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My Sarclinian Experience:
Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Fellowship Year-End Report

I am now entering the final stages of editing a film whose idea was conceived more than two years ago. At that time in my life, the end of college was nigh. I could barely contain my trepidation at leaving the realm of formal education, under whose nurturing care I had thrived for nearly 16 consecutive years - *seventeen* years if we count the Fruit-Loops necklaces and singalongs of kindergarten.

As I work and re-work this film material, cutting here and reordering there, I find myself following the advice of my filmmaking teacher, who during my trepidatious senior year would tell us to keep massaging our footage into what it *wanted* to become. I remember him saying, "this scene is two minutes long, but it *wants* to be one-and-a-half minutes." At the time, his wording struck me as antithetical to the way I had been taught in academic subjects over the previous 17 years. Most of my recent education had involved things like math problems and analytical essays; what did I care how a problem set or a paper *wanted* to be completed? My task had always been simply to plan and execute the appropriate solution or argument, often according to some formula or rubric.

This contrast between two kinds of thinking - one relying on an objective, prescribed method and the other on a subjective, improvised approach - quickly became a major theme in my conceiving of this film. While my education has given me substantial preparation in planning a project and seeing it to fruition, it took a year pursuing a creative project on my own to discover how to let myself think outside the box. A full-year fellowship afforded me the luxury of constantly rethinking the very nature of my project. I was able to ask myself questions like, "When must I stick to the plan, and when would it be foolish for me not to modify my course?" With such questions, I was able to discover not just what shape I wanted to give the film, but what shape my film wanted me to give it. I am not so naive to think that I will be able to afford the same amount of freedom in future creative endeavors, but I am grateful to the Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Fellowship for having given me this opportunity on my first real film. The flexible and year-long nature of the fellowship were fundamental to my success at becoming embedded in the culture and to my particular way of realizing the film.

On October 4, 2007, I touched down on the New Hampshire-sized island of Sardinia armed with nothing but a suitcase, a backpack, and a movie camera. My immediate goal was to immerse myself in small-town life and learn more about the singing tradition of Sardinia's famous *tenores*, on whom my film was to be based. Ironically, I had located my first contact in the supposedly untouched Sardinian hinterland via Google—one of today's most ubiquitous symbols of global interconnectedness. (This irony was not lost on me at the time; in fact, it foreshadowed the contradictions that would come to dominate my thinking about Sardinian culture.) My contact's name was Angela Ragusa. Angela is from mainland Italy and a writer/translator of children's books. Her husband, Bill Woolf, is an American visual artist and professor of studio art. The two of them live in the middle of Sardinia in a 2,500-person town called Santu Lussurgiu. They run a program that helps foreign professors organize excursions and cultural exchanges for their students in Sardinia. Though their organization had not been active in the months leading up to my arrival, they were happy to assist me in finding a host family and putting me in touch with local singers.

WHY "G"

The host family Angela set me up were the Coccas: a typically raucous bunch of Sardinians. As is usually the case in Italy and especially in Sardinia, I was quickly made to feel part of the family. Some days I would help the father, Vincenzo, with some messy farm work. Rosa, the morn, took to calling me to dinner using the same impatience she employed with her 10- and 12-year-old sons. This is a working-class family, but, as Vincenzo kept his typical Sardinian pride, they are not poor. Vincenzo is a farmer without a farmhouse. He lives in town, in a house he built before he got married. His animals reside outside of town, in various plots he rents. He has sheep, cows, pigs, and rabbits. His monthly income is from the cheese, milk, and meat he sells. The family's food expenses are next-to-none, as nearly everything they consume—from bread to meat to fruit to milk to cheese and wine—is of their own production. Though I only ended up staying with this family officially for a month, they became one of my cornerstones throughout the entire year.

During my month of living with the Coccas in Santu Lussurgiu, I got my first real exposure to Sardinian singing. Each of the town's four religious fraternities has a quartet subset that sings at official church occasions. I remember losing myself in the labyrinth of cobblestone streets on the way to observe my first evening rehearsal. I must have weaved through more than half the eerily silent town when I could start to make out singing in the distance. I continued to weave, but now with the aid of the voices guiding

me, and lo and behold I came upon a tiny little courtyard and a stone chapel with the door ajar. Strange, beautiful, melismatic polyphony seeped out.

This was not the type of Sardinian singing I had anticipated. Whereas I had only heard the genre *canttt a tenores*, with its fascinating guttural vocal quality, Santu Lussurgiu was home to a different choral tradition of *cantu a cuncordu*. Whereas the *tenores* tradition is sung outside and often combines secular themes with dancing, the *cuncordu* style is more often sung *a cappella*--in the chapel, literally--and uses mostly Latin religious texts. It occurred to me that I might be foolish to write off all forms of singing that weren't strictly *tenores-especially* since the social networks of religious fraternities in this community (some of them rivals) seemed like promising fodder for ethnomusicology. In that first month, I sat in on several rehearsals of two of the four fraternities. I also got to know another group that was unaffiliated with the church, *Cuncordu Lussur-zestt*, the self-proclaimed black sheep of Santu Lussurgiu's singing scene. I got to meet a few times with Ignazio Macchiarella, the local expert on Sardinian folk music. He was instrumental in giving me Sardinian contacts, both in music and film circles, that helped carry me into later phases of my project.

It struck me that I had been very lucky to have more or less stumbled upon the tiny town whose singing tradition is so unique that even a prominent Sardinian ethnomusicologist saw fit to buy a house there. I also think it may have been fate that I came to know the pleasant, listenable *cuncordu* style before moving on to the less accessible but equally intriguing *tenores*. Nevertheless, as my first month in Santu Lussurgiu was drawing to a close, I realized that, both for the purpose of my project and for the sake of my sanity, I would have to move on.

That month had taught me about my own personal limits. The strength of some researchers, particularly anthropologists, is their ability to live in a single remote village for months and even years on end. Though I have always thought of myself as adaptable to different living situations and different environments, Santu Lussurgiu taught me that I can only take provincial life in controlled doses, however warm and welcoming the people there. Perhaps that is the curse of being American, of having gone through four incredibly stimulating years of liberal arts education: I need a certain level of stimulation and diversity in my life. For me, one month in Santu Lussurgiu was time very well spent, even if a second month might not have been.

The decision to make the city of Cagliari my new home was mostly out of logistical convenience.

My needs were few but essential nonetheless: cheap rent, internet access, means of transportation, and just enough hustle and bustle so as not to make me lose my mind. At first, I had fears that moving my home base to the "big city" meant that I was selling out, but living here has been a productive and meaningful experience in itself.

More than Sardinia's glamorous Emerald Coast region near Olbia, Cagliari represents a gateway between Sardinia and the rest of Europe. Like Olbia, Cagliari has a seaport and an airport. Unlike Olbia, though, it is a university town with a steady presence of young people from all over the island. Though Cagliari's tourism industry is growing, the tourists are generally few and far between. To me this place still feels Sardinian, but with the flavor of a southern Italian city.

With Cagliari as my new home base, I set up communications with a film lab in Rome - unfortunately, an island of 1.6 million inhabitants can't support its own 16mm film processing lab. I spent a couple of months taking trips to explore the island and get a clearer idea of what I wanted to film. By that point, I had decided to focus on singing tradition; my mind open to the possibility of broadening the film's focus. I had decided that with all the interesting aspects of daily Sardinian life, the singing might be more compelling if it portrayed as just one of several aspects of a culture trying to adapt to modernity while maintaining tradition.

Some of my excursions during this explorational period took me to weekend festivals in Barbagia. This so-called "land of barbarians" is the wild, mountainous interior region known both for its throat singing and for an unsavory history of kidnappings and bank robberies. In attending these festivals and talking to people, I got a sense of some of the tricky social situations I would have to navigate in order to film. When I told people I was making a film about Sardinian culture, they get very enthusiastic and wanted to bring out their Culture with a capital C - the costumes, the masks, the dances, the performances. People's strong wish to help me was both a blessing and a curse: if I wasn't careful, I would lose creative control to well-intentioned people who were deciding for me what's worth filming. I tried to explain to my potential subjects that some of the most convincing and revealing footage about a culture can come out of film in just everyday events. But asking people to be filmed candidly in everyday situations is a tall order, so I understandably some are understandably uncomfortable, -.

One of the great advantages in doing this project on 16mm film - besides its breathtaking aesthetic quality - is that I was forced to be economical with my shooting and lay the proper groundwork before

actually collecting footage. I spent a full three months meeting people and exploring the island before starting to film. I ended up being able to afford about 45 eleven-minute rolls for the entire project, which I spread out over 9 months of filming-that's a whopping two minutes per day, on average. Though I inevitably found myself frustrated at the guesswork involved in shooting documentary on 16mm - "I predict something interesting is going to happen... 1101v!"-I think the necessity of economy forced me to be a much more disciplined and decisive filmmaker. The medium of film also spurred my decision to expand the focus beyond singing, due to the technical difficulties associated with filming long pieces of music in a continuous manner, as film necessitates short takes. Both the content and the feel of the piece would have been very different in video, and I remain very happy with the outcome, if not convinced that I will attempt film for all of my documentary efforts in the future.

As I began filming a variety of people at specific events and in their daily lives, I tried to always keep in mind questions like *What does this person's life tell us about the culture in Sardinia today and how that culture is changing? What does this person tell us about the extent to which Sardinia is modern/traditional? Does he/she reflect a culture that is Italian or unique/Sardinian?* I tried to pick people and situations in which the answers to one or more of these questions was particularly relevant. As a result, the film has become a series of vignettes, which **Jcl!** together present a complex portrait of an island which I believe offers a uniquely isolated, traditional culture undergoing globalization.

In the beginning, I filmed mainly at official cultural events, as in these situations people are universally glad to be filmed. I was invited to film at a traditional pig-roast dinner hosted by a pair of choirs in a town called Fonni. On the week leading up to Mardi Gras, I ventured to several versions of the Sardinian Carnevale celebrations that involve bizarre pagan animal costumes. On Easter, I went to Castelsardo for a singing-accompanied religious procession from a picturesque coastal hamlet to the windmill-dotted countryside. I gradually felt the need to abandon the big festivals in favor of more intimate, everyday settings. I filmed independent farmers-including my host father Vincenzo in Santu Lussurgiu-who struggle to make a living and bemoan the population decline in their communities. I followed a young, forward-thinking Sardinian named Maurizio who is committed to building sustainable tourism on his island. I spent time with an elderly woman who weaves Sardinian tapestries, as well as a Senegalese immigrant whose story I believe to be just as much a reflection of Sardinia's modern-day narrative. My hope is for all these stories to complement and build on each other. The film's style is primarily verite, with the occasional expository text and off-the-cuff interviews.

More than anything else, this film represents a year-long journey. As the project unfolded, I began to see my task less as a rubric with tasks to complete, and more as a Choose Your Own Adventure book, with each of my creative decisions being informed by my overarching questions about the island. I found that the film's essence - what it *wanted* to be about - was determined both by my original vision and by the circumstances I found on the ground. I suppose this exciting unpredictability is the stuff on which a documentary filmmaker thrives. Though I could write a novel outlining the backstory of this film, my hope is for the work to be appreciated at face value. There should be no need for a companion text or disclaimer; the evolutionary creative process is surely wrapped up in the very DNA of the film itself. My hope as a first-time filmmaker has been to exhibit neither the exploitative distance of a short-term visitor nor the myopic bias of an embedded Sardophile. This film is very much to reflect the view of a young American living in Sardinia, and this is something I could not have achieved without the generous support of the Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Traveling Fellowship.