

Oral History in the Freud Archives: Incidents, Ethics, and Relations

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This paper, reflecting on a more or less successful collaborative attempt to have the record of a dream from the Sigmund Freud Archives released and published, explores the notion that archival work might be enriched in various ways by adopting some of the sensibilities of oral history methodology. In the course of addressing the utility of this methodology in archival work, uncertainties arise involving issues of responsibility, respect, and confidentiality. Research positioned in a fluid community process that recognizes power relations between researcher and researched as well as scholarly responsibilities to living, vulnerable people opens the archive to both risks and gains in reworking and explicitly addressing the social life of stories.

The notion has relevance for historical geographers because they are traditionally archive users who need to be sensitive to research materials and their contexts. Indeed, in the course of archival work, they do not unusually become privy to unpublished personal, perhaps revelatory, information. In certain archives, the issue of confidentiality is rarely understood as problematic once material has been deposited in the archive. Concerns about fair and proper use generally arise with the possibility of publication and only then in terms of legalities surrounding copyright legislation. On the other hand, many archives now have quite stringent conditions on use of materials; for instance, the access rules for the University College London Special Collections state that “In general, a 30-year closure period is applied to personal papers, 80 years for student and staff records, and 100 years for personal medical records.”¹

Furthermore, historical geographers are paying increasing attention to the reinvention of biography. Stephen Daniels, reflecting in 1997 on his study of the 18th-century landscape gardener Humphry Repton, used the phrase “life geography” to place a geographical spin on the study of the human life, suggestive of the ways people react with their bodies to the worlds around them.² The phrase reappeared as the title of a major session of the Historical Geography Research Group at the 1999 Royal Geographical Society-Institute of British Geographers Conference in Leicester—Nicola Thomas found inspiration for her life geography of Lady Curzon, Vicereign of India, in feminist theories that critiqued the “great man” biography that sought to place the subject above

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and beyond the involvements of everyday life.³ In these and other ongoing efforts to approach subjectivities, bringing appropriate sensitivities to non-traditional sources while recognizing the importance of emotion and imagination in historical geographies, researchers may encounter practical and ethical challenges as they touch not only the delicate papers of the dead, but the stories that might unsettle the sleep of the living. I recount my own story with an aim to encourage optimistic stories about engaged archival research—an activity continually in danger of closing down due to legal, moral, and personal fears of opening up.

The phrase “the social life of stories” is from anthropologist Julie Cruikshank who recently used it to title her book on narrative and knowledge, based on collaborations with three elders in the Yukon territory between 1974 and the late 1980s.⁴ I admit the link between oral tradition in Canada and the Sigmund Freud Archive in Washington, D.C. might sound a bit tenuous, but Cruikshank’s thoughts on the academic’s role in regard to issues of accessibility, local empowerment, and popular involvement in history were a continual source of inspiration for me when I was absorbed in oral history fieldwork in the mid 1990s—these have both heartened and dogged me ever since.

My work then concerned the social history of a lake in British Columbia that had been drained after the Great War.⁵ Rather than use the recorded interviews about the lake as material to be mined for fact, I was taught to understand them as vital components of the rhetorical dimension of history, expanding a historical culture of argument, attending to relations of power, and transforming our own perspectives and understanding of written documents in the process of our research. The work was about listening reflexively, reclaiming suppressed metaphor and, so was my wish, disturbing dominant progress narratives. When I went for further postgraduate study in England, turning my attention to early conservation in the Fens,⁶ I was accustomed to approaching both oral and written archives not as self-contained repositories where one quietly gathers the facts on individuals but rather as webs of connections and opportunities for dialogue—an amplified version of Doreen Massey’s definition of places as “articulated moments in networks of social relations and understandings.”⁷

A key part of my work involved Sir Arthur Tansley, a founder of British ecology who helped to establish the Nature Conservancy and who coined the term *ecosystem*; a scientist of wide interests who died in 1955 and whose papers were housed mainly in the Department of Plant Sciences at the University of Cambridge. Early on, I began to make contacts with surviving colleagues and descendants. I knew something about Tansley’s interest in Freudian psychoanalysis—he had written a book concerning the topic in 1920—but this aspect of his life and work was largely unexplored. I began to correspond with Freud scholars, such as Michael Molnar of the Freud Museum in London and I was given a lead on additional Tansley material in the Library of Congress. It came with a warning that the deposit, which included an inter-

view with Tansley, was held in the notorious ZR-Section of the Sigmund Freud Archives that was restricted, not due for public release for several years, and under the control of Dr. K.R. Eissler, the eminent psychoanalyst, author, and head of the archive. At the time of my interest and correspondence with him, he was nearly 90 years old. I would need to get permission from him. Having read Janet Malcolm's account, *In the Freud Archives*,⁸ I had the impression that I was attempting to gain access to an elite, highly protective, and protected world in which secrets (not to mention scandal and litigation) were simply the way things were done.

Eissler's first reply to me was terse: "I do not recall an interview with Tansley." As far as Freud archivist Dr. Harold Blum knew, Eissler himself had conducted the interview with Tansley in the 1950s as part of his long-term project to interview as many of Freud's former patients as possible. I continued to write, but my letters went unanswered. Eissler's eight-word response was as close as I managed to get to the Freud Archive until the summer of 1997 when I consulted Dr. John Forrester, Reader in the History and Philosophy of the Sciences at Cambridge, about the psychoanalytic papers I had been examining in the Tansley archive over in Plant Sciences. One document, which appeared to be a letter from Freud to Tansley concerning the first patient of psychoanalysis, Anna O.,⁹ was particularly interesting to Forrester and with this potentially important "find" that offered something of fresh interest to Eissler, Forrester helped me engage Eissler in further negotiations, which, after many more months, led to a brief notification from Eissler that the Tansley material was no longer restricted. I was in.

The ensuing journey to Washington, D.C. to copy the dream material became immediately surreal for I arrived the very day the Monica Lewinsky scandal was breaking—what would rapidly become the most reported international story in 1998. Another big story, the Supreme Court of Canada ruling that oral history could be used as legally binding evidence in support of Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en land claims, was completely overshadowed that month as "oral history" became a pun in the headlines of American papers debating "what is a sexual act?"; as radio talkshows discussed the best way to answer your kid when asked "what is an intern?"

Dodging clusters of anti-abortion demonstrators in front of the White House, I made my way to the Library of Congress' James Madison Memorial Building. The entry was engraved with Madison's admonition "knowledge will forever govern ignorance and a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives." I was searched at the door, certified unarmed, and permitted to proceed upstairs to the Freud Archives. After presenting the gold ticket—the Eissler letter—the restricted boxes containing the Tansley material (and also, tantalizingly and indiscreetly, restricted Wilhelm Reich correspondence) were placed before my desk. With growing fascination, I saw that the Tansley file—at first glance, disappointingly slim—consisted of a dream as remembered by Tansley together with his own interpretation of it, a short history of Tansley's relations

with Freud, and a transcript of an interview conducted by Eissler in 1953. Tansley had titled his submission “Three Contributions,” an echo of his favorite work of Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*.

The dream began, “I dreamed that I was in a subtropical country, separated from my friends...” Strangely, as I read on ... I realized that I knew this dream. In his 1920 book, *The New Psychology*, Tansley had offered a somewhat censored version of this same dream as a good example of dreams about sexual relations without attributing it to himself; “the man with a rifle surrounded by savages and unable to break through them is a true poetic symbol of the man in conflict with the herd, which separates him from the object of desire.”¹⁰ This dream, Tansley’s submission made clear, was one of the major turning points in his life; as he interpreted it, he, a married man, had fallen in love with a student. But this conflict seemed to be supplanted by another—from the dream came his interest in psychoanalysis, a serious new rival for his long-time love for ecology.

Upon my return, Forrester was equally enthused with the material and we decided to work on it in collaboration. For me, this was a wonderful opportunity to work with a respected Freud scholar and historian of science; over the next several months, the dream material was augmented by many other finds and much serendipity. Forrester, on a trip to the Freud Museum in Vienna found, by chance, that Tansley’s personal collection of psychoanalytic books made up a significant portion of the oldest volumes held on the shelves—the museum staff had no idea who Tansley was. We planned an article and in terms of thinking about relations between researcher and the researched (us living; Tansley dead), I had no significant misgivings about making Tansley’s dream public in an academic journal. Tansley himself had offered his dream to the Freud Archive and to future historians as his contribution to the history of psychoanalysis. As Tansley knew well, psychoanalysis, by making a dream an object for scientific analysis, removes the barrier between the private and public self. His dream and his role in the early history of psychoanalysis, which became our focus, provided a new understanding of that history in Britain. Furthermore, his dream contribution made a fascinating case study in the significance of dreams in history, enabling us to examine the part they might play in an individual’s life.

In terms of concerns about relations with the living, I sent the material to Tansley’s grandchildren with whom I had been in contact. I heard little from them until the spring of 1999 when we were preparing our final draft for publication in *History Workshop Journal*. A granddaughter phoned and she sounded distressed; she said she did not see the point of raking over the coals. So began months of negotiations with the grandchildren, copyright holders, and the *Journal* over various issues concerning publication with permission-to-publish high on the list. We worked with family members, explaining our position, listening to theirs, going over the draft sentence by sentence and taking on board suggested changes. The granddaughter who had initially phoned was experiencing problems with her memory: the whole process called

for effort on everyone's part but perhaps especially for her, and her time was generously given. In the end, everyone was pleased with the piece; but the experience made it clear that there were many questions involved in the lengthy process that called for more consideration.¹¹

In many respects, we faced conventional problems of archival work leading to publication that could be framed wholly in legal terms and left to lawyers. But it was also true that the dream and its connections with the sexual life placed us in the shifting and unstable terrain dealing with attitudes (ours, and interested others') towards morality and sexuality—terrain Tansley himself covered in his own wide-ranging discussions. In a talk given at Oxford in 1932, Tansley commented that "...it is difficult to be satisfied that one is leading the good life in the modern world of the 20th century. Society is rapidly changing and with it our ideals of the good life. Our wills are consequently uncertain, what our particular behaviour should be is often doubtful."¹² By way of conclusion, I would like to consider further some uncertainties that his archival dreamwork raised for me.¹³

First, I began to wonder if an emphasis on copy-responsibility rather than copyright might be a better way to approach archives. The problems of responsibility are surely no less angst-ridden. What if you believe the guardian of the archive is not a responsible agent, mentally or morally? Who has the responsibility to arbitrate in such cases? What if the guardian is willing to share with one researcher and, perhaps arbitrarily, not with another? That sorry situation will be faced by others who want to see Tansley's "Three Contributions" for, after Eissler's death in February 1999, the material went back on restricted access.¹⁴ Am I responsible to offer copies to researchers myself?

Linked to responsibility is the matter of respect. In the attempt to widen the range of voices in oral history, the necessity of creating a respectful atmosphere conducive to the creation of trust, support, and empowerment has long been recognized. As historical geographers follow trails that blur categories of institutional/non-institutional materials and responsibilities, the necessity of treating others with respect is also basic. For archivists, respect might just mean treating the papers with delicacy and clean fingers, but when the papers lead us, as they inevitably do, to living stories, messy history, is there a time when giving respect might mean leaving certain papers and people alone?

Of course that is the key question and how do we answer it?¹⁵ Are we tempted to make a utilitarian calculation of the benefits to "humanity" of the publication of this private material? Not so easy! What other criteria are going to be used? What were our criteria for pressing the grandchildren to give their consent when they felt that this was all better kept private? At the time, I think I felt that Tansley's ease with the material (and psychoanalysis itself) outweighed his descendants' discomfort. I also had a strong sense that the project to date was one of the most fascinating and constantly surprising I had ever worked on and I found it difficult to accept this final twist—the possibility that the dream story might not be given much of a social life at all. But then, who were

we to burst in on their lives and comfortable memories of grandfather with the extraordinary news, “we know what Tansley was dreaming”?

People who deal with confidentiality on a routine basis, such as counselors and analysts, have ethical guidelines to protect the anonymity of the individuals involved and, according to Christopher Bollas and David Sundelson in *The New Informants*, the requirement of confidentiality on analysts is absolute and eternal, and completely unconditional.¹⁶ Those analysts and patients who take risk and seek disclosure in order to provide case histories confront the manifold difficulties of informed consent—how can one ever determine the consequences of the consent? Arnold Goldberg, in his consideration of the writing of psychoanalytic case histories, points to a paradox that researchers also may face, if, for instance, permission to publish becomes linked to the promise to suppress certain details of a person’s life. “We run,” he writes, “a risk of essentially writing fiction if we become firm protectors of confidentiality, while we run a risk of moral transgression if we insist on a truthful presentation.”¹⁷

Archival research requires a delicacy of concern, and the business of sorting out what we need to know from what we do not need to know is highly contextual; such creative historical geography, shaped by curiosity and sensitivities to place, has no explicit guidelines. Being reflexive about our pleasures in research; why we do what we do and how, is importantly linked to that project; and though, in that process we may be pulled towards the radiant cynicism¹⁸ in which academia often specializes, optimistic stories also abound. Cruikshank, referring to what she learned from the oral tradition of the Yukon women she worked with, writes “one of the many things these women taught me is that their narratives do far more than entertain. If one has optimistic stories about the past, they showed, one can draw on internal resources to survive and make sense of arbitrary forces that might otherwise seem overwhelming.”¹⁹ Intending to encourage further optimistic academic stories, so that we might more confidently follow our curiosity and other people’s dreams, we can choose to foster trusting relationships through our research. In archives, we might consider our “guiding rules” of oral history and explore, besides the letters, the catalogs, and the notebooks, the possibilities of human connections through time.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to John Forrester for his responses to this paper and to Elizabeth Gagen for encouraging me to write it. I am also grateful to Alan Baker, Julie Cruikshank, Philip Howell, Gerry Kearns, and Matt Rogalsky for their comments and encouragement. Katherine Jones and Matthew Kurtz gave me the opportunity to present this material in April 2000 at the Association of American Geographers’ Annual Meeting in Pittsburgh. Finally, I would like to thank

Richard Schein and the anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions—remaining problems are my responsibility alone.

Notes

1. See University College London (UCL) Library's Special Collections website located at <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/Library/special-coll>.
2. Humphry Repton, *Landscape Gardening and the Geography of Georgian England* (New Haven, Conn. and London: Yale University Press, 1999). This book resulted from the study Stephen Daniels spoke about at the Annual Undergraduate and Postgraduate Conference organized by the Historical Geography Research Group of the Royal Geographical Society-Institute of British Geographers (RGS-IBG).
3. Nicola Thomas, "Exploring the Boundaries of Biography: Lady Curzon, Vicereign of India 1898-1905," paper presented at the RGS-IBG conference.
4. Julie Cruikshank, *The Social Life Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory* (Lincoln, Nebr.: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).
5. Laura Cameron, *Openings: A Meditation on History, Method and Sumas Lake* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997).
6. My recent work on Fenland conservation which, in part, explores connections between early ecology and psychoanalysis includes: "Histories of Disturbance," *Radical History Review* 74 (Spring 1999): 4-24 and "Anthropogenic Natures: Wicken Fen and Histories of Disturbance 1923-1943," (Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 2000).
7. Doreen Massey, "Power-geometry and a Progressive Sense of Place," in John Bird et al., eds., *Mapping the Futures: Local Cultures, Global Changes* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993): 66.
8. Janet Malcolm, *In the Freud Archives* (London: Papermac, 1997).
9. See John Forrester and Laura Cameron, "'Cure with a Defect': A Previously Unpublished Letter by Freud Concerning 'Anna O.'" *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 80:Part 5 (1999): 929-942.
10. Arthur G. Tansley, *The New Psychology and Its Relation To Life* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1920): 131.
11. The article appeared as Laura Cameron and John Forrester, "A Nice Type of the English Scientist: Tansley and Freud," *History Workshop Journal* 48 (Autumn 1999): 64-100.
12. Arthur G. Tansley, "The Temporal Genetic Series as a Means of Approach to Philosophy," (paper delivered to the Magdalen Philosophy Club, Oxford, 5 May 1932); A.G. Tansley Collection, Department of Plant Sciences Library, University of Cambridge.
13. See Jeffrey Weeks, *Invented Moralities: Sexual Values in an Age of Uncertainty* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995) for further discussion of ethical issues regarding care, respect, responsibility, and knowledge.
14. The interview with Kurt Eissler was derestricted 23 May 2000 but the other two "contributions"—including the record of Tansley's dream—are not due to be derestricted until 2009 and 2010.
15. Thanks to John Forrester for his questions here.
16. Christopher Bollas and David Sundelson, *The New Informants: Betrayal of Confidentiality in Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy* (London: Karnac, 1995).
17. Arnold Goldberg, "Writing Case Histories," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 78:Part 3 (1997): 438.
18. See Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Woman: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991): 184.
19. Cruikshank, *The Social Life of Stories*, xii.

