

“To prophesy *post hoc*”

The Curious Afterlives of Oddball Archives

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It is a curious, if not downright odd, first thing to say about *The Oddball Archive* that, above all else, it has spoken to me at the level of politics. After all, particularly as it is practiced in the contemporary academy, politics or political science is a discipline famed for its ‘seriousness’; its social science predictive ways, its focus on institutions, structures of power and governance, and its avoidance of the messy stuff of culture, agency and desire. Could anything be less oddball; less hospitable to the playfulness of hoaxers and hoarders, or the incongruity of dissected fish and Dixie cups? What of the explorations at the limits of rationality, the flush of excitement at revelling in the irrational, and the constant, quite odd, slip between them both that *The Oddball Archive* performs so well?

But politics it is! I say this because at the heart of *The Oddball Archive* I see a series of questions - no, a call-to-arms if you will - centred precisely on the *politics* of knowledge production; its practices, its objects, and our place as practitioners of and within it. What the uncanny, the heterogeneous, the curious and the downright odd do for us is show us the manifold ways in which knowledge formation is a deeply political act - all those streams of thought shut down as quaint, deluded or categorically dangerous blind alleyways of inquiry by the relentless monotheism of modern science historiography; all those states of being - ecstatic, fractious, excessive, divine - curtailed, shunned and ultimately disciplined, for being out-of-step with a dominant mode of knowledge production whose contemporary form can only countenance Being shackled to a notion of productivity; and all those ways in which things, objects, treasures and plain and simple ‘stuff’, are stripped of their ability to demand attention, circulate, resonate and coalesce within worlds and spheres of knowledge, reduced as they are to mere possessions of more ‘Enlightened’ beings. These are things which we have not just inherited as the way the world happens to be; these are things which are a reflection of the world we have produced - the acts of repression, the conquests and disciplinings; the hard-fought negotiations and compromises; the bigotries, fears and violences; as well as the more modest whims and fancies, forgetfulnesses and out and out dumb luck associated with how it is that something comes to stand as ‘known’.

However, in getting lost in the curious collections of objects, places, words and temporalities of *The Oddball Archive* what we find is the way in which this collection - like all good collections - points not only to its own death, but also to the effervescence of its many possible afterlives. In the extremes of its near-misses, but more often than not, blistering successes, this archive of archives, odd and curious, furtively calls upon us to acknowledge and resist the ways in which our disciplinary trainings are just that - disciplining as much as they are enabling. It beckons to us as practitioners of knowledge production to *perform* and *enact* the archive rather than merely explicate its worth. And finally it calls to us to recognise the ways in which the things, peoples and places collected within the archive have an ability of their own to throw us, to move us and, dare I say, to act upon us as if agents of their own desires. Thought of in this manner, I cannot think of a more apt term than ‘politics’ to describe how we might take a collection like *The Oddball Archive* forward: it captures

both the urgency and ethics of working with those things that for any number of reasons have found themselves as being 'Other' to contemporary concerns.

From repression useful things return

There is a particular, somewhat neglected, early essay by Georges Bataille setting out a rudimentary theory of Fascism which I have found particularly enlightening and enabling of an understanding, not of its specific subject matter *per se*, but of a general condition of knowledge lying at the very heart of modernity.

In "The Psychological Structure of Fascism", Bataille opposes a 'productive', bourgeois, element of society whose most significant trait was its 'tendential homogeneity', with a non-productive element of society he described as *heterogeneous*.¹ Although essentially a division concerned with the ownership of the means of production, interestingly enough for our purposes, Bataille extends this description to include the very structures and formations of post-Enlightenment thought and knowledge formation as well. Thus we find, by its very nature, scientific knowledge is allied with the homogeneous elements of society: "compelled to note the existence of irreducible facts... the object of science is to establish the homogeneity of phenomena".² Using the psychoanalytic metaphor of the exclusion of the unconscious from the conscious ego, Bataille characterized homogeneous scientific knowledge as necessitating the exclusion, not only of the 'restricted heterogeneous' elements of taboo and mana, but also anything deemed heterogeneous resulting from 'unproductive expenditure': violence, excess, madness - the elements of heterogeneity that surface in persons or mobs when the laws of homogeneous society have broken down.

For Bataille, this exclusion of the heterogeneous from the homogeneous elements of society was governed by an active 'intentionality' on the part of the bourgeoisie in an effort to maintain control over the means of production (hence he often called it 'censorship'). But if we were to put this notion of exclusion alongside Heidegger's wider epistemological deployment of Husserl's phenomenology of perception and the suggestion that every act of knowledge is necessarily accompanied by a simultaneous and unavoidable act of concealment and unknowing, then what we begin to approach is, to my mind, an understanding of this process of exclusion *as general condition of Post-Enlightenment knowledge production itself*. Taken in this way, we can suggest an homogenizing tendency is inscribed into the very structures of scientific knowledge production at the level of discourse which operates above all by the inclusion of certain elements deemed fit and worthy of rationality along with a simultaneous exclusion of those elements to be deemed 'Other' to it. Put another way, we can claim that the structures of post-Enlightenment rationality are as much about the suppression of heterogeneous elements as they are of the generation of knowledge claims.

Elsewhere, I have pushed on with Bataille's psychoanalytic metaphor by characterizing the operations of this general condition of post-Enlightenment, scientific, knowledge as being akin to an act of repression.³ In doing so I suggested that as much as the Enlightenment may be seen as an active campaign for the eradication of other ways of knowing and being that were heterogeneous - primarily those which were enchanted, magical and sacred - this eradication, or rather repression, was necessarily an incomplete one, and that elements of these other ways of knowing and being not

only coexist with scientific rationality to this day, but more to the point are constitutive of them *in their repression*. Thus, *Curious Visions of Modernity*, as that book was called, essentially become an effort at unearthing the repressed heterogeneous underbelly of a scientific modernity triumphantly pronouncing its own Enlightenment through the homogenizing violences it would unleash across the globe.

Imagine my delight, then, when first rummaging through *The Oddball Archives* to discover Beth McCoy's stunning recuperation of the FEMA emergency signs in post-Katrina New Orleans as ancient sorceries of the law; talismanic signs giving up black bodies and possessions both as a sacrifice to ward against the knowledge that many more will be subsumed by the rising tides of capitalism and white liberalism's living death for black people, at the same time as conjuring forth from memory the wish of sacrifice as internal reprisal for the humiliation of 9/11. These glyphs FEMA inscribed on half submerged properties in New Orleans represent nothing less than, to paraphrase Bataille, 'vengeful incursions of the sacred' upon the supposedly rational surfaces of modernity's knowledge claims. This is indeed a magic of the State.

Likewise Timothy Sweet's description of Shawnees, Iroquois and Delaware narratives of the 'eradication' of the Great Buffalo from the lands of the Ohio Valley, as they surfaced in European narratives of 'extinction' of the Woolly Mammoth, is instructional first and foremost of the ways in which such negotiations always happen within the 'contact zone' of colonialism: the dismissal of the knowledge acts of one system as fanciful 'myth', yet a reliance on them as evidence (albeit perverted), followed by an act of translation into the language of rationality, thereby licencing the eradication of the original narrative. But more than this, what Sweet's own excavations unearth is the way in which the Enlightenment may have shifted agency from God to 'Man' as *the* knowing being, but almost as if in mourning the license which narratives of God-as-agent gave, we moderns constantly felt its pull, deploying it in our analyses of breaks in the fossil record, even as we denounced as 'myth' similar indigenous calls to supernatural agency. Far from being something confinable to the early, half-formed fumbblings of eighteenth-century science, this pull of agency in knowledge production, and recourse to non-human agents, is still very much with us today.

This is, in effect, part of the important work which *The Oddball Archives* undertakes for us: to demonstrate "that great trove of unreason that nourishes reason's archive", as its editors put it⁴. And we can see these unreasonable reasons, occluded visions and less useful efficacies at work right throughout the collection - the hoarders, the hoaxers, the Necronauts, the political and philosophical thinkers at the edge of what it is to think, and don't forget the fish-dissecting-movie-makers. In each of them we can see the way in which reason operates and how their thoughts, actions, and outputs may even be directly in conversation with more reasonable logics and rationales. Yet also there is often that some-thing-else, that little bit extra, that excess which tips them over into the not entirely reasonable. At the same time there are those who were never part of the cannon of reason and rationality, but were always already constituted at its margin as 'Other'.

But whereas I am in staunch solidarity with the notion that "we approach oddity and even unreason as irremediable elements of all thought"⁵ - how could I not be with my own narratives of repressed heterogeneity lurking in the shadows of scientific knowledge structures? - I think we need to do more than just revel in, document and archive these oddball practitioners, these curious collections of things and objects, and these asynchronous synchronicities. One of the provocations of *The*

Oddball Archive is the hypothesis that archives of idiosyncratic thinking reveal as much about the shape of history as any taxonomy of the works of great minds.⁶ True enough! However, it could be said that they reveal as much, not because their inclusion into discourse through our unearthing of them makes a picture more complete - this would in fact be a dangerous proposition. Rather, in defining that which cannot be, they mark out the limits and limitations of our knowledges, but more to the point, they elucidate the mechanisms through which such knowledge is produced, which is itself a marker of interests, struggles, negotiations, betrayals, hijackings and even genocides in the worlds which sustain and nurture them. So while I agree we should not dismiss the richness of these alternative thinkers, their thoughts, and the worlds they produced merely as offshoots of the regressive or self-destructive tendencies within Enlightenment reason; I also think that if we are to honour their visions rather than merely domesticate them, then we need to address how it is that the label 'oddball' may have come to be associated with people who might themselves have thought they were anything but; places and things that were once central to the march of rationality and reason but suddenly found themselves on the outer; and those whose heterogeneity was marked as dangerous, foreign or inhuman from the very beginning.

Acts of repression are often productive, but very rarely innocently so. What I want to do for the purposes of this afterward is to dwell in this lack of innocence as a way of showing how a collection like *The Oddball Archives* should call upon us to be responsive, not just to the pleasures of dabbling in the forgotten side-paths of modernity, but also to the analysis of how they have been side-lined in the first place *and may yet again* by our own interactions with them. What I want to do, then, is to push into the realm of politics to explore the exclusions and heterogenising tendencies of a rationality which still take sustenance in its homogenizing exclusions. To do this I will need to indulge in some odd, perhaps even irrational, and certainly excessively, ways...

Remember the guillotine is an instrument of Enlightenment!

In a scathing rebuke of the sub-discipline of political science known as International Relations, Sankaran Krishna characterises the field as being more than just race-blind; he characterises it as actively amnesic of the part it plays in the continued maintenance of a racialised status quo.⁷ Toward this end, and in faint echo of Foucault, Krishna zeros in on the political side effects of the academic commonplace of abstraction, acknowledging it to be an inescapable analytic device which makes knowledge practices possible in the first place, but also as something never innocent of power. In the case of International Relations this lack of innocence has a sharp political edge: "IR discourse's valorisation, indeed fetishisation of abstraction is premised on a desire to escape history, to efface the violence, genocide and theft that marked the encounter between the rest and the West".⁸ In this regard, Krishna sees the discipline as being predicated on a number of 'disciplining' abstractions: the taboo against overly descriptive or historical analysis in favour of theory-building, the reduction of social beings to utility-maximisers, the evisceration of violence and its effects through its reduction to mere statistics in graphs and tables, the persistence with an archaic system of states which discredits imagining non-institutional ways of being, the preservation of hyper-masculine insecurities on matters of gender, and the elision of themes such as land theft, racism, slavery and colonialism.⁹ In Krishna's eyes these otherwise commonplace academic abstractions come to constitute the way in which the discipline preserves its own ideology as the legitimate author(ity) of

academic pronouncements about the International. Krishna is unequivocal in his naming of this maintenance of disciplinary self in the face of historic violence and complicity: "Founded as it is on discourses that justified, abstracted, and rationalised the genocide of populations of the so-called New World, the enslavement of Africans, the colonisation of Asians, the discipline of International Relations is one giant strategy of containment".¹⁰

There are a number of things I find compelling about Krishna's overtly politicised account, and which will eventually help me reveal the political effects of the Oddball. The first is the way in which these very specific 'heterogenising' tendencies are the direct and inevitable outcome of a key cornerstone of rational discourse itself: abstraction - that logic which makes contemporary academic knowledge possible in the first place through its ability to draw equivalence and make mobile information for comparative purposes. The second, although somewhat incidental, is the way in which Krishna grounds this accusation in the replication of the discipline via its everyday pedagogic practices. In this case, the way students are encouraged to display their virtuosity in techniques of abstraction, and are berated as being 'too historical', 'too descriptive', 'not analytic enough', or 'lacking in intellectual rigour' should they not. To this we could add any number of additional 'trainings' that International Relations propagates: the antagonistic and combative argumentation; the masculinist valorisation of 'power politics' as the only 'real' politics and the belief that institutions are the only site of such politics; the denigration of personal, local or even internal state politics as somehow 'feminine'; the derision of racial politics as something 'to get over', so on and so forth. And finally what I find captivating about Krishna's account is the way in which the particular carries with it an air of the general: this is not something confined to a 'problem discipline' called International Relations - in fact in many ways IR is known as an exemplary social science - this is a general condition of the Western academy. Yes, the details may differ from institution to institution; discipline to discipline, but whether it is politics, economics, history, law, art history, or philosophy there are elements of what Krishna has been describing in all of them.

In essence, what Sankaran Krishna's account of the disciplining effects of International Relations does is call attention to the political ramifications of how our academic disciplines replicate themselves, our part as academic agents of that replication, and, more to the point, how this replication is not innocent of the maintenance of certain conditions in the world or of a status quo. Like any system of knowledge, this they cannot help but do at a purely structural level - Enlightenment or otherwise, any system of knowledge will consist of a series of mechanisms for its own coherence and replication. By bringing Bataille into conversation with Krishna the suggestion I want to make is that the epistemological status of the oddness at the centre of *The Oddball Archive* should be seen not merely as the incidental by-product of Enlightenment rationality, although there is no doubt an element of happenstance to it. Rather this oddness is the consequence of an active expurgation from an Order of Things by a system of knowledge production which has at its core a need to do more than just maintain internal coherence, but actively seek to repudiate and repress those other ways of knowing and being that are not its own. This we can see in the excesses of Enlightenment rationality. The Enlightenment was an effervescent flowering of knowledge, it was the birth of a technique of knowledge production which would enable wondrous invention and advance; it would herald the coming of 'Man' as *the* knowing subject and it would bring a globe within that subject's purview through its standardised times and flows, new forms of communication and exchange; it would liberate subjects from older forms of subjugation, and it would allow for the birth of political communities capable of bringing tens of thousands of subjects under the sway of a

single flag. And yet we must not forget the excesses of violence, dispossession and destruction which came with it.

Toward an odd reflexivity

If anything of the above account has chimed with the reader then hopefully it is in sounding a word of warning regarding our encounter with the heterogeneity of the oddball, and the place we academics might yet play in its further domestication and marginalisation. Precisely because we all too often view the oddball as a thing otherwise just existing as curious and off-centred in the world, we tend to overlook the ways in which it has been produced as such. And if what Krishna insinuates has even a kernel of truth to it, then this domestication can be as much a function of the structures and logics of our disciplinary formations as they are of any active negligence on our behalf. We may be the most sympathetic of collectors, most nuanced of archivists and skilled of historians, yet still be complicit in the erasure of that thing in which we delight and wish to reveal.

Precisely because it is not perfect in this regard, I propose we read *The Oddball Archive* as a call to arms, a call to the kind of reflexivity which would bring recognition of our own positionality and the techniques of exclusion and domestication we are inadvertently agents of to the fore of our research and writing on the oddball. This is not a romantic and unproblematic call to occupy the space of knowledge of 'the Other'; that is, it is not the suggestion that we may be external to the systems and functions of power which bring us as researchers, writers, interested amateurs and aficionados into discourse, even as we search at the margins of that discourse for the traces of oddity which enchant us so. Rather, what I am intimating is that we might take the work of a book like *The Oddball Archive* forward by focusing on the ethical and political position of working on epistemologically vulnerable material from within a system predicated on producing that vulnerability.

In this manner I am reminded of the early call made by Subaltern Studies scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty to a project of history writing he would later describe as 'Provincializing Europe'. Starting from the realisation that, particularly as it is practiced in the institutional site of the university, the act of History writing was one which necessarily brought 'Indian History' into a position of subalternity to a master narrative otherwise known as 'the History of Europe', Chakrabarty sought to redress the deep collusion between history and the modernising narratives of citizenship and nation (which could only ever read Indian histories in terms of lack), with an effort to invert this structural positioning of Europe as the referent of all histories by casting *it* to the provinces of history writing itself.¹¹ This was neither a call to reject the rationality of modernity *per se*, nor was it a call to a shallow cultural relativism, or atavistic nativist history. Rather it was an appeal to a history which would make visible within the structures of its narrative forms its own repressive strategies and practices.¹² But in making this appeal Chakrabarty made known the doomed nature of his own enterprise: "This is a history that will attempt the impossible: to look toward its own death by tracing that which resists and escapes the best human effort at translation across cultural and other semiotic systems, so that the world may once again be imagined as radically heterogeneous".¹³ Doomed because of the impossibility of conducting this project within the institutional site of the university whose knowledge protocols will always take one back to the terrain where all contours follow that of Europe, Chakrabarty nonetheless perseveres. He perseveres because of the political and ethical imperative to do so.

In pursuit of left-handedness

The assembly of shadows, the organisation of optical phenomena which resist the light, the look of things that suggest a face, the depth of bodies that cannot be concealed - all these things fall under dark writing's jurisdiction. Like the ground, the meaning of dark writing cannot be excavated; it lies in the footstep, the leap and the instance between two strides.¹⁴

If *The Oddball Archive* calls to us at the level of being responsible to the ways of knowing and being produced by the disciplinary exclusions and homogenising tendencies of our academic abstractions, then in what way does it also point toward further work, techniques of investigation, and modes of inquiry which might take this political call forward in responsive and responsible ways?

In the same 'elsewhere' I referred to earlier of *Curious Visions of Modernity*, I attempted to write to a series of pre-modern curiosities in as left-handed a way as possible. That is, in a way which confounded and frustrated the desire of the right hand to domesticate, to draw equivalence, to square the circle, to lock sign and signifier into one-to-one relationships; to write to genre, discipline or type. In that instance, the divide between modern and pre-modern, although increasingly blurred the further I journeyed, did act as a kind of guide in this venture. So it was to semblance, sympathy and similitude that I wrote; my own kind of dark writing.

But on this occasion two fragments have surfaced from the pages of *The Oddball Archive* which I briefly want to sketch as I see potential in them for the development other left-handed techniques: the need to perform, not merely explicate the archive, and the archive-as-agent.

The need to perform

In many ways the archives written about in this collection already point us in the direction of new modes and techniques of academic inquiry themselves: in their fragmentary and opaque structures, in their elusive and unreasonable claims, their oddness unfurls before us like a blueprint to be studied, replicated and, above all, *performed*. Jonathan Eburne's archive of David Lynch's 'kits' neatly shows us this. In the absurdity of Lynch's Fish Kit - of assembling a living fish from the kit of its dissected parts - what comes to the fore is Lynch's own characterisation of ideas as being tangible things, and in this case the thing which is the 'substance' or 'materiality' of the idea is also a vital and animating spirit, both blueprint for action and something in excess of it. It is thus not difficult to see Lynch embracing his own eclectic 'fish kit' of transcendence edited from his cut-up wanderings through world religions as, in essence, this is precisely what he is chasing: the animation, the 'click, click, click' of film through camera, the vital spirit which sees dead and inanimate things rise again.

Following on from the Eburne/Lynch Kit we could suggest that metaphor, excess, the uncanny, and the heterogeneous are as much techniques to be deployed as they are anything else. One of the all-too-common dangers of dealing with epistemologically fragile archives is that the archive disappears

from our work amidst the reams of explication we make of its worth, rather than the archive being allowed to surface itself in all its oddness, and disruptive and illusive qualities. Not all of the chapters in *The Oddball Archives* were able to avoid this, but some did with noteworthy skill.

In the complex interplay of hoax, hoaxer and hoaxed, Judith Roof deftly reveals a two-way (a least) operation: for the perpetrator of the hoax, because it is always already a repetition, the triumph of originality is rarely there to be had (pleasure is to be derived from the performance of hoaxing itself); whereas for the recipient of the hoax, the hoax is already known through its repetition and transparency (not that this means people are not willing to be hoaxed). In this way, the play of a hoax is nothing less than that of the public secret - that thing which is known but not admitted to in everyday discourse. In fact, it is only through its 'knownness' that the hoax can even be. But in the twists and turns of Roof's hoaxers and hoaxed, one almost starts to feel a prickle of recognition; the recognition which comes with the slow dawning that one is being played, and that 'played' here was not a dishonesty or failing of argument; rather, it was an uncanny repetition or performance of the argument itself, the fulfilment of "desire for the revelation of the representation as sought by the mark".¹⁵

When metaphor is pushed to its limit and breaks, something happens; there is that haemorrhaging of a kind of 'presence' often associated with the negative labour of defacement. It is an animating force which, if performed, can produce curious disruptions and odd disjunctures indeed.

Archive-as-agent

When the category of 'man' heretically ascended to the position of *the* knowing subject in the early modern period, and thereby assumed the power to name of the Adam/Christ figure, something was lost - that demiurgic trace written into all things which activated them as agent, not patient of knowledge. But in confounding the taxonomic categories of a rationality which structures knowledge as an evolving series of named inert things (even if they are actually living things), the oddball, like Lynch's fish kit, often starts to come close to something 'vital' in and of itself. How else do we explain its pull on us; that immediate flash of recognition when we stumble across it in our research travels? It is as if it is not so much that we notice it; it is more like it notices us, beckoning often as something jarring and out-of-place, but equally as something to be treasured.

As someone familiar with the academic writings of a few of the authors assembled in this collection it was most interesting to ponder the manner in which many of the chapters had been written. For some whose writing I already knew, this project would have been but more of the same of a writerly way honed elsewhere. But for others I got the sense of the license which the material itself gave, if not demanded. More than just that this is trivial or amusing material which can afford a lighter touch, what I sensed with some chapters was a coming-to-terms with a new set of imperatives for writing about the thing which somehow seeks to evade or elude our standard academic explications with their well-worn structures, so familiar that they announce 'expertise' and 'scholarliness' well before one even reads a single word. In other words, what I sensed was the way in which the archives themselves were speaking back, demanding of their authors that they do justice to these avoidances and oddities.

What calls us to an archive, and this is particularly true of the allure of the oddball archive, is the power of its ability to throw us, to unsettle, to unnerve, to worry as well as to delight. This power is the archive's vital spirit, generated often precisely because it is at odds with the rationality of its day. But it is also this very spirit which is targeted when we innocently enough go about working with our archives; working in ways that serve us and our research agendas; working on them so that they can be compared, contrasted, qualified, quantified, systematized and temporalized - in a word: homogenized.

Being self-reflexive of the positionality from which one writes carries with it the possibility of admitting that other ways of knowing and being are entirely possible. Occupying those 'other' positionalities may well be beyond our reach, but in striving to be responsible to the objects of our research, we may come close to knowing what it is to acknowledge their needs and desires rather than always following our own. It is this above all else which *The Oddball Archives* teaches us.

¹ Georges Bataille, "The Psychological Structure of Fascism," in *Visions of Excess, Selected Writings, 1927-1939* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985].

² *Ibid.*, 141.

³ David L Martin, *Curious Visions of Modernity: Enchantment, Magic and the Sacred* [Cambridge Mass. The MIT Press, 2011].

⁴ Eburne & Roof, "History of the Collection", *The Oddball Archive* [will need publishing details inserted here] p. 6.

⁵ Eburne & Roof, p. 5.

⁶ Eburne & Roof, p. 4.

⁷ Sankaran Krishna, "Race, Amnesia, and the Education of International Relations" *Alternatives* 26 (2001): 401-424.

⁸ Krishna, "Amnesia", p. 401.

⁹ Krishna, "Amnesia", p. 407.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for Indian Pasts?", *Representations*, 37, Winter 1992, pp. 1-26. And later: Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998 and 2008].

¹² Chakrabarty, "Artifice of History", p. 23.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Paul Carter, *Dark Writing: Geography, Performance, Design* [University of Hawai'i Press, 2009], p. 1.

¹⁵ Roof, "Personifying La Con, or Post-Hoax Ergo Proper Hoax", *The Oddball Archive* [will need publishing details inserted here] p. 295.