

## The Body Archive

Why this desire for a body archive, for an assembly of history's traces deposited in me? (I worry over how to describe it, how to frame it without sounding banal or bafflingly idiosyncratic.) The body archive is an attunement, a hopeful gathering, an act of love against the foreclosures of reason. It is a way of knowing the body-self as a becoming and unbecoming thing, of scrambling time and matter, of turning toward rather than against oneself. And vitally, it is a way of thinking-feeling the body's unbounded relation to other bodies.

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I begin then to compile an archive of my body, an activity that from the start feels discomfotingly intimate. Too intimate and too bewildering an undertaking, because like all other bodies mine has become so many things over time, has changed dramatically through forces both natural and social. I am also, it must be noted, a person whose body has been broken and maimed many times over – a fact that I cannot yet entirely account for.

How, then, to undertake this desired body archive? There are, of course, those obvious places that are marked on the body, places where the body has been cut, or burned, or broken. I could begin simply by cataloguing these inflections through the traces they have left behind. Just

as easily, I could also turn to my body's naturally occurring oddities, the ways that it has grown and developed against perceived social norms. Both approaches emphasize the body's surface, and both dwell on its "imperfections" – those aspects that we (especially those of us trained as women) see magnified so acutely that when we look at ourselves we see not body but flaw, not the histories that produced us but a catalogue of deficiency.

While these topographical oddities may indeed become part of my archive, they cannot constitute its core. This is in part because I do not want to gather a body archive strictly in order to convert culturally produced deficiency into historical value; to begin to love, in other words, what I have been trained to perceive as flaw.

There is an archival crisis already looming here, because the body's surface is ultimately not stable ground upon which to build an archive. While the skin is a visual sign of the body's exterior limit, the physicist Karen Barad emphasizes how in fact bodies extend into space well beyond the skin. Molecularly, we spread into the "outside" world, mingling with it in ways that are not apparent to us. Our bodies are porous, as Nancy Tuana reminds us when she calls into question "the boundaries between our flesh and the flesh of the world."<sup>1</sup> These feminist formulations of the body insist on our vital entanglements with the outside world, complicating any easy binary demarcations of "inside" and "outside." For better and for worse, we are made up of an outside world which constitutes, nourishes, and poisons us in turns.

1 Nancy Tuana, "Viscous Porosity," in *Material Feminisms*, eds. Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, 188–213 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 198.

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This is not only a material problem for my body archive, but also an affective one. In the end, we are not bounded, contained subjects, but ones filled up with foreign feelings and vibes that linger and circulate in space, that enter us as we move through our lives. We likewise leave traces of ourselves and our own affective states (which are never really just our own) behind us when we go. After all the discipline we have endured to teach us that we are self-governing and self-contained, responsible for how we feel, Teresa Brennan insists that "the taken-for-grantedness of the emotionally contained subject is a residual bastion of Eurocentrism in critical thinking."<sup>2</sup> How we think about ourselves as material and emotional beings turns out to be a style of thought, one that emerges from a specific place (Europe) at a specific time (modernity). Against this historically imposing style of thought, I am fully invested in the conviction that our bodies and minds are less discrete than we have been led to believe. Bodies and minds: I confess, I have already lost the difference between them.

There is something haunting to me about the fact that I lean on contemporary feminist new materialist discourse to account for the fact that the body is not and has never been singular. Something haunting about the fact that the non-singularity of the body, its vital entanglements with other kinds of bodies, was once so obvious across cultures, geographies, and histories that it didn't need to be argued. Something changed, something *was* changed. A monumental worldview swept in and tried – with brute force, with discipline, with pedagogy – to make us each one self. But there is a prolific past that tells a different story of the body as an infinite collection of bodyings. And the grand historical force of producing the singular

2 Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 2.



self has made these pasts difficult to gather, difficult to archive.

Pondering the idea of the body archive, I cannot resist thinking toward those palpable bodily openings: the orifices. Those holes in our bodies where other bodies have unabashedly entered and left their deposits. Among other things, the body's archive might be framed as an archive of penetration. A cellular recounting of sloughs of skin, of bodily fluids that have been shed or excreted into each body, into each of the body's canals. A history, in other words, of foreign bodily matter left inside us. In this sense, the vaginal archive also turns out to be an anal and oral and acoustic one... Each orifice an entry where we palpably open, where other bodies have been, and by leaving their traces in us have, in a molecular sense, become us.

This thought is at times distressing to me when I reflect upon a history of forced and unwanted bodily entry, or of those fleeting shameful affairs I have so often wished to make disappear from my archive. I do not want to retain those remnants, nor at times can I bear that to some degree, however infinitesimally, I am constituted by them. Lest I forget, though, that we also shed ourselves over time. This body is not the body it was then and is already becoming another body. This formula offers degrees of relief and panic in turn. It is also another kind of fiction. Suddenly I am aware of the body as both archive and archivist – in a crucial sense, it gathers its own materials. Control over the assemblage that I am turns out to be pure fantasy.