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4-Wheeled Trauma – A Film and a State Unto Itself

A large part of archival practice is the ongoing challenge of administering and providing access to archives created for specifically defined social communities, especially when those at stake are marginalized, under-documented, or otherwise socially suspect. Especially if some of its attendant behavior, probably captured in the archive itself, is culturally unacceptable or even illegal, those represented may themselves restrict or deny access to the records they themselves created (Flinn, 2005). This is often true of inner-city cultures and groups of people who are not normally or traditionally represented within the culture at large, and whose social status depends upon properly being "represented." The records, often sparse, have the increased burden of being a small representative sampling, and attempts to create them are met with resistance, especially when the subsequent personal remembrances are open to misinterpretation and possible legal action.

The Falcon Boys Car Club is in East Oakland and comprised mostly of African American males and some Latinos, an example of a small community within the larger fabric of the Bay Area who had no formal or methodological history-keeping strategy in place. The members began fixing up late-model Ford Falcons in the early '70s and remain unknown and undocumented in the larger car culture, partly as a point of pride and fierce exclusive spirit of their small community, which overlaps several others, in terms of race, social standing, religion, and geography. In 2005, Oakland filmmaker Brian Lilla interviewed some of the original members and filmed their exhibitions and daily habits, producing a documentary called "Ghetto Fabulous," which remains the only personal historical documentation of this subculture. Yet the film is not widely available, and control of and access to the film as well as its master tapes have been taken by members of the Falcon Boys themselves, who for the first time were "authentically" documented, yet now carefully guard who gains access to their history and how. The film has not been released and is not available online. This largely self-created history remains exclusively their own object of historical memory. Its creation and dissemination highlights how the archival process both created awareness of the need for a record within the community, and how information is withheld specifically as an enhancement to the truthful archival nature of the documentation.

This paper is anecdotal to a large extent because the community first came to my attention on a Thursday night in March 2005, when Lilla rented the theatre I worked at to show his 55-minute film. He intended to show it to the cast and crew and other friends, and rented out the 890-seat theatre and also invited the 30 members of the Falcon Boys Car Club featured in the film. Over 2,000 people turned out, many of them from the inner-city neighborhoods in which the Falcon

Boys lived and many in customized and highly modified vintage cars and motorcycles, some in groups of over 40. Word had spread in a viral way through the various micro-communities, before the age of ubiquitous texting or Internet social networks, and was an indication of who was interested and invested in the film outside its immediate circle, and who was interested in being present in its first public dissemination within and for the community. The film, ostensibly a rare "above-ground" attempt to document a small vintage car club in East Oakland, is heavily informed by class consciousness, gang-banger swagger, hip-hop culture, and a mode of representation related to material exhibition, ironically in this case of 20-year-old obsolete Detroit cars, the Falcons by which the group takes its name. Many of the original Falcon Boys have since died or are in jail, and the ones still around are in their 50s. Lilla talked to as many of the surviving members as he could get to participate, and in the process inadvertently facilitated the community to document its own authentic history on film for the first time and discover what purpose an archive could serve for the members.

The Falcon Boys of East Oakland, a fragmented group made up of marginalized members of the inner-city culture, are outside the normal efforts of any "formal heritage sector" to define or document (AHRC, 2008). The group began fixing up '68 to '70 models of Ford Falcons in the 1980s, 10 years after the line itself had been discontinued. The late-model Falcons were notoriously unloved, with a design stuck in the '60s, and at that time used Falcons could be had on the street for as little as \$200. The Falcon Boys' work and effort began to impress those around them and became centered on a need to "represent" within their own community, using the repurposed cars as symbols only a close-knit group (numbering less than 100 unofficial members) would likely understand and an unintentional but specific common interest and set of skills. Their circumstances, including the realities of inner-city life surrounding and involving them in some of the poorest districts of Oakland, make it problematic to enter or explore this community from the beginning. Many of the members were ex-cons or drug dealers, with part-time jobs as mechanics (B. Lilla, personal communication, May 12, 2009).

This self-defined community has remained invisible to above-ground culture. They do not share their obsessions, their methods, or the fruits of their labor with the outside world, and certainly not with any official record-keepers. Much of the associated behavior, both of the participants in the procurement of resources and of the observers, often falls into illegality (B. Lilla, personal communication, May 12, 2009). Status, news about events, gossip, and a sense of authenticity are spread by word of mouth and other grassroots means. The behaviors, politics, and shared knowledge of the members are linked to the exhibition of their cars and their mechanical prowess inflected by an appreciation of automotive history and design, and while their exhibition of the cars is in a

public sphere, it is specifically within and for their own community, and protected rather than broadcast. The rituals around this exhibition of their culture are social, verbal, and intuitive rather than regimented or official. The community is defined by its behavior. And while the vibrant car communities in many inner cities like East Oakland and the cultures surrounding them are primarily exhibitionistic, they are all coded within behavior based on under-documented physical, material, and social cues.

The social glue that holds the community together would be diluted if there were a separate, fixed history accessible to the public. The tension between the underground vibrancy of the culture and a reluctance to document or fix any evidence of their behavior to more traditional (and official) memory institutions raises the question of how this "ghetto fabulous" community perpetuates its own image and history, and how it negotiates this memory, articulating and disarticulating it by turns. It is important to recognize that they define themselves within a web of many overlapping sets of communities. The community functions under a loosely defined and intentionally secretive understanding of its own history, fiercely protective of how they are perceived, yet when an outsider such as Lilla enters into the community and attempts to document the visible history of the community through interviews and filmmaking, his results are disproportionately over-determined by the lack of other previous history or archival records. It is difficult to define the exact scope or history of the group, and Lilla's work inadvertently creates tension between his own documentarian impulse, traditional archival historical meanings, and the community's expectations and stakeholder status, whether or not they want an archival record, and how they will participate in its creation and ultimately its dissemination. As I will show, Lilla's efforts ultimately resulted in the Falcon Boys becoming the active custodians of their own cultural heritage.

Ain't Gonna Be Pretty – A Problematic Community

The term "ghetto fabulous" signifies a mode of living within poor circumstances, generally an inner city or ghetto, in which an ostentatious demonstration of style or wealth—"fabulousness"—suggests an inappropriate or ironic display against the accepted norms of the social circumstances of the class, to make "economic disadvantage invisible, and a matter of economic achievement" (Iton, 2008, p. 170). The African American culture in East Oakland may attempt to display, perhaps to assert, what status is available to them or they can acquire within their closed community by exhibition of some desired or unique trait, whether it be fashionable clothing, expensive cars or jewelry, socially transgressive, daring, or illegal behavior, or a combination of all three. In a culture where wealth and opportunities are not so easily come by, other resources

and credibility on the street, or "street cred," play important parts when negotiating non-normalized, transitory, unsure, and dangerous relationships between each other. When someone gains some form of cultural cache by "striking it rich" literally or figuratively, they cash in on that moment and that new-found status by being "ghetto fabulous" even if that moment may be short-lived.

Lilla, a native of Oakland, got his inspiration to make the film watching his neighbor Dave Johnson restore a Falcon in his driveway over six years. One day Lilla turned on the camera, asked a few questions and discovered his neighbor was a Falcon Boy. Johnson introduced Lilla to his "posse," and Lilla was soon the group's unofficial biographer. Lilla was welcomed into their homes, went out for group drives, to parties, and street-corner memorials and illegal car rallies known as sideshows. "It was like somebody handed me a passport," Lilla said. "I could never have shown up in East Oakland and said, 'Hey guys! I want to make a movie about you'" (M. May, 2005).

Lilla reported that he was chased out of the neighborhood three or four times when loitering black youths saw his camera and decided they did not want him in the neighborhood (B. Lilla, personal communication, May 12, 2009). Lilla also discovered certain aspects of the history were off-limits, and many members were resistant to being documented for any reason. He took great pains to make sure he was not crossing any unspoken boundaries, and nervously greeted some of his harshest critics in the lobby of the theatre back in 2005, who came to make sure he had done them right. "If he fucks this up," an unidentified gang-member announced, "it ain't gonna be pretty" (M. May, 2005).

The negotiation between the stakeholders' communal identity and the authenticity of the presentation of the documentation was to be decided in a public, literally exhibitionist manner in front of almost 1,000 spectators in a theatre. The interpretation of the record by that time was out of Lilla's and the Falcon Boys' hands. The film would turn out to be a critical success, enjoying showings internationally on the documentary film circuit over the next couple of years. But in its wake few other attempts have been made to further explore the culture with any true anthropological methodology. A notable exception, "Why I Ride: From Low to Show" (Conscious Youth Media Crew, 2007) recreates the history of Latino low-rider culture in San Francisco in the 1960s and the link to sideshow culture on the other side of the Bay in the mid '80s, and argues that street cruising developed as a demonstration of a new, socially acceptable materialistic behavior of marginalized ethnic groups in the public sphere. Luciana Duranti warns against such "attribution of values" in her discussion of archival documentation strategies that take a likely incomplete representative sampling of evidence and attempt to create a societal reading that serves the archivist more than the documented process (Cox, 2000, p. 252). The realization of the paucity

of organically created evidence in traditional archival settings of such groups was prevalent in the literature at the time "Ghetto Fabulous" was produced (Johnston, 2001).

While the culture is fluid and crosses racial and cultural lines, it is limited by class boundaries. It is not defined solely by interest in a specific style of car (although a high premium is placed on the appreciation of well-maintained American cars, not merely "circus cars" but ones that are street-legal and functional.¹) The problem of access stems from the street politics and tensions that arise when urban groups and gangs involved in activity they may not be comfortable sharing with outsiders or other marginalized communities are observers—or unwilling participants. Subjects become scarce, unreliable, or belligerent, both during the documentation and during the subsequent attempts at archival memory-keeping. The sudden presence of the archive challenges and threatens the community's previous rituals of "remembering and forgetting, inclusion and exclusion, and the power relationships" the rituals manifest (McKemmish, Gilliland-Swetland, & Ketelaar, 2005, p. 359). Of concern for an archivist interested in collecting historical evidence, there is a very real perception and potential that this gang—or street—culture can turn confrontational on a dime.

What does exist of the cultures has so far entered the public consciousness by unofficial channels. Around the time of "Ghetto Fabulous," peripheral members of the community had been haphazardly documenting sideshow activity. Traces of these homemade records appear on YouTube and "sideshow" anthology DVDs sold online and on the street, at flea markets, or passed hand-to-hand (B. Lilla, personal communication, May 12, 2009). These videos are filmed by bystanders with cameras on the sidelines, and often visible in the crowd are observers with handheld cameras. Some of this footage has been collected into home-brew DVDs sold outside normal distribution channels, including the titles "Oakland Gone Wild" (French Braids Entertainment, 2006), "Ghostride the Whip" (Image, 2008), and "Sideshows and Hos" (5 vols., French Braids Entertainment, 2002-2005). These DVDs often brag on the back covers of having captured police activities and nudity in addition to driving prowess.

While unofficial and not sanctioned by the community in any traditional sense, these homegrown collections have a strong element of authenticity by virtue of the fact that the community members themselves created and distributed them. But there is evidence of pressure within the community to suppress this documentation, since it is the only available footage.² Very few of these homemade films appear on IMDB or for sale elsewhere, and when MSNBC reported on the phenomenon in 2005 (Mankiewicz, 2005) they used this fan footage, primarily from Yakpasua Zazaboi, who has positioned himself as the movement's chronicler (Allen-Taylor, 2003).

To the outsider, these underground videos document little more than the public exhibition of illegal activity. They are ultimately not engaged in creating or intended as documentary evidence of the community so much as exhibitionistic and flagrant disregard for the law. Law enforcement officials view them to identify the neighborhoods and cars (although license plates are often obscured). There is at least one instance of police tracking someone down after a posted video revealed their identity.³ This threat of being policed or further marginalized no doubt exerts pressure against other attempts to collect memories or photographs of the cars or members, or otherwise identify, document, and archive the 30-year history of the subculture. If members of the community are identified with Oakland's problematic inner-city car culture, they are likely to be harassed and persecuted by law enforcement. Posted or texted invitations to organized sideshows have said "No goofy niggaz."⁴ Potential troublemakers are often not welcome because the trouble they may cause brings a negative spotlight onto the culture and makes the act of participating in the culture—and creating a continuing and dynamic history—that much harder.

The relative scarcity of materials about and by this culture is endemic of and follows from its lifestyle. There is no archival process or real structured or regimented means by which the community remembers itself, and none in which they participate. This specific community, except for rare traces, is intentionally hiding from sight. The relative high incarceration and death rate of the community in which the Falcon Boys reside also threatens an ongoing understanding and collation of information about them (Lilla, 2005). The community has only begun to understand and acknowledge a concern for documenting and archiving primary and memory materials that would shape how they will be remembered, as it already threatens to be misrepresented by others, unauthorized, and over-mediated by law enforcement and government agencies and news organizations.

Grillwork Traces - The Record, As It Is

The majority of the poorer populace in mainstream culture does not have access to or understanding of methodological or anthropologically-minded ways to document or preserve their memories or unique and specific culture reliably. Nor may they appreciate the larger ramifications of letting that process out of their immediate control. The records that exist are created through government processes and other official channels either through aid organizations, tax and payroll activity, or other interactions with government offices, as well as evidence, pertinent to this population, in police files. Their profile in the culture is shaped by these public and overly determined records and documents.

In underground and misunderstood communities—especially ones that flirt with, engage in, or have been associated with illegal activities—members

prefer not to give up control of what records they may have, as they can include stories and histories which may expose them to ridicule, arrest, or worse. Although the authenticity of what records exist may remain unassailable, they are not collected or managed with the benefit of any professional archival practical expertise or a sense to a future historical legacy. This results in serious archival gaps that may unbalance or otherwise threaten the integrity and cultural context of any histories collected or captured, as standard archival practice demands.⁵

Single records or histories are fragmentary and circumstantial without context. Archivist F. Gerald Ham argues that passivity in archival collection creates distorted histories, and only active accessioning can offset the bias reflected in incomplete historical records (Peace, 1984). While the accidental evidence is not balanced by a more focused or authoritative methodology—an occasional mention in a car magazine may acknowledge the existence of the Falcon Boys and press notices report cruising and sideshow incidents, usually in connection with police reports—the culture is otherwise only voluntarily participatory: de-centralized, geographically fluid, and un-fixed.

Members fall in and out of favor based on social and "political" impressions of peers. The culture is built, nurtured, and passed along primarily in face-to-face and informal social interactions. Exhibitions happen on the street and in parking lots, sometimes in car rallies or neighborhood settings. The circumstances by which the community first defined itself are also instructive. The initial group of car culture members acquired unpopular or discontinued models of cars, in part particularly because they were marginalized by larger society (Witzel & Bash, 1997). The low-riders, a Latino movement that adopted and repurposed Detroit "muscle" cars, also for a deliberate modification and exhibition, likewise valued cultural discards that allowed a dedicated group in inner cities to exhibit mechanical prowess, ingenuity, and a sense of reappropriating and reinvigorating otherwise marginal popular cultural iconic objects. They specifically functioned outside a mainstream culture that had devalued and underappreciated their cultural contributions. There is an intentional irony in that.

The communities were able to exhibit an underdog dedication to something that in the larger culture would likely be seen as a waste of time. Oral histories both in the film "Ghetto Fabulous" and online include recounting of the initial derision the Falcon Boys encountered on the street, almost as a source of pride (Lilla, 2005).⁶ The exhibition of these discarded muscle cars might set members up to ridicule; the public shows were not for anyone but neighbors, and street corner interaction was the recognized forum by which important and valuable social information would travel through close-knit communities without official traces. This is part of the power of the information, but the community

remains "problematically" recorded. It is underground, fragmented, and bundled with social and cultural biases, bragging, bravado, and other cultural "tainters."

The verbal and shared admiration, the public exhibition for effect and progression of cars in orchestrated concert on weekends, the additions and shifts to the population and cars themselves, and even the specialized work certain mechanics are capable of, along with their reputations, all make up the historical record of this community. The oral memory of these events shapes the community, and is nurtured by the community. While not physically housed within a building, it arguably comprises a virtual archive, one that is intangible yet capturable.

The participatory nature of this archive, in which one must be seen and be talked to, is a critical part of the history. The context in which actions are talked about, in how work and behavior relate to those who came before and after, may perhaps be the most critical aspect of how the culture operates and sustains itself. Hilary Graham notes the importance of community members relaying their primary experiences to each other as authenticating behavior (Bell & Roberts, 1984). This cultural context of the ritual of a face-to-face interaction and a fierce protection of the record in order for it to be accepted by peers and given respect motivated thousands of people within the community to show up for the unadvertised show of "Ghetto Fabulous" four years ago, and for someone to be so invested as to threaten the director that if he did not properly capture the community, "it ain't gonna be pretty."

The underlying sense of self-censorship leads to a marginalization. As mentioned, many in the community may be involved or know about some form of illegal activity, and elide themselves from being documented. This ultimately prevents any attempts at documentation or archiving from being fully successful. Lilla notes occasional pressures from older Falcon Boy members to change or even abandon the project, and he was constantly warned to avoid certain details of the community's past histories, behaviors, and activities. This protection of the archival record, and a preference for no documentation rather than unauthorized documentation, creates a specific voice to what remains and is passed on. The liveliness and robustness of how the information normally travels through the culture and generations is a distinct aspect of its character, its creation and recreation, and its preservation for now depends upon the unreliable but unduplicatable mutable tradition of oral histories. This is a continuing specter of self-marginalization.

There has been a growing awareness and demonstrated response against how the subculture continues to be represented in normalized venues. The coverage in 2005 in traditional media outlets created anxiety in the community, and comments of living in a "police state" (and opposing voices calling for one) now pepper the users' posts on YouTube and other Internet sites. Zazaboi has

noted on his MySpace blog that the passivity to the media representation of "his" car culture has allowed it to be portrayed as sociologically aberrant, and he has been subsequently motivated to represent it "correctly."⁷

The continuum theory of archival records correctly suggests a constantly changing relationship over time and circumstances between the records, the original intended audiences, and the communities from which they are extracted (McKemmish, 2001). Lilla was unable to find distribution for "Ghetto Fabulous," mostly because of the rights issues over the music he used in the film. (Most of it was suggested by the members themselves, either playing in the background or donated from their own collections, and lends the film the soundtrack of authenticity.) Lilla finally chose to give the masters of his film to the Falcon Boys as a good-faith effort and as a way to avoid the legal and ethical questions he found himself unable and unwilling to negotiate. The Falcon Boys have subsequently duplicated and now distribute copies of the film judiciously among their own community and acquaintances (B. Lilla, personal communication, May 12, 2009). Lilla surrendered the archival document back to those that it strove to document. To this day, they pass out and sell copies as a way to explain who they are and what they do to the chosen few they wish to initiate, a calling card for the subculture itself.

In the Gutter and to the Curb – The Flawed and Authentic

There is a limited but specific corpus of information available about such a diverse, unorganized, rich, and secretive community. No meaningful collection of documents, records, histories, or archival aggregations exists, and the most effective way to document it would be to become a participatory member. But entry is difficult, and traditional archival practices are not appropriate or possible, and would not reflect the culture in its natural and dynamic working mode. As to allowing outsiders to enter the realm of the subculture and actively collate and attempt to "accession" primary materials, the members remain suspicious of record takers or makers. They are convinced outsiders would "get it wrong."

Since this group is ill-defined by one local, interest, or racial or political class, they hold on to their identity and the signposts and codes that define it fiercely, not through evidence but through presence. The scant and elusive amount of evidence can be considered an "archive," in that it collects and preserves primary materials created by, and in some cases about, the niche community. Indeed, it as truthfully as possible, with strong input from the community members themselves, documents a specific and definable cultural movement within a larger environment, specific in behavior and identity, and otherwise under- or misrepresented in traditional record-keeping methods.

As it is, the collection of taped materials, traded closely within the community along with a continuing and strong tradition of oral histories is self-built and policed. It is secretized with high borders to access and only for those who already belong. The information is in a way reauthorized by its exclusivity. Unlike what may be conceived as a normal archive, it lacks any form of final or fixed physical presence or repository. It is dynamic and allows continued organic growth and adaptation to the ongoing history. It does not "behave" as a dead repository. Western culture tends to preserve itself by keeping the evidence of its own past processes, and archives retained the remnants and items no longer of practical use. The inactivity and static nature of the records in the archive ascribes to them some of their power.

The inaccessibility of the records can be its own symbol of authenticity, even as they remain dynamic. In documenting the ongoing and shifting car culture in East Oakland, the living history is in itself generating its own history. The relationship between the past activity, that has been archived and preserved and fixed, and the present realities, which continue to evolve and inform and change the context of what came before, is problematic to normal archival understanding. Ideally, all personal archival documents could be integrated and fully represented within the context of the larger memorial efforts of culture at large (Ketelaar, 2008). The aggressive engagement with the archival materials by the community which it documents, and the active reorganizing by it, allows the archive to "recreate" the community as time goes on. And as the materials are disseminated back into the community, it is redefined again.

But rather than be concerned about how an archive "should act," we should ask how this archive acts for the community that it serves. These dynamic records create value through their very portability and dynamism, and their living and organic intangibility has a sense of presence in the community more important than any actual "proof" they may provide. The memory of the history of the community is the property of the group, and held by them exclusively. Even a film produced by an outsider is ultimately (and really) their property. The record, for all its "faults," has the most value only within, and because it *is* in, the community.

It is exclusive. It is self-defining, and without outside input or scrutiny. It does not "freeze" a history. It is proof in a way to ensure the community can understand itself in circumstances in which no one else can help them. Like many archives, the Falcon Boys and the car culture of East Oakland use the record they have created to engage with the past and define their present. What happened adds value to what they are doing now, and they hold the cultural meaning, however complicated and personal as private and dear. Old cars reflect all kinds of social values that many communities define themselves by. They alone understand exactly how fabulous what they are doing really is.

Notes

¹ Yakpasua Zazaboi, the director of Sydewayz, notes on his YouTube channel page: "Sideshows are NOT about jumping on top of cars...they are not about fighting or pill poppin' or whatever you learned on the evening news. It isn't about donuts either... Its about pretty women, classy cars and just generally showing off!"

² Over 20 of the hand-held camera anthology collections are available on Amazon.com, while the more respectable and respectful "Ghetto Fabulous" and "Why I Ride" are not listed and are not available commercially, which is a signpost of an underground "authenticity" in itself.

³ For example, reported here: <http://www.nowpublic.com/crime/youtube-gangster-bird-road-rudy-arrested> (retrieved March 15, 2009).

⁴ Seen at the Sydewayz MySpace blog, at http://blogs.myspace.com/sydeshow_kings (retrieved October 30, 2009).

⁵ As in item V. of the SSA Code of Ethics (1980, rev. 1992 and 2005).

⁶ At <http://www.myspace.com/221097127> (retrieved November 1, 2009).

⁷ At <http://blogs.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction=blog.ListAll&friendId=22570017> (retrieved March 10, 2009).

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Selected Online Documentation

- ConsciousYouthMediaCrew.
<http://www.consciousyouthmediacrew.org/news/71/cymc-proudly-presents-why-i-ride-from-low-to-show>
- Falcon Boys, Fordfalcons.com.
<http://www.fordfalcons.com/latemodel/falconboys.htm>
- Falcon Boys page, MySpace. <http://www.myspace.com/221097127>
- Ghetto Fabulous*, first 9 minutes, on YouTube.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ywye6xZzCEc>
- "Sideshow" on MSNBC, on YouTube.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZIPtMVObgs>

Selected Filmography

- Ghetto Fabulous* (2005; Lilla Films)
- Ghostride the Whip* (2008; Image)
- Oakland Gone Wild* (2006; French Braids Entertainment)
- Sideshowz & Hos* (5 volumes) (2002-2005; French Braids Entertainment)
- Sydewayz* (1999; Sydewayz Entertainment)
- Sydewayz: The Series* (2006; Sydewayz Entertainment)
- Why I Ride: From Low to Show* (2007; Conscious Youth Media Crew)

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