

## The Body as Archive: Cultural Memory, Identity, and Psychisme

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### Abstract

The concept of the **body as archive** challenges conventional notions of memory as a purely cognitive or textual phenomenon by foregrounding how the **body itself stores, transmits, and performs cultural memory**, contributing to both individual and collective identities. This review synthesizes interdisciplinary research from anthropology, cultural studies, psychology, performance studies, and embodied cognition to explore how bodily practices, gestures, postures, and performative acts function as repositories of cultural knowledge and identity. Drawing on theoretical frameworks of habitus, body memory, and cultural memory, we argue that the body not only reflects but *archives* embodied history—shaping social norms, identities, and affective attachments across generations. We discuss concepts such as embodied memory, the repertoire versus archive distinction, somatic transmission, and the role of performance and ritual in cultural continuity. The review also examines how bodies enact cultural resistance, negotiate power, and embody trauma and collective experiences. By reconceptualizing memory as lived through embodied experience, *psychisme* is reimagined as a dynamic interface between cultural inscription and bodily agency. This integrative perspective offers insights into identity formation, cultural resilience, and the politics of remembering and forgetting in diverse sociocultural contexts.

**Keywords:** body as archive, cultural memory, embodiment, identity, psychisme, collective memory, performance, habitus, cultural transmission

### 1. Introduction

The traditional view of memory as a cognitive function situated within the individual mind has been expanded by research that situates memory within **social, cultural, and embodied processes**. While individual memory focuses on autobiographical recall, and collective memory emphasizes group narratives and symbols, the **body as archive** foregrounds the ways in which culture itself becomes inscribed in bodily practices and habitual forms of action. This concept builds on the insight that memory is not only stored in the brain but also lived and enacted through the body in habitual gestures, postures, movement patterns, and performance practices.

In this review, we explore how the body—through its lived experience and cultural inscription—becomes a **repository of cultural memory**. This understanding transcends simple mind–body dualisms and emphasizes the **embodied nature of remembering**, where culture and identity are materially and affectively archived in bodily practices. We integrate

diverse literatures that examine how bodies remember, how collective memories are enacted, and how identities are shaped through embodied cultural forms.

## 2. Theoretical Foundations: Memory, Embodiment, and Culture

### 2.1 Cultural Memory and Identity

The notion of cultural memory extends memory beyond the individual to include socially shared and transmitted memories that shape group identity. Instead of merely storing facts, cultural memory provides a **temporal horizon of meaning**, enabling groups to connect past and present in meaningful ways and to orient themselves within cultural traditions.

French sociologist Maurice Halbwachs argued that individual recollection is always framed within **social contexts and collective frameworks**, suggesting that memories are constructed through social systems rather than existing as isolated mental contents.

### 2.2 Embodiment and the Body–Mind Interface

Embodiment theories emphasize that cognition and experience are grounded in bodily processes rather than separated from them. Embodied cognition holds that bodily interactions with the environment shape mental representations, affective experiences, and social identities. This framework thereby situates memory and identity not as abstract mental phenomena but as **lived and bodily practices**.

Writing about body memory, philosophers such as Thomas Fuchs have highlighted that habitual bodily patterns—posture, gesture, habitual ways of moving—encode personal and cultural histories in implicit, non-verbal forms.

## 3. The Body as Archive: Conceptualizing Embodied Memory

### 3.1 Body Memory and Cultural Inscription

The concept of **body memory** refers to the ways in which the body stores patterns of behavior, sensorimotor skills, and socio-cultural practices beyond conscious awareness. These memories are not linguistic or episodic; rather, they are encoded through repeated cultural practices, rituals, and social interactions.

Cultural norms influence how bodies are shaped, learned, and habituated. People across different societies internalize culturally specific postures, gestures, and modes of movement that both reflect and reinforce values, roles, and social relations. This aligns with the idea of *habitus*—the embodied dispositions shaped by cultural context and social history.

### 3.2 Implicit and Collective Body Memories

Implicit bodily memories include procedural routines such as dance steps, ritual movements, or habitual expressions of respect, greeting, or deference that are learned through cultural practices. They become part of who individuals are, often without explicit conscious awareness.

Fuchs, for instance, discusses how shared bodily habits within a group constitute **collective body memories**, influencing spatial and temporal patterns of behavior that echo generational cultural practices.

## 4. Performance and the Body as Cultural Archive

### 4.1 Performance, Ritual, and Memory Transmission

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In performance and ritual, the body becomes the **primary medium of cultural memory transmission**. Diana Taylor's influential distinction between *archive* and *repertoire* illustrates this idea: while archives (documents, texts, monuments) represent enduring memory, the *repertoire* consists of embodied practices—movement, gesture, song, narration—that transmit knowledge through performance. These embodied forms require *enactment*, co-presence, and rhythm to endure.

Dance, theater, ritual practices, and ceremonies are not mere reenactments of cultural pasts but are living archives in which **memory is enacted through the body**. Each performance reinforces cultural meaning and contributes to the ongoing process of identity formation and memory preservation.

## 4.2 Case Studies in Embodied Cultural Memory

Studies of performance in diaspora communities demonstrate how *embodied cultural practices* such as traditional dance help maintain collective identity far from homelands. These performances preserve cultural memory through the body's movements, gestures, and affective presence rather than through verbal retelling alone.

In artistic projects such as *Body as Archive*, dance practitioners explore how bodies hold layered memories of cultural tradition and socio-political history, questioning what the body is told to remember versus what it remembers on its own.

## 5. Body, Power, and Sociopolitical Memory

### 5.1 The Politics of Embodied Cultural Memory

The body also functions as a site of political inscription. Social norms, power relations, and cultural values shape bodily practices, dictating how bodies should comport themselves in public and private spheres. This embodied political memory influences how groups perceive identity, belonging, and resistance.

Social movements often activate bodies as archives of collective struggle. Public demonstrations, protest marches, and embodied actions re-inscribe historical injustices into contemporary memory, transforming bodies into living memorials. These embodied acts link personal and collective narratives in powerful ways.

### 5.2 Gender, Identity, and Cultural Norms

Embodied memory also operates through gender norms and expectations. Cultural prescriptions about posture, dress, gesture, and bodily comportment affect how gender identities are lived and remembered within societies. Disciplines such as performance studies and feminist theory explore how bodies negotiate power, resistance, and identity through embodied practices.

## 6. Psychisme and Embodied Cultural Histories

### 6.1 Psychisme as an Interface Between Body and Culture

The term *psychisme* denotes the interplay of psychological processes with bodily expression and cultural inscription. From this perspective, memory and identity are not purely mental constructs but emerge from the **interaction between embodied experience and cultural context**.

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Memory is thus both *internal* and *external*—lived through bodily practices and shaped by social and cultural influences. The body archives the ongoing dialogue of cultural values, rituals, and shared histories in ways that resist simple verbal or textual codification.

## 6.2 Body Memory and Identity Formation

Body memory contributes fundamentally to identity formation. How people move, gesture, and inhabit space reflects their cultural lineage and personal histories. Cultural identity is not simply articulated in symbolic systems or narratives; it is enacted through embodied memory that integrates past and present experiences in everyday behavior.

## 7. Embodied Archives in Contemporary Contexts

### 7.1 Digital Culture and Embodied Memory

Contemporary cultural environments increasingly involve digital and mediated forms of memory; yet embodied practices remain central to how communities remember and perform their past. Digital archives interact with embodied repertoires, as in ritual performances shared online that reinforce community memory across spaces.

### 7.2 Heritage Practices and Embodied Tradition

Cultural heritage initiatives that focus on embodied practices—such as traditional crafts, dance forms, or ritual procedures—highlight the importance of the body as archive. These practices are living archives that adapt to changing social contexts while preserving continuity with the past.

## 8. Challenges and Future Directions

The field of embodied cultural memory invites several avenues for future study:

- **Interdisciplinary research** combining anthropology, psychology, performance studies, and cognitive science.
- **Cross-cultural comparisons** of embodied memory practices in different societies.
- **Embodied identity and diaspora research**, examining how bodily practices negotiate multiple cultural archives.
- **Ethical and political implications** of how bodies are archived, represented, and mobilized in public memory.

## 9. Conclusion

The **body as archive** reframes memory and identity as deeply embodied phenomena, transcending the mind–body divide to show how culture, history, and individual experience are inscribed in bodily practice. Through habitual movement, performance, ritual, and gesture, bodies archive cultural knowledge and negotiate identities across time and space. Recognizing the body as a living archive enriches our understanding of memory, belonging, and psychisme—revealing how cultural memory is lived, felt, and enacted through embodied experience.

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