# Troubles in Archives:

## Misleading Assemblages, Awkward Activisms and Trickster Traces

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**Whites Writing Whitness Working Paper**
**ISBN 1 900522 24 1**

Please reference as: Liz Stanley (2015) *Troubles In Archives: Misleading Assemblages, Awkward Activisms and Trickster Traces* Edinburgh: Whites Writing Whiteness Working Paper http://www.whiteswritingwhiteness.ed.ac.uk/publications/working-papers/troubles

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## Abstract

This presentation addresses the scena-setting task for the Symposium on 'Archives, Art and Activism' in two linked ways. Firstly, it relates the scena theme of narrative to the overall symposium focus on archives, art and activism. And secondly, it supports the group of shorter papers following it by exploring fault-lines within narrative inquiry and how these play out in relation to the archival turn. These fault-lines cohere around the artfulness of researcher assemblages, the provocations of some archival activisms, and the ontologically complicated character of archival traces. The 'Preface' provides introductory comments on researcher positionality, the broad powerful and extremely influential ideas associated with the narrative turn, and some unresolved issues at the heart of narrative inquiry. Three aspects of the latter are then explored in in relation to archives, art and activism. 'Misleading assemblages' explores researcher stories told about archives, using the *Olive Schreiner Letters Online* as a digital meta-archive and rejecting the idea of digital archives as totalising compendia. It does so in particular regarding to readers and users and ideas about construction, assemblage and accountability. 'Awkward activisms' is concerned with re/making archives from beneath, outside, beyond. It makes the point that such activism comes in many shades and there are often uncomfortable histories and heritages of collections and archives that need to be reckoned with. 'Trickster traces' points out the 'by nature' fragmentary and partial character of archival traces. This is in part because the traces always lack the context of the people, times, places and events that gave these their past meanings, and in part because what remains may be alien to present-time understandings and so tricky to comprehend.

## 1. Preface

1.1 Relevant to the shape and content of this presentation for the 'Archives, Art and Activism' symposium is that I'm a feminist sociologist, working at the interface of literary studies, social history and cultural sociology. A recent ESRC and British Academy project has been on the letters and other remaining papers of the feminist writer, social theorist and political commentator Olive Schreiner, including

publication of a digital archive, the *Olive Schreiner Letters Online* (www.oliveschreiner.org). This has been followed by an in progress project, also funded by the ESRC, on Whites Writing Whiteness, which is concerned with changing representations of the racial order by white people in southern Africa from the 1770s to the 1970s. Again the focus is on letters, but also diaries, inventories, accounts, telegrams, Wills, maps, and other everyday documents of life are also being used to explore the scriptural economies of different figurations of white people over this 200 year period. Both are drawn on in what follows

1.2 In addition, I have written about narrative inquiry in both methodological and theoretical terms as well as drawing on various of its key ideas in my research, although I'd describe myself as part of the loyal opposition in narrative inquiry, something I'll comment more on later. Relatedly, my core interests include auto/biographical self-representations in autobiography, testimony, diaries, also portraits in photography, painting and sculpture (eg. *The Auto/Bigraphical I*); documents of life and all the everyday oral, visual, written, built, embodied and other texts of different kinds, including commemorative monuments and memorials (eg. *Documents of Life Revisited*); and archival research, involving both archives as conventionally understood, and through creating alternative archives, and also meta-archives (eg. *The Life and Death of Emily Wilding Davison*, *Sex Surveyed*, *Olive Schreiner Letters Online*).

1.3 Two broad opening comments about narrative will set the scene for the discussion following.

1.4 The first is that the archival turn is best understood as a part of something larger in significance terms and that has substantially challenged and changed intellectual thinking. This is the narrative turn, with narrative here conceived broadly as a set of ideas, a perspective, rather than in the more limited form of focusing on specific methods that it takes in many introductory texts. Some of the key ideas associated are that people matter and lives should be understood holistically; researchers too are subject within this, not somehow apart; there is no god's eye view and there are no convincing grounds to claim epistemological privilege; all knowledge-making is situated and partial; reflexivity in knowledge-making and knowledge-claims should follow; assumptions about referentiality should be surrendered and the partiality of all accounts of the world grasped; lives are storied and told and so stories are accounts using fictive devices of various kinds; some stories count for more than others in terms of social hierarchies and their exclusions and notions of worth and this is key to the configuration of knowledge/power; neither 'the past/then' nor 'the present/now' are *sui generis*, a given, but products of social construction; and the archival turn is a key part of these ideas.

1.5 The narrative turn in this broad sense has been a constitutive part of that profound remaking of the intellectual landscape that has occurred in the long duree of changing ideas taking place over the last fifty or so years. It includes within it embodiment, affect and all other aspects of the human condition that are represented and told about – that is, everything. And how powerful, how resonant, these ideas have been, the crests of tsunami-like waves that have washed over contemporary life, such that we now think and work and perform and research under their sign.

1.6 The second thing to say is that there are some muddles at the heart of narrative inquiry, fault-lines that result in narrative scholars often speaking and writing past each other, because talking about different ontological and epistemological orders, while using the same terms to intend different things.

1.7 One example, alluded to earlier regarding a loyal opposition in narrative scholarship, is that when people are asked about narrative, immediately and almost invariably defining narrative is collapsed into defining story. I have no problems with the idea of story, a concept and a set of theoretical and methodological ideas attached that are well-crafted. However, there *is* a problem with the term narrative being now often used as a synonym for 'stuff I work with', when people actually mean, for example, some interviews. The term narrative is itself a fault-line, then. The wide-ranging ideas constituting the narrative turn are powerful and attractive and address and answer a range of intellectual needs, while the specific term 'narrative' is under-examined and under-theorised, except in story terms, and with the loyal opposition – myself included - more interested in meta-narratives, linked sets of stories, than the 'narrative inquiry' of methods texts.

1.8 A second fault-line concerns the strong tendency to treat stories as testimonies and to focus specifically on those from oppressed groups and individuals, good people, people we approve of, treating them as having a directly referential character, and taking them at face value. There is surprisingly little work, apart from the loyal opposition again, which treats them situated knowledges and emanating from particular times, places, contexts and points of view, and consequently as accounts which make use of an array of fictive devices as part of their representation of and claims to facticity. Indeed, recognising these storied and performative aspects of stories and testimonies is in some narrative quarters seen as tantamount to denying that events referred actually happened, a very binary approach to the complexities of the referentiality and representation relationship, instead seeing stories as either absolutely true or else false.

1.9 A third fault-line concerns a development that aligns narrative work with similar developments in archival turn literature, and is situating the researcher in ethnographic terms. I have no problems with ethnography, but I *do* with focusing

analysis away from 'them' and 'then', and into research stories of 'now' presented in *auto*ethnographic terms, regarding the researcher's experiences and feelings. The loyal opposition here, while not disregarding the need for researcher reflexivity with regard to knowledge-claims, remains insistent that, in archival research, what matters is social life back then and competing knowledges about it and this is what should be the focus, not the researcher's experiences and feelings in carrying out research on this.

1.10 Other examples could be provided, but the point has been made. The narrative turn is a broad church of ideas around the core that social life, in the past, also in the present, is not *sui generis* but a social construction. And it includes majority and minority views on all the key ideas outlined earlier, with sometimes fierce clashes between them.

1.11 But there is also a stronger argument to be made, which is that these fault-lines are interesting places to be, for they are surface eruptions indicating troubled turbulence at the depths. They raise troubles and problems, but at the same time point to interesting possibilities. They all hinge on the lives/stories/facts/fictions set of interrelationships, and they occur concerning the archival traces of the past as much as concerning narratives/stories of the present. What now follows pursues some of these fault-lines in relation to archival research, concerning the activities and assemblages of archival researchers, the troubling character of some archival activisms, and the trickiness of the remaining traces.

**2. Misleading assemblages: artfulness and artefacts**

2.1 Much of my archival work has drawn on the idea of 'cultural assemblage', something that has been a focus of considerable theoretical and substantive attention in cultural sociology over the last decade. Cultural practices make their own often implicit knowledge-claims, they are never *sui generis*, never a given, and always products of times, places, people, ideas and practices. This points cultural sociology in the direction of exploring the genealogy of such practices, involving the time-making and time-using activities through which cultural forms originate, circulate and are used. The idea of cultural assemblage includes both the work of making it, of making the cultural, and also the work it does, the effects it has through its circulation and use and eventual redundancy or change. And if we too are subject, and knowledge is always situated knowledges, then the researcher's own cultural practices and assemblages should also come under careful scrutiny, if reflexivity is to mean something analytically worth having.

2.2 The *Olive Schreiner Letters Online* was funded by the ESRC and published through hriOnline, the UK's leading publisher of digital primary source materials(www.oliveschreiner.org). The *OSLO* is a meta-archive, but with some important differences from many other such projects. It delivers all the 5000+ extant

Schreiner letters, drawn from many sources, three continents and over forty archives, and does so in digitised transcribed form. It rejects the practice, now almost a digital convention, to provide jpegs, for these are a simulacra of presence and not presence itself, while transcriptions keeps the role of researchers/editors in frame. Fully searchable, the *OSLO* provides Schreiner's letters to readers and users in a variety of ways, through the reader's Boolean searches, also via topic collections, particular correspondents, archives, time periods and a variety of other ways. In narrative terms, there are many stories, interrelated but not coterminous, being told here in meta form, regarding Schreiner's letters, regarding how the 'researcher/editor function' conceives and interprets these, regarding how secondary researchers become storied within this because of how their interests and needs have been envisioned, and in addition and importantly, regarding how the many thousands of its regular readers and other users put together their own versions of such stories.

2.3 In doing so, however, it emphasises and provides information about how its organisation and content conceive and position 'the reader' in relation to Schreiner's letters and also the researcher-provided editorial apparatus surrounding them, as well as detailing other editorial practices. And as this indicates, there is both the promise of the digital and meta to deliver reader superordinacy, but also the recognition that this occurs in terms and conditions as set by the researchers-as-editors – that is, a 'researcher/editor function' is necessarily part of the action.

2.4 Succinctly, the *Olive Schreiner Letters Online* and other such meta-projects are cultural productions, cultural assemblages - they are not givens, *sui generis*, but the work of particular people, times and places and technologies. Inevitably, they are marked by points of view, ideas frameworks, boundaries and constraints. There are researchers-editors at work ('Cultural assemblage'; ' The reader, the text and the editor'). And they're made as persuasive, as convincing, as possible with their likely readers, visitors, consumers or audiences in mind. The edifice of the meta-archive, then, is an artifice, a cultural assemblage, and the idea of cultural assemblage is one I find helpful, indeed necessary, because it requires making the work that goes into the making and the using of cultural archival assemblages explicit, visible and accountable. And through it, the stance of the OSLO is shown to be an at basis 'whole letter' and 'back to the archival sources' one.

**3. Awkward activisms**

3.1 I want now to turn the lens onto a related aspect of 'the making' of archival assemblages, concerning archival activists and activisms. Activism here is understood as a process, the process of people re/making archives from beneath, outside, beyond, and not a state of being; and it does not attach to some political and ethical positions but not others.

3.2 Archival activists may be seen as rather like Joan Findlay, who with her husband George assembled the 180 years worth of papers of the interrelated Findlay, Schreiner, Niemeyer and Rose Innes families in South Africa, produced a book about this (*The Findlay Letters*) and donated them to a major university-based archive in Johannesburg and so with safeguards for open access. Also archival activists may perhaps be seen as rather like the feminist networks that went into action *contra* Olive Schreiner's estranged husband, Cronwright-Schreiner. Having produced a poisoned chalice of a biography of her, and a dog's breakfast of her edited letters, he set out to obtain and destroy as many of her letters and original manuscripts as possible. And in the face of this, they assembled, and in some cases inventorised and curated, her letters to particular correspondents, then donated these to public archives.

3.3 However, thinking about the research I carried out before the Schreiner letters project, perhaps the archival activists of our dreams may be seen as rather like the Boer (precursor to today's Afrikaner) proto-feminist women who produced testimonies about the concentration camps of the South African War of 1899-1902, in which many women and in particular children died of typhoid, dysentery, measles, and pneumonia. Not only did they ensure the manuscript testimonies were published and archived, but also were published proponents in the creation of a large number of commemorative and archival places and spaces in which these and related accounts could be preserved. Dreams can sometimes turn nightmarish, though.

3.4 The women who produced these collections were political activists, mainly from elite family backgrounds, by and large they personally had a good South African War, and they also had high profile political careers in the cultural Afrikaner and women's nationalist framework of the 1910s, 20s and 30s, some of them into the 40s and 50s. The women's testimonies were first solicited and collected post-1902 in the burgeoning context of and in support for a militant and racialised form of nationalism. They were subsequently added to in a number of further swathes, occurring at key political points in the development of nationalist politics. Their core message was, is, the deaths that occurred were not the product of disease and muddle in an *in extremis* wartime situation, but were deliberate and genocidal. Now, if many women and children died, as they did, then one response might be, why does it matter? But truth and lies *do* matter, in and of themselves. And in this instance it also matters because of what came next.

3.5 There is a complicated story to tell here about nationalism and feminism of the racialised right, but as I have told it elsewhere (*Mourning Becomes…*) I will cut to the chase. The post/memory process and the collection and publication of women's testimonies was from the start highly nationalist and racialised, and with the later collections influencing as well as being influenced by national socialism in Germany

in the 1920s and 30s: Goebbel's adoption of the term 'concentration camp' came from his South African connections, it is salutary to remember.

3.6 These women's testimonies become and remained over a long period of time central to Afrikaner nationalist political traditions, through their distribution and circulation via a range of cultural organisations and activities. Their core message became, not just orthodoxy, but 'the truth', unquestionable truth, and any contrary view damned as lies, as flat-earthism. And while the details faded over time, the core message remained until the 1994 transition in South Africa, and indeed after. For instance, while all other aspects of the South African past and its supposed 'history' were problematised in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's *Final Report*, this was not . Indeed, the Report explicitly states that it is to be taken as precisely *sui generis*, unquestionably true and on a moral par with the evils of apartheid. Few people who now read any of these testimonies in their published or archived forms will struggle past their iconic status, that the women's testimonies = truth, to find the range of other accounts that also exist but which problematise their viewpoint on the events that occurred.

3.7 What I am emphasising, then, is that people at all points on the moral and political compass, both in the past and also now in the present, can become archival activists determined to ensure thet *their* versions of events survive. And this puts firmly on the agenda that the remaining traces of the past, and the spaces and places they are found in, have complicated and sometimes very uncomfortable histories and heritages. As a consequence, the genealogical processes of history-making and truth-making – their cultural assemblage - should always be part of the framework of archival investigations, as should thinking carefully about the traces that remain and what they do, and do not, add up to.

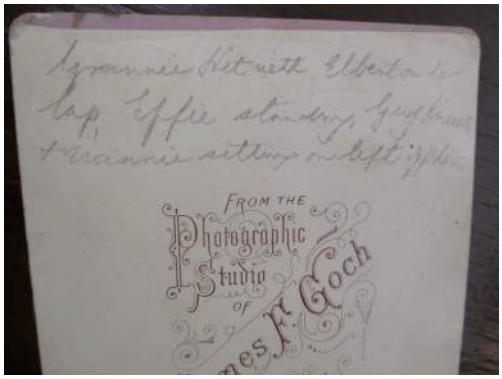
**4. Trickster traces: what remains**

4.1 As a concept, the idea of the trace can itself be traced, to the work of, among others, the philosopher of history and archaeologist RG Collingwood in the 1930s, the historian Marc Bloch in the early 1940s, and the philosopher Jacques Derrida in the later 1960s. The trace for them is what remains concerning some point in the past beyond living memory, and which is as a consequence necessarily accorded meaning and relevance according to present-time concerns and understandings. The trace is the basis of all thinking about the past beyond direct memory, and consists in the maps, oral recordings, letters, Wills, photographs, household accounts, horse-packways, court records, buildings, contents of cupboards and so on. This is the flotsam and jetsam of the past, stuff like the duffel-coat buttons cheek by jowl with a hair-grip, a packet of letters, a jew's harp, sheath-knife, and embroidery thread in a paper-bag, the contents of a family button-box I inherited. But the traces remaining are what we have and necessarily work with.

4.2 But what of the trickster aspect of the trace? It is built in, comes with the territory. The trace is fragmentary, partial – indeed, it is *never* complete because always lacking the context of the people and times and places and events that gave it meaning back then. And often it is so partial, so fragmentary, that it's rare to be able to work out from it to reach… to reach *different* conclusions from those seemingly presaged in a particular trace. An example here is provided by an extract from a letter Olive Schreiner wrote to Isie Smuts, the deeply politically active wife of Transvaal and later South African politician Jan Smuts. It was written in the tumultuous year of 1913 when a whole raft of racial legislation was introduced, including the notorious Land Act that disappropriated black people from land rights, asking Isie to 'Give my love to Neef Jan. Tell him to take care of my Indians & Natives for me while I'm away! Oh, Isie dear, if one has suffered so much as I have all my life since I was a girl, & especially in these last years, one realizes how unnecessary it is we should ever inflict suffering on each other." (OS to Isie Smuts, 18 Oct 1913, NAD Smuts / OSLO; ['neef' a diminutive, formally nephew or cousin but used informally of a younger man and to indicate hierarchy].

4.3 At first, second and third sight, this letter shows Olive Schreiner writing in racialised diminishing terms - 'my Indians', 'Natives'. That's the trace for you, one might think, revealing feet of clay in these incontrovertible words on incontrovertible pages. However, it is not so simple, for people can write in many ways and for a range of purposes. There is a backstory here. A few years ago in a South African archive I came across a letter by one of Schreiner's closest friends, Alice Greene, to her lover Betty Molteno. It is dated 23 November 1913 and refers directly to Schreiner's letter. In it, Greene writes to Molteno about Schreiner being 'very amusing' about what her letter to Isie said. Greene's letter makes it incontrovertible that Schreiner was deliberately sending the Smutses up, including the 'Neef' which in effect diminishes this senior politician as a mere lad, with Isie and Jan unable to understand that Schreiner's comments were made with irony, for diminishing patronage was, as it were, the air that they. However, they might have smelled something of a rat, firstly because Schreiner had written a remarkably similar but fuller letter to Isie at another political juncture, in January-February 1909; and secondly because the Smutes would have realised the sentence following was a barbed reference to the inflicting of unnecessary suffering that Jan Smuts, in his capacity at that time as a leading South African cabinet minister, was carrying out and the country's lurch rightwards regarding race and also trades union politics under his leadership.

4.4 Absence of contextual information, then, is a tricky matter, with Schreiner's and Greene's letters providing a sharp reminder of the need for caution in drawing conclusions from single traces remaining, and of always establishing as much of the context possible as part of investigation and analysis. But presence can bring its own trickiness, for thinking in terms of the mind-set of 'then' is no straight-forward matter, as the photograph and the note on its back shown here will help indicate.



(UCT Schreiner-Hemming: D0873-D0874)

4.5 The photograph is of five people, two adults and three children. Looking at it, as we do, through the eyes of outsiders looking without familiarity or love, we can see 'race' in the sense of skin colour, if that is how we are attuned to, or wish to, do so. It was seen in more complicated terms by the family member, Wynnie Hemming, older sister of the children shown in it, when she wrote the note on its back three or four decades after the photo was taken, about who these people were: 'Grannie Het with Elbert on her lap, Effie standing, Guy kneeling & Nannie sitting on left of photo'. The note was for her nieces and nephews, the children of the Effie referred to as standing on the right, and was written when Wynnie sorted through family papers with thoughts of mortality in mind.

4.6 For Wynnie, and by implication also for Effie's at that point adult children, it was not self-evident who was 'Grannie Het' and who was 'Nannie'. 'Grannie Het' was. Ettie or Het or Hetty Stakesby Lewis was actually Wynnie's aunt, and also that of Elbert and Guy, the other children shown; she had adopted them after their mother's death, and they came to call her mother. Wynnie's note goes into some detail writing that Nannie – Anna Tempo but known universally as Nannie, including when she later become well-known in the Cape Town area as a temperance worker and social reformer – is 'sitting on left of photo'. There is no assumption in Wynnie's note of race in hierarchy terms, and there is the implied possibility that family can be multi-ethnic. But, readers may be thinking here, this sounds like my making an incautious reading, my over-inferring from one trace, the scribbled note on the photograph's back, and ignoring the evidence of colour on its front.

(UCT Schreiner-Hemming D0877)

4.7 The basis for my inference is additional contextual information that renders it plausible and is raised by among other evidence this second photograph. When the note was written by Wynnie, her sister Effie had married Arthur Brown, shown here. Arthur was one of the children of the respectably married white missionary John Brown and the educated and sophisticated Sarah Read, a mixed race Khoisan woman by family background, and Arthur and Effie were the parents of the by then adult children, specifically Barbara and Theo Brown, that Wynnie's note was written for. Arthur and Effie's children would have heard of but not seen the legendary Nannie, who died while they were very young, although her name and the social work agencies she founded remained notable in Cape Town through their childhoods and adulthoods. Also, their family experience – including as visible in other family photographs - would have told them that such matters as who was a Nannie and who was a grandmother, not to mention who was a father, and who they were themselves, were complicated and did not necessarily run according to a colour line.

**5. Troubles in archives – some brief conclusions**

5.1 The key questions of the archival turn – including, what is an archive, who they are set up and run by, what's in them, who uses them and under what conditions, the meanings both then and now of the traces that are their contents, and the means by

which present-time knowledge-making based on them can be substantiated - have no easy answers. However, the troubles surfacing around this, some of which I have sketched out, are interesting and energising. These troubles, with their intertwining of facts and fictionalisings, their competing representational and anti-referential aspects, their interpretational complexities, their scrutiny of research practices, point the inquirer towards cultural assemblage and the work of making it, and the work it does. And through this, they direct us towards the trace and its artefactual aspects, towards the contexts in which such traces were produced, circulated and had their original meanings, and also towards how archival traces *now* are made sense of, with their ascribed meanings firmly located within present-time disciplining as well as disciplinary frameworks.

5.2 If I were to be asked, do I want archives to be of wider kinds, do I want them to have broader contents, do I want full use made of digital developments in opening up archival practices, do I want archival contents and the products of archival research to point to a wider, richer and more varied past, and to be part of expanded more egalitarian futures, then of course my response is yes to all of these. But, ask me if I want a tidy house and to clear all these troubles away, and the answer is no. This is because it is the fractures, partialities, annoying absences, unaccountable presences, and dodgy traces that I've spoken about, all the complicated untidynesses, that raise the fact that the past *matters*. And it matters including because it was as riven, disputed, fought over, and also enjoyed and worked in and struggled over by people who wanted to make better and more equal – and some who wanted to make more hierarchical and exclusionary – as that fleeting moment we call the present. Attempting to tidy away, to remove, such things is an attempt to fix how the future sees the now present.

5.3 And so, under the broad sign of the narrative turn, with its keen attention to archival practices and cultural assemblages, including the researcher's own, I recommend to readers misleading assemblages, awkward activisms and trickster traces. These are the troubles in archives that intrigue, annoy, and make us think hard about what we are doing, why, and with what possible consequences.

**Acknowledgements**
This paper was originally given as a scena presentation paper at the Symposium on 'Archives, Art & Activism', jointly organised by Gothenburg/UCL, held at University College London on 3-5 Sept 2015. I am grateful to the organisers for this opportunity. My grateful thanks to the ESRC for funding the two research projects (Olive Schreiner Letters RES-062-23-1286; Whites Writing Whiteness ES J022977/1) drawn on in writing this paper. The two photographs appear with the permission of Manuscripts and Archives at the University of Cape Town.

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**Archive collections**

Molteno-Murray Family Papers, Manuscripts and Archives, University of Cape Town, South Africa.
Schreiner-Hemming Collection, Manuscripts and Archives, University of Cape Town, South Africa.

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