary economy' ('Reading the Archive 182). This imaginary economy is inscribed by a number of intersecting axes: it is an economy of cultural and financial production and consumption; it is an imagistic economy of photographs, pictures, paintings, films and so on; and it is also an imaginary economy that attempts, with the production of each new image, to efface the genealogy of images that is instrumental in the production of any image by arguing, for example, that the image is purely the work of a singular imagination.

Sekula effectively demolishes this liberal humanist conceptualisation of the image, as something that is purely the work of the imagination, by arguing that the 'archive constitutes the paradigm or iconic system from which photographic 'statements' are constructed' ('Reading the Archive' 184). This iconic system must be seen as

supplying the conditions of possibility for the emergence and production of any image. Furthermore, through the invocation of the Foucauldian term 'statement,' Sekula situates this iconic system within discursive relations of knowledge/power that function to systematize and regulate the production and consumption of images; in other words, these regimes of visuality construct both the possibility for visual enunciation and the very cultural intelligibility of the visual 'statement' as such. He elaborates this constitutive function of the archive:

> We can speak then of a generalized, inclusive *archive*, a *shadow archive* that encompasses an entire social terrain while positioning individuals within that terrain. This archive contains subordinate, territorialized archives: archives whose semantic interdependence is normally obscured by the 'coherence' and 'mutual exclusivity' of the social groups registered within each. ('The Body in the Archive' 10)

What interests me here is the manner in which the archive positions a subject within the terrain that it encompasses whilst, precisely as *shadow archive*, it effaces its constitutive role in a subject's process of visual production and consumption: its structuring and active 'presence' is, as shadow, barely perceived.

As a theorist of visual culture, Sekula locates the archives that he examines within institutional settings. He deals with the literal archives of filing cabinets and databases that house historical collections. In this essay, I want to transpose Sekula's concept of the shadow archive from the materiality of institutional locations and sites to the body.

Taking my point of departure from Sekula's evocative concept of the shadow archive, I want to reflect on the manner in which our bodies are themselves inscribed by embodied shadow archives that escape intelligibility precisely because they constitute the corporeal infrastructure of our everyday thoughts and practices. As such, these corporeal shadow archives exemplify the biologisation of the cultural, that is, discursive practices of knowledge/power, in constituting our subjectivities and our very conception of 'the body,' become invisibilised or effaced as they proceed to constitute the very conditions of possibility of our lived bodies and identities as socially and culturally intelligible entities. In this sense, our corporeal shadow archives function as a priori determinations that remain invisibilised to us precisely because of their a priori status. Their invisibility is enabled, paradoxically, by the very materiality of the body – in other words, a repertoire of gestures, expressions and practices become invisibilised through the process of lived embodiment.

I want to frame this discussion of the corporeal shadow archive in the context of the discursive effects of knowledge/power on the body of the subject. Specifically, on the complex, layered, unceasing work of regimes of assimilation and normativity on bodies. Over many years, I have attempted to flesh out the operations of regimes of assimilation and normativity on two geopolitical fronts: in the context of Australia and in the context of the racialised south/north divide that marks the Italian peninsula. And I want to underscore here the virulent liveness of ongoing assimilationist violence that has such a tenacious grip in Australia. Just yesterday, for example, I found in my mailbox a pamphlet distributed by white supremacists declaring: 'Immigration is a serial killer. Ethnic realities violated, mutilated, left for dead.

We're next.' The ironies that are inscribed in this 'we're next,' when situated in the genocidal history of this country, need hardly be elaborated.

To return to this notion of an embodied shadow archive, in an essay that emerged from the counter-histories of Calabria and the village of my birth, Spilinga, I began to theorise the manner in which white historicidal forces worked effectively within Italian official histories to negate and erase the dense and complex Arab past of the South, including Sicily and Calabria (Pugliese 'Le Altre Italie'). If this Arab past was mentioned at all, it was merely spoken of as something that was wholly transitory and that had left no legacy, cultural or otherwise, that was worth noting. For example, Alberto Foresi opens his provocatively titled essay, 'The Jihad in Italy: The Expedition of Ibrahim II ibn Ahmad' (2003), with this dismissive line: 'The Arab-Islamic presence in Italy has always constituted a marginal fact in the national story.' Remarking on the southern Italian emirates established by the Arabs at Tropea, Bari, Amantea and Santa Severina, he proceeds to write them off as '[o]rganisms of brief duration, leaving scarcely any trace on the art or material culture' of the region (Foresi). These gestures of dismissal need to be situated in the long, entrenched and contradictory history of whiteness in Italy. As I have discussed in detail elsewhere (Pugliese 'Race as Category Crisis'), the history of whiteness in Italy is perfectly encapsulated by the racist aphorism 'Africa begins south of Rome.' The racist North/South divide operates along this racialised geopolitical axis that demarcates the North as Aryan and European, and the South as African and Arab.

The hegemonic accounts of Italian history are invariably preoccupied with marking the South as Arab while simultaneously denying that any vestiges of Arab culture have survived: 'All the Semites that have ever resided in Italy, and in particular the Arabs, have left no trace or have been entirely assimilated' (quoted in Israel and Nastasi 213). These words of absolute erasure are, however, contradicted by the oral histories and the everyday cultural practices of my Calabrese family. In the face of these white supremacist acts of both symbolic and physical historicide and their tactical contestation by the lived practices of everyday life, I want to invoke a haunting meditation by Michael Dodson: 'And the past cannot be dead, because it is built into the beings and bodies of the living' (40). In my essay, I juxtapose the silences regarding our Arab past in the official histories against the oral stories that my late father recounted. In the face of the violence of historicidal erasure, I found that many things have survived from our Arab past that belie the 'facts' of official histories – traces that have been transmitted intercorporeally from generation to generation.

The seemingly erased past is not dead. It is embodied: 'built into the beings of the living.' Contrary to official historicidal claims, the traces of this Arab past have not been obliterated from the lives of contemporary Calabrese. One has to learn to look and listen. 'Our memories are not chemicals in our heads,' writes Dodson, 'but our flesh and our voices and our ways of seeing' (40). Out across the water from Carciadi and Spilinga, the *tonnare* (tuna fishing crews) sing '*U leva leva, e tiramul' a rancata…*' a song of the Arab ancestors who taught the Calabrians tuna fishing (Bellassai). In the Calabrese of the Spilingoti, Arab words continue to name and constitute the practices of everyday life (Placanica 76), both in Calabria and here in Sydney, Australia, the location from which I write. In the burial of our dead, for example, we lower the *tambutu* (coffin) into the *taju* (clay). These are the oral shards

that survive and give voice to this Arab past in the contemporary practices of everyday life. 'We do not need to re-find the past,' writes Dodson, 'because our subjectivities, our being in the world are inseparable from the past' (40). There's no need to go to the archive to re-find the past. In the archive resides the artefactual datum: atomised, insular and cryogenically suspended, awaiting the revivifying touch of the scholar. The scholar in the archive forgets the lived, embodied archive that s/he brings to bear in this moment of archaeological resurrection.

I refer to these lived fragments that continue to inscribe the seemingly mundane practices of everyday life as they belie the myth of a Calabrian world within which the traces of this Arab past have been entirely erased and forgotten. Through the survival of these fragments within the practices of everyday life, 'an ethnic alterity is kept – obstinate, fragmented, escaping every seizure' (de Certeau 172). Obstinate, fragmented, these shards are in fact repeatedly conjoined and revivified through the cultural and corporeal rituals of everyday life: cooking, eating and burying one's dead.

> [T]hese ostensibly trivial relics oblige, even if it is in silence and with punctuality; they bring back into the field of what we 'know for sure' the irruptions of a 'but all the same…. They represent what is passed over in the teachings that naively invest their faith in the contents of knowledge and that fail to perceive the scansions of materials by which a group defends, unbeknownst to its teachers, its present relation to a dispersed patrimony. (de Certeau 172)

This dispersed patrimony of Arab culture finds its magnetised locus in the lived, corporeal archive of my everyday life – the scansions of materials continue to re-mark and punctuate the Arab history of contemporary Calabrese across the practices of everyday life.

To return to the W.E.B. Du Bois meditation with which I opened my paper – 'What I think of myself, now and in the past, furnishes no certain documents proving what I really am. Mostly my life today is a mass of memories with vast omissions, matters which are forgotten accidentally or by deep design.' What if some of these vast omissions, forgotten accidentally or by the violent historicidal forces of assimilation, were recuperable through the staging of an archaeology of one's body, through the reflexive examination of the self as repository of so many dense cultural sedimentations and as archive of accumulated histories and practices? I want to resituate this question in the context of an eloquent meditation from Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* – 'The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is 'knowing thyself' as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory' (cited in Said 25). To a large degree, our bodies are marked by an infinity of traces that, in having been so fully absorbed into our everyday practices, are largely invisible – they are practices without an inventory. Thinking about our bodies as living archives would compel us, I would argue, to begin to materialise this invisible inventory and to begin to name and identify the forces that have worked so assiduously to create those lacunae and omissions that constitute our lived histories. Thinking of our bodies as living archives would also compel the articulation of alternative epistemologies that escape the grids and formulations of techno-rationality

and its official archives. Techno-rationality has ordered the official archive into taxonomic grids and formulaic categories: everything is at once ordered, categorised and separated. The fibres that connect one practice to another are thereby severed. The complex relationality that animates all cultural practices is obliterated through this process of archival atomisation and categorical separation. Viewed in this light, the official archive emerges a type of columbarium, repository of dead matter.

The official archive is premised on the disciplinary exercise of division and categorical subjugation. It is the quintessential apparatus for the production of 'subjugated knowledges' (Foucault 7). Within the archive resides 'knowledge': legitimate, hierarchically ordered and conceptually transparent. What cannot be accommodated to this regime is dispatched to the disordered domain of subjugated knowledges, as that 'series of knowledges that have been disqualified as nonconceptual knowledges, as insufficiently elaborated knowledges: naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity.'

Escaping the grid of scientificity because of their 'naivety,' operating below the radar of erudition, and *nonconceptual because corporeal*, these other knowledges articulate other ways of being and knowing. In contradistinction to the official archive, the alternative epistemology of the embodied archive is predicated on *relationality*, on the fluid connections between seemingly dissimilar things: for example, the connection between ecology of the earth on which I stand and the taste of the food in my mouth. This relationality breaches the categorical borders of atomised taxonomies by insisting on the indissociable links that bind the body to histories, cultures and geographies. Dense sedimentations of the past that enact ruptures, transformations and continuities, producing an embodied present that is always anachronically tied to what has preceded it and to what will follow. The body here as lived fulcrum of a future anterior: in the future, the past will already have left its traces. What has been obliterated, assimilated or divided from itself remains silently, corporeally recuperable as embodied trace, perhaps with no name and no category, a mere corporeal shadow that continues to animate in the face of loss, gesturing toward another form of knowledge altogether.

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