C.S. Wiesenthal

Seed Stories: Pitched into the Digital Archives

Backstory

For the past two decades, as digital culture and "technology enhanced" learning have steadily colonized our lives, my creative writing pedagogy has deliberately swung in an oppositional, old-school direction. I have resisted the Insta-virtualization of Everything in my classroom by approaching the teaching of creative nonfiction specifically through the lens of material culture, inviting my students to pay careful attention to things and artifacts –including books –initially just as a means of encouraging young writers' powers of focus and observation, and their appreciation for the value of embodied experience and knowledge. Material objects, however, also offer portals for aspiring writers' engagement with the wider world of stories and the demands of context; they enable teachers to introduce research as an essential component of creative writing, and as a creative activity in itself. As I've written about elsewhere, through consideration of storied objects and things, we can cultivate a critically alert sense of emplacement, of creative writers' *residency* in the fullest sense of mental and physical presence in real space and time.

What this has meant in practical terms are course syllabi based as much on experiential learning about and through physical stuff and places as on assigned readings and workshop sessions. All of my creative writing courses include frequent field trips and exercises based on our class visits to local "GLAM" sites –galleries, libraries, archives, and museums. These forays have included, for example, trips to our special collections library to view artists' altered books and representative examples of publishing formats over book history, in order to get creative writing students thinking about form, structure, and the

power of the book as a medium (what, exactly, counts as "a book," and whether it *should* be altered by other artists as an "art object" turn out to be surprising complex and contentious questions!). We have visited the municipal garbage dump for inspiration (exploring environmental themes by tracing the life cycle or biography of one selected piece of "garbage" from its point of manufacture to its post-consumer afterlife—an exercise that may resonant even more strongly in the wake of the pandemic's spotlight on our over-reliance on global supply chains). And students have completed low-stakes writing exercises on stories they've discovered in connection with visits to various museum collections, ranging from fine art and textiles to paleontology and zoology. I will contact curators and visit such collections in advance to organize and plan these class exercises, thinking about how the materials and physical spaces might relate to either thematic issues or lend themselves to highlighting selected technical aspects of creative writing. In short, though, usually we walk, gawk, touch, listen and sniff a lot as we think and write.

2020, of course, had other plans in store for us, and the pandemic prospect of teaching remotely by Zoom pitched my usual hands-on materialist pedagogy out the window. In desperation, I re-designed my "Pandemic Edition" writing workshop to—*at least*, I thought—incorporate a virtual field trip to a digital archive. The idea was sparked by a mass email that arrived in my inbox one day from Adam Matthew Digital Publishers, a digital database publisher to which my university library subscribes. Partnering with universities and libraries around the globe, digital publishers such as Adam Matthew obtain agreements to convert print materials into digital formats, which they then license to other educational and public institutions. On this occasion, Adam Matthew was hosting an orientation session for faculty to acquaint scholars with the digitized research collections available to them at the University of Alberta. Why not apply this opportunity to my teaching for the remote term ahead? I signed up for the noon hour workshop. A simulated screen environment would obviously diminish the role of artifacts as a basis for close observation and description (although these skills remained relevant). But maybe a virtual archive could still provide writers new to creative nonfiction with an opportunity to add depth, texture and impact

to their personal stories by connecting them to larger events, timelines, social issues or cultural mythologies. Maybe it would still help highlight research—a word that can wrinkle noses when uttered in a creative writing classroom—as an element crucial to craft. Readers will be able to judge the relative merits of my efforts toward this goal in a later section of this essay, which outlines how I incorporated students' digital archive research into their term work.

In his now-canonical study of the archive, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1995), Jacques Derrida reminds us of the residual meaning that lurks in the etymological roots of the word, deriving from the Greek *arkheion*, for "house" or "domicile." More specifically, the term referred to the "residence of the superior magistrate," the guardian of the law, the *archon* invested with the power to interpret official documents placed under his privileged purview (2). As an originary "domicile" for the management of memory and law, the archive is thus not only a physical site, but also an abstraction and a social practice. Archives are also always structured on a curious paradox, Derrida notes. There is an "internal contradiction" structuring the "drive to archive": every archive embodies a drive to conserve, store, save and remember that is premised precisely upon the feverish certainty of destruction, expenditure, obliteration, and forgetfulness—a fear of the "radical finitude" of material stuff and the scraps of memory (19). Perhaps this is a fear we are—at our own peril—losing in a digital age. As the brilliant poet Anne Carson has observed, digital modes of reproduction and storage are distinct in that they bear no obvious signs of "decay" or "time." Carson makes this comment in the context of discussing the process of putting together her multi-media collage elegy *Nox* (2010), which she designed with Robert Currie using scans that were then xeroxed "lifting the cover a bit so a little light gets in, so [the image-text being xeroxed] has three-dimensionality" (qtd. in Teicher, n.p).

Whether material or de-materialized, however, all archives confront us with a set of problems related to social power, authority and representation. As Derrida acknowledged, "Of course, the question of a politics of the archive is our permanent orientation here. . . . There is no political power without

control of the archive, if not of memory. Effective democratization can always be measured by this essential criterion: the participation in and access to the archive, its constitution, and its interpretation" (4). Under pressure from feminist, queer, and critical race theorists, among others, it is in fact the "effective democratization" of the archive as a cultural practice that has been increasingly emphasized in recent decades.

In the formulation of another prominent theorist of the archive, Michel Foucault, archives embody "*first* the law of what can be said" (129). What could be more essential for nonfiction writers than that? This is especially true for my introductory-level writers, who come from a diverse range of faculties, majors, and personal backgrounds at a large Canadian university. These students most often do *not* self-identify as "creative writers" or "artists." Increasingly, my classes include BIPOC students who –at least in my corner of Western Canada, comprise of growing numbers of Indigenous students (Métis, Cree and Inuit especially), and first-generation East Indian, Chinese, and Somali learning communities. Such students often struggle to connect with (much less find their own self-authorizing voice within) an imposing, impersonal institutional culture, one that too often still relies on invisibly white curricula that reproduce their marginalization. They also bring to the classroom very distinct relationships to the English language, as well as an untapped wealth of linguistic diversity that is potentially beneficial for any group of creative writers.

Creative nonfiction is a wildly flexible, accommodating genre, but in order for it to engage all students, it requires not only an inclusive syllabus reflecting different intersectional voices, but also an inclusive *approach* to central questions (like the role of research in creative production). So, to introduce the concept of the archive as a critical problem of social inequity and representation, and for a masterclass in the role of educated inference and imagination in reconstructing stories of the past from "official" archives, we read works such as Saidiya Hartman's "An Unnamed Girl, A Speculative History." Underlining the fact that histories of the oppressed are rarely autobiographical, Hartman's method of "speculative

nonfiction" or "critical fabulation" offers a powerful example to attune students to omissions in "official" records, to ask critical questions about bias, and to see the possibilities for nonfiction writers to use narrative and informed imagination and conjecture to bring untold or effaced stories to life on the page. Hartman's "An Unnamed Girl" essay in *The New Yorker* (accessible online) is an excerpt from her recent book, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (2020). Her most sustained discussion of her method of "critical fabulation," however, appears in her article "Venus in Two Acts (2008).

The digital archive experiment described below was implemented after such ground work on archive theory had been done in class discussion, extending and applying our work into practice.

The Digital Archive Experiment

Collaborative initiatives across disciplines, bringing creative nonfiction teachers together with reference librarians, archivists, gallery and museum professionals, is an exciting emerging trend that promises fuller possibilities than I can outline here. Academic library and information specialists, for their part, have certainly been taking note of the "meteoric" rise of creative writing as an academic discipline, and have begun to "develop innovative ways to provide services"—both "outreach and instructional"—to them (Pavelich 2010). Likewise, "Creative Writing Research and Pedagogy" was the theme of a recent interdisciplinary digital symposium hosted by the University of Calgary, May 18-19, 2021, which included keynotes by humanities special collections and research librarians at both U.S. and Canadian universities. In addition to the partnership with commercial digital publishers outlined above, this "experiential symposium" organized by Melanie Boyd, Jason Nisenson and Aritha Van Herk provided another valuable example for how we might move forward in integrating libraries, archives and special collections into our creative writing pedagogy practice.

As noted above, I began by enrolling in that introductory webinar hosted by Adam Matthew, a U.K.-based digital publisher that my university library subscribes to, meaning that all students and faculty on campus have access to their digitized collections. The virtual field trip I subsequently planned was devised in collaboration with two Adam Matthew academic specialists, Laura Blomvall and Dot Kelly, to whom I reached out via email. Collaboration was key to realizing the teaching objectives of this initiative. I described to Laura and Dot my course in general and my teaching goals for a virtual field trip to the archives, sharing with them the course syllabus, which emphasized themes of constructing and exploring identity. Together, we selected five archival collections that most closely matched what I had learned of my students' autobiographies and writing interests to that point in the term. These included collections on *Migration to New Worlds*; *Gender: Identity and Social Change*; *Slavery, Abolition and Social Justice; Food and Drink in History*; and *American Indian Newspapers.* (The latter was of particular interest as a rare example of Indigenous journalism from 1828-2016, primary periodical literature compiled by and for Indigenous peoples, including issues in Indigenous languages.)

On the selected day of our virtual field trip, Laura and Dot joined our Zoom session and presented highlights of the featured collections, first showing students how to actually locate and access the Adam Matthew databases through our university library system. Then, through a power point presentation, they provided an introduction to search options to guide students through their database searches, identifying various links and resources. They explained, for instance, how under the "introduction" tab, students would find a menu that included scholarly essays providing critical overviews and contextualizing the collection in detail—an invaluable resource even for students adept at independently navigating the infrastructure of such databases. Fig. 1 below provides a representative screenshot example of a front page to one of the Adam Matthew database collections we explored as a class with guidance from Laura and Dot.
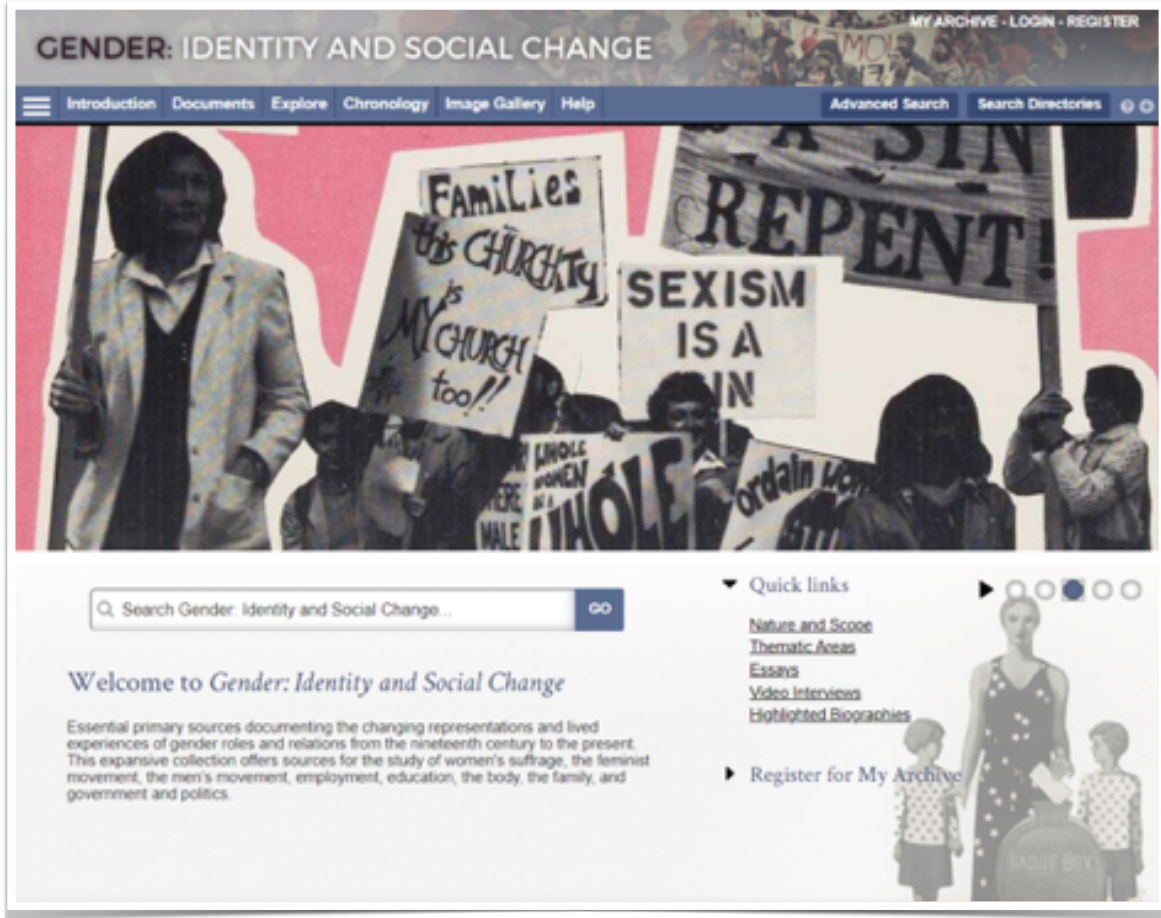
Fig. 1: Screen Shot from Adam Matthew's Gender: Identity and Social Change digitized database collection.

Reproduced with permission of Adam Matthew Inc.

Aside from the nuts and bolts database research techniques information, Laura and Dot also reinforced

some essential archive theory in their virtual class visit and power point presentation. Specifically, they

provided my students with a reminder of the complexity of defining and handling "primary sources" – of

the writer's responsibility to interrogate her materials for bias as though "forensic evidence." Whether or

not Laura and Dot had in mind the jurisprudential origins of the archive recalled by theorists like Derrida,

their legal metaphor of "forensic" interrogation was absolutely apropos. They drew a brilliant analogy to

the Netflix thriller *Mind Hunter*, which got the "crime scene" point across very graphically, isolating the

following questions for students in some of their power point slides:

-who created the document and why?

-who was the document made for, and what is the wider context of that source?

-why has this document been preserved, and not others?

-whose voices do we *not* hear in this document?

-is the author or source reliable?

-where is the bias?

(Blomvall and Kelly, 2020)

In the case of museum or gallery collections, "artifact" can replace the word "document" in such

questions, to the same investigatory ends. In any case, we are reminding students to be critically aware of

Foucault's "first" law, of an original repository that structures and rules (or, at least, over-determines) what

can or cannot be said in the first place.

Seed Stories

After our tour through selected Adam Matthew digital collections with Laura and Dot, I then asked my

students to choose one archive to explore independently for an informal exercise which asked them to

locate a "seed story"—some primary source that sparked or stretched their thinking and imagination about

their own current drafts-in-progress or writing preoccupations. It didn't matter what kind of source it was

—an oral history video, a post card or a map, a letter, an old news story or advertisement. The idea behind

seed stories is to locate factual or uncut, raw source material that embodies potential to be elevated from

the realm of mere reportage to the level of artful creative nonfiction storytelling. This sort of seed

material can be the barest of bones, as with the example below, a brief AP newswire "factoid" I culled

PRIME NUMBER

$10.9-million

The amount paid for the world's largest known yellow diamond at auction in Geneva on Tuesday, beating previous records for a jewel of its type. Including commission the unidentified telephone bidder paid almost $12.4-million for the pear-shaped, 110.3-carat gem, putting it within the $11-million to $15-million range Sotheby's had estimated before the sale. The diamond was sold by New York-based company Cora International, which discovered the jewel in South Africa last year. The colour in yellow diamonds is caused by nitrogen impurities trapped within carbon molecules. – AP

Fig. 2: Seed story sample from print media for in-class exercise

$from the *Globe & Mail* newspaper ages ago, and have shared in class for students' consideration with excellent results (Fig 2).

What sorts of possible stories infuse a small news item like this? How might those stories shift depending on whose point of view they might be told from (the South African miners'; the jeweler about to make the first cut in the unfinished rock; the geologist analyzing the stone's composition; the Sotheby's auctioneer; the "unidentified telephone bidder"; the hand model's, etc.)? Where would the story you tell ideally begin, where would it end, and what would be your ultimate purpose in constructing such a story? What sorts of research would it take to develop this story idea, and what might be some of the more

compelling questions, paradoxes or controversial issues a writer could focus on in her treatment of the angle and aim she chooses?

In more recent years, another "seed story" example I provide to my students in advance is the catalyst for Truman Capote's classic "nonfiction novel" *In Cold Blood* – a tiny thumbnail newspaper clipping about the Clutter family murders in 1959.

For this past semester's digital archive exercise, the only stipulation I gave students for their choice of seed material was that the primary source embody excellent *potential* for development into a work of original creative or literary nonfiction. (See Appendix 1 for the exercise assignment itself.) Students were asked to informally summarize (in a page or so) their ideas for developing their sources and any questions these sources raised for them, and to post these notes to an eClass forum. The following week, they were divided into small groups to share and discuss their exercises. In the small group debriefing sessions on their seed material, students exercised their oral skills and abilities to "pitch" a story's potential merits to others, while auditors functioned in effect as editors, providing verbal feedback and insight just as they did in workshop sessions on written drafts.

In thinking about potential story treatment of seed material, everyone is thinking about aspects of craft we have discussed all term: what makes for intriguing and complex real-life characters? What are the buried stories beneath the surface story of the primary material? Again, we were asking, where might a story most effectively begin and end? Why is it important to re-tell this story *now*? What themes or dramatic tensions coalesce in the seed material? What symbolic, metaphorical, allegorical, or mythological possibilities might it reflect or offer? What literary forms, genres, or patterns of organization might be appropriate to re-tell the story and why? At the same time, students are also constantly evaluating the historical, ideological and contextual considerations related to their material—that "question of a politics of the archive," to recall the "orientation" of thinkers from Derrida and Foucault to Saidiya Hartman. What is required in order to use this source responsibly and sensitively, as well as creatively? What further

kinds of research might be necessary? Where are facts lacking, and where might the known facts yield plausible inferences or conjecture? And what should creative nonfiction writers do with intractable silences and gaps in the record?

Outcomes

My students returned with a treasure trove of seed stories after being pitched into the digital archive. A sampling of the materials they brought back included a Victorian circus poster; an old newspaper clipping about an Alberta ghost town; ephemera connected to the 1967 Monterey Music Festival ("since we have been in some state of lockdown since March of this year, I have been pondering what live music means to myself and to our culture…"); a 1940 memorandum relating to sexist divorce laws in the U.S. from the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America; a 1745 recipe book, *The Accomplish'd Housewife* ("in a nonfiction piece, I think there is enormous potential in viewing these old cookbooks through a feminist lens"); a passage from the diary of a WWI surgeon ("the only source I found which humanizes brown soldiers"); a photograph from a 1919 massacre in India (which the student, himself of East Indian origin, proposed to develop in connection with a personal narrative of childhood trauma). A Cree student, noting that the *American Indian Newspapers* repository "reflects colonialism from the standpoint of the colonized," proposed a character portrait of the publisher behind a late 19th-century newspaper. Using a similar format to Saidiya Hartman's "Unnamed Girl," another student proposed using images from the *Food and Drink in History* collection to develop a story on evolving gender roles and "food as a tool to achieve social goals."

But our class experiment with finding seed stories in digital archives ended up involving all stages of the writing process. As will be evident by now, the informal seed story exercise develops research skills that inform the generative stage (story conceptualization, brainstorming, pre-writing activities) and

subsequent compositional phases (writing up story treatment ideas and reflections to share with peers, actually integrating external sources into their work, and thus making decisions about documentation, citation, acknowledgment, etc.). Another benefit of the exercise is that it exposes students to a class of "less polished, less fine" materials rarely encountered in the undergraduate classroom: ephemera –those traces "of the transient, the marginal, or the fugitive" that are "usually omitted from sources undergraduate [writers] are encouraged to consider" (Gardner and Pavelich 86-87).

The fact that many students' seed stories remained hypothetical sketches did not lessen the value of this informal exercise. Just as the aim of the virtual tour exercise was, broadly, to encourage young writers to expand their storytelling horizons, so such "unfinished" rough work carries ahead with students at the end of term, a creative spillage that furnishes them with ready material and inspiration for further writing (whether independent, or in future creative writing courses). It signals a forward-looking logic that resists the abrupt "closure" of an institutional semester, and fosters into the future that writerly self-identification that is often so tentative in students. In some cases, I explicitly encouraged students to follow through on their seed story ideas in my final feedback.

Students, of course, had the further option of actually using the informal seed story exercise in their final end of term projects, which a number of them did. Those who went on to incorporate material from the exercise into their formally graded final projects honed their applied writing skills in effective integration and presentation of source materials for finished writing. As an added incentive, the team from Adam Matthew Digital—intrigued to see how a group of creative writers might make use of their materials—proposed that students could submit any final projects using source material from their databases for possible publication on the Adam Matthew website.

This further step resulted in some wonderfully innovative end-of-term work. One student used an image of a 19th-century Hindu painting to weave a segmented personal essay meditating on both "Western

academic analysis of Eastern sources" (a meta-critique of the archive) and her own struggle with internalized racism, as a diasporic Hindu. (This student essay has now been chosen by Laura, Dot and their colleagues for publication on the Adam Matthew digital publisher's website, along with an author interview.) In a few cases, students used disparate image-text materials to push creative nonfiction form to radically nonlinear, experimental ends. One multi-media collage project, on brain concussions, resonated with clashing materials that included snippets of WWI medical literature on shell shock, drawn from an Adam Matthew archive. Another experimental non-narrative piece was composed of evocative fragments and "found pages" structured around literal and metaphorical senses of the word "rumination," a term etymologically derived from *rumen*, a cow's stomach. In this case, the as the student explained, "I drew inspiration from an old [1901] agricultural text—a manual of veterinary homeopathy—that I saw in [an Adam Matthew collection]. It is what sparked the 'found page' idea." (The "found page" was her term for the collage of borrowed archival materials she selected and arranged as a visual image-text.) These final projects were among the most intriguing and ambitious experimental creative nonfiction works I've seen produced at an introductory level.

Whether they included digital archive research in their final projects or not, the students were unanimously enthusiastic about our "awesome" excursion. Thanks to my partnership with Laura and Dot, and my students' own receptiveness, being pitched into the digital archive turned into a highlight of the course for everyone.

Adaptations for Other Educational Settings and Levels

While theoretical concepts of the archive and of primary sources are complex, the tales that objects tell or suggest are accessible to adult learners of all levels. Exercises connected to the digital archive tour can be modified and simplified for any level of post-secondary student. Rather than requiring independent

database searching, teachers could, for example, focus solely on having students fulfill the task of finding seed stories from a pre-selected cache of digitized artifacts. Teachers could then gather the seed story ideas from the class and choose some of the strongest examples to work through with students, playing a more direct role in guiding them for what to look for and consider when assessing raw material for story treatment, as per the suggestions above. Alternately, teachers could simply pre-select a group of artifacts chosen from specific digitized collections on themes relevant to their individual course and class, and work through these.

Recently, some editors and teachers have shared their convictions that remote education will pass with the pandemic. But like many others, I'm not so sure there's any going back, at least not completely. Digital modes of instruction, or at minimum, aspects of it, seem to me likely to stay, if only for the additional versatility they offer students, administrators and teachers. Going forward, it seems handy—*at least*, I think again—to cultivate and keep a few remote learning exercises in our tool kits. Finding seed stories in digitized archives could be one of them.

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Appendix 1

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In the formulation of another prominent theorist of the archive, Michel Foucault, archives embody "*first* the law of what can be said" (129). What could be more essential for nonfiction writers than that? This is especially true for my introductory-level writers, who come from a diverse range of faculties, majors, and personal backgrounds at a large Canadian university. These students most often do *not* self-identify as "creative writers" or "artists." Increasingly, my classes include BIPOC students who –at least in my corner of Western Canada, comprise of growing numbers of Indigenous students (Métis, Cree and Inuit especially), and first-generation East Indian, Chinese, and Somali learning communities. Such students often struggle to connect with (much less find their own self-authorizing voice within) an imposing, impersonal institutional culture, one that too often still relies on invisibly white curricula that reproduce their marginalization. They also bring to the classroom very distinct relationships to the English language, as well as an untapped wealth of linguistic diversity that is potentially beneficial for any group of creative writers.

Creative nonfiction is a wildly flexible, accommodating genre, but in order for it to engage all students, it requires not only an inclusive syllabus reflecting different intersectional voices, but also an inclusive *approach* to central questions (like the role of research in creative production). So, to introduce the concept of the archive as a critical problem of social inequity and representation, and for a masterclass in the role of educated inference and imagination in reconstructing stories of the past from "official" archives, we read works such as Saidiya Hartman's "An Unnamed Girl, A Speculative History." Underlining the fact that histories of the oppressed are rarely autobiographical, Hartman's method of "speculative nonfiction" or "critical fabulation" offers a powerful example to attune students to omissions in "official" records, to ask critical questions about bias, and to see the possibilities for nonfiction writers to use narrative and informed imagination and conjecture to bring untold or effaced stories to life on the page.

Hartman's "An Unnamed Girl" essay in *The New Yorker* (accessible online) is an excerpt from her recent book, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* (2020). Her most sustained discussion of her method of "critical fabulation," however, appears in her article "Venus in Two Acts (2008).

The digital archive experiment described below was implemented after such ground work on archive theory had been done in class discussion, extending and applying our work into practice.

The Digital Archive Experiment

Collaborative initiatives across disciplines, bringing creative nonfiction teachers together with reference librarians, archivists, gallery and museum professionals, is an exciting emerging trend that promises fuller possibilities than I can outline here. Academic library and information specialists, for their part, have certainly been taking note of the "meteoric" rise of creative writing as an academic discipline, and have begun to "develop innovative ways to provide services"—both "outreach and instructional"—to them (Pavelich 2010). Likewise, "Creative Writing Research and Pedagogy" was the theme of a recent interdisciplinary digital symposium hosted by the University of Calgary, May 18-19, 2021, which included keynotes by humanities special collections and research librarians at both U.S. and Canadian universities. In addition to the partnership with commercial digital publishers outlined above, this "experiential symposium" organized by Melanie Boyd, Jason Nisenson and Aritha Van Herk provided another valuable example for how we might move forward in integrating libraries, archives and special collections into our creative writing pedagogy practice.

As noted above, I began by enrolling in that introductory webinar hosted by Adam Matthew, a U.K.-based digital publisher that my university library subscribes to, meaning that all students and faculty on campus have access to their digitized collections. The virtual field trip I subsequently planned was devised in collaboration with two Adam Matthew academic specialists, Laura Blomvall and Dot Kelly, to

whom I reached out via email. Collaboration was key to realizing the teaching objectives of this initiative. I described to Laura and Dot my course in general and my teaching goals for a virtual field trip to the archives, sharing with them the course syllabus, which emphasized themes of constructing and exploring identity. Together, we selected five archival collections that most closely matched what I had learned of my students' autobiographies and writing interests to that point in the term. These included collections on *Migration to New Worlds*; *Gender: Identity and Social Change*; *Slavery, Abolition and Social Justice; Food and Drink in History*; and *American Indian Newspapers*. (The latter was of particular interest as a rare example of Indigenous journalism from 1828-2016, primary periodical literature compiled by and for Indigenous peoples, including issues in Indigenous languages.)

On the selected day of our virtual field trip, Laura and Dot joined our Zoom session and presented highlights of the featured collections, first showing students how to actually locate and access the Adam Matthew databases through our university library system. Then, through a power point presentation, they provided an introduction to search options to guide students through their database searches, identifying various links and resources. They explained, for instance, how under the "introduction" tab, students would find a menu that included scholarly essays providing critical overviews and contextualizing the collection in detail—an invaluable resource even for students adept at independently navigating the infrastructure of such databases. Fig. 1 below provides a representative screenshot example of a front page to one of the Adam Matthew database collections we explored as a class with guidance from Laura and Dot.

Aside from the nuts and bolts database research techniques information, Laura and Dot also reinforced some essential archive theory in their virtual class visit and power point presentation. Specifically, they provided my students with a reminder of the complexity of defining and handling "primary sources" – of the writer's responsibility to interrogate her materials for bias as though "forensic evidence." Whether or not Laura and Dot had in mind the jurisprudential origins of the archive recalled by theorists like Derrida, their legal metaphor of "forensic" interrogation was absolutely apropos. They drew a brilliant analogy to the Netflix thriller *Mind Hunter*, which got the "crime scene" point across very graphically, isolating the following questions for students in some of their power point slides:

-who created the document and why?

-who was the document made for, and what is the wider context of that source?

-why has this document been preserved, and not others?

-whose voices do we *not* hear in this document?

-is the author or source reliable?

-where is the bias?

(Blomvall and Kelly, 2020)

In the case of museum or gallery collections, "artifact" can replace the word "document" in such questions, to the same investigatory ends. In any case, we are reminding students to be critically aware of Foucault's "first" law, of an original repository that structures and rules (or, at least, over-determines) what can or cannot be said in the first place.

Seed Stories

After our tour through selected Adam Matthew digital collections with Laura and Dot, I then asked my students to choose one archive to explore independently for an informal exercise which asked them to locate a "seed story"—some primary source that sparked or stretched their thinking and imagination about

their own current drafts-in-progress or writing preoccupations. It didn't matter what kind of source it was —an oral history video, a post card or a map, a letter, an old news story or advertisement. The idea behind seed stories is to locate factual or uncut, raw source material that embodies potential to be elevated from the realm of mere reportage to the level of artful creative nonfiction storytelling. This sort of seed material can be the barest of bones, as with the example above, a brief AP newswire "factoid" I culled from the *Globe & Mail* newspaper ages ago, and have shared in class for students' consideration with excellent results (Fig 2).

What sorts of possible stories infuse a small news item like this? How might those stories shift depending on whose point of view they might be told from (the South African miners'; the jeweler about to make the first cut in the unfinished rock; the geologist analyzing the stone's composition; the Sotheby's auctioneer; the "unidentified telephone bidder"; the hand model's, etc.)? Where would the story you tell ideally begin, where would it end, and what would be your ultimate purpose in constructing such a story? What sorts of research would it take to develop this story idea, and what might be some of the more compelling questions, paradoxes or controversial issues a writer could focus on in her treatment of the angle and aim she chooses?

In more recent years, another "seed story" example I provide to my students in advance is the catalyst for Truman Capote's classic "nonfiction novel" *In Cold Blood* – a tiny thumbnail newspaper clipping about the Clutter family murders in 1959.

For this past semester's digital archive exercise, the only stipulation I gave students for their choice of seed material was that the primary source embody excellent *potential* for development into a work of original creative or literary nonfiction. (See Appendix 1 for the exercise assignment itself.) Students were asked to informally summarize (in a page or so) their ideas for developing their sources and any questions

these sources raised for them, and to post these notes to an eClass forum. The following week, they were divided into small groups to share and discuss their exercises. In the small group debriefing sessions on their seed material, students exercised their oral skills and abilities to "pitch" a story's potential merits to others, while auditors functioned in effect as editors, providing verbal feedback and insight just as they did in workshop sessions on written drafts.

In thinking about potential story treatment of seed material, everyone is thinking about aspects of craft we have discussed all term: what makes for intriguing and complex real-life characters? What are the buried stories beneath the surface story of the primary material? Again, we were asking, where might a story most effectively begin and end? Why is it important to re-tell this story *now*? What themes or dramatic tensions coalesce in the seed material? What symbolic, metaphorical, allegorical, or mythological possibilities might it reflect or offer? What literary forms, genres, or patterns of organization might be appropriate to re-tell the story and why? At the same time, students are also constantly evaluating the historical, ideological and contextual considerations related to their material—that "question of a politics of the archive," to recall the "orientation" of thinkers from Derrida and Foucault to Saidiya Hartman. What is required in order to use this source responsibly and sensitively, as well as creatively? What further kinds of research might be necessary? Where are facts lacking, and where might the known facts yield plausible inferences or conjecture? And what should creative nonfiction writers do with intractable silences and gaps in the record?

Outcomes

My students returned with a treasure trove of seed stories after being pitched into the digital archive. A sampling of the materials they brought back included a Victorian circus poster; an old newspaper clipping about an Alberta ghost town; ephemera connected to the 1967 Monterey Music Festival ("since we have been in some state of lockdown since March of this year, I have been pondering what live music means to

myself and to our culture…"); a 1940 memorandum relating to sexist divorce laws in the U.S. from the

Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America; a 1745 recipe book, *The Accomplish'd Housewife*

("in a nonfiction piece, I think there is enormous potential in viewing these old cookbooks through a

feminist lens"); a passage from the diary of a WWI surgeon ("the only source I found which humanizes

brown soldiers"); a photograph from a 1919 massacre in India (which the student, himself of East Indian

origin, proposed to develop in connection with a personal narrative of childhood trauma). A Cree student,

noting that the *American Indian Newspapers* repository "reflects colonialism from the standpoint of the

colonized," proposed a character portrait of the publisher behind a late 19th-century newspaper. Using a

similar format to Saidiya Hartman's "Unnamed Girl," another student proposed using images from the

Food and Drink in History collection to develop a story on evolving gender roles and "food as a tool to

achieve social goals."

But our class experiment with finding seed stories in digital archives ended up involving all stages

of the writing process. As will be evident by now, the informal seed story exercise develops research skills

that inform the generative stage (story conceptualization, brainstorming, pre-writing activities) and

subsequent compositional phases (writing up story treatment ideas and reflections to share with peers,

actually integrating external sources into their work, and thus making decisions about documentation,

citation, acknowledgment, etc.). Another benefit of the exercise is that it exposes students to a class of

"less polished, less fine" materials rarely encountered in the undergraduate classroom: ephemera –those

traces "of the transient, the marginal, or the fugitive" that are "usually omitted from sources

undergraduate [writers] are encouraged to consider" (Gardner and Pavelich 86-87).

The fact that many students' seed stories remained hypothetical sketches did not lessen the value

of this informal exercise. Just as the aim of the virtual tour exercise was, broadly, to encourage young

writers to expand their storytelling horizons, so such "unfinished" rough work carries ahead with students

at the end of term, a creative spillage that furnishes them with ready material and inspiration for further

writing (whether independent, or in future creative writing courses). It signals a forward-looking logic that resists the abrupt "closure" of an institutional semester, and fosters into the future that writerly self-identification that is often so tentative in students. In some cases, I explicitly encouraged students to follow through on their seed story ideas in my final course feedback.

Students, of course, had the further option of actually using the informal seed story exercise in their final end of term projects, which a number of them did. Those who went on to incorporate material from the exercise into their formally graded final projects honed their applied writing skills in effective integration and presentation of source materials for finished writing. As an added incentive, the team from Adam Matthew Digital—intrigued to see how a group of creative writers might make use of their materials—proposed that students could submit any final projects using source material from their databases for possible publication on the Adam Matthew website.

This further step resulted in some wonderfully innovative end-of-term work. One student used an image of a 19th-century Hindu painting to weave a segmented personal essay meditating on both "Western academic analysis of Eastern sources" (a meta-critique of the archive) and her own struggle with internalized racism, as a diasporic Hindu. (This student essay has now been chosen by Laura, Dot and their colleagues for publication on the Adam Matthew digital publisher's website, along with an author interview.) In a few cases, students used disparate image-text materials to push creative nonfiction form to radically nonlinear, experimental ends. One multi-media collage project, on brain concussions, resonated with clashing materials that included snippets of WWI medical literature on shell shock, drawn from an Adam Matthew archive. Another experimental non-narrative piece was composed of evocative fragments and "found pages" structured around literal and metaphorical senses of the word "rumination," a term etymologically derived from *rumen*, a cow's stomach. In this case, the as the student explained, "I drew inspiration from an old [1901] agricultural text—a manual of veterinary homeopathy—that I saw in [an Adam Matthew collection]. It is what sparked the 'found page' idea." (The "found page" was her term for

the collage of borrowed archival materials she selected and arranged as a visual image-text.) These final projects were among the most intriguing and ambitious experimental creative nonfiction works I've seen produced at an introductory level.

Whether they included digital archive research in their final projects or not, the students were unanimously enthusiastic about our "awesome" excursion. Thanks to my partnership with Laura and Dot, and my students' own receptiveness, being pitched into the digital archive turned into a highlight of the course for everyone.

Adaptations for Other Educational Settings and Levels

While theoretical concepts of the archive and of primary sources are complex, the tales that objects tell or suggest are accessible to adult learners of all levels. Exercises connected to the digital archive tour can be modified and simplified for any level of post-secondary student. Rather than requiring independent database searching, teachers could, for example, focus solely on having students fulfill the task of finding seed stories from a pre-selected cache of digitized artifacts. Teachers could then gather the seed story ideas from the class and choose some of the strongest examples to work through with students, playing a more direct role in guiding them for what to look for and consider when assessing raw material for story treatment, as per the suggestions above. Alternately, teachers could simply pre-select a group of artifacts chosen from specific digitized collections on themes relevant to their individual course and class, and work through these.

Recently, some editors and teachers have shared their convictions that remote education will pass with the pandemic. But like many others, I'm not so sure there's any going back, at least not completely. Digital modes of instruction, or at minimum, aspects of it, seem to me likely to stay, if only for the additional versatility they offer students, administrators and teachers. Going forward, it seems handy—*at*

least, I think again—to cultivate and keep a few remote learning exercises in our tool kits. Finding seed stories in digitized archives could be one of them.

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Appendix 1

Sample Informal Exercises: Working Creatively With Primary Archival Materials

Option 1: (linked to work-in-progress for course assignment)

Set aside some time to explore one of the archival collections of special interest to you, looking for any material loosely connected to the final project that you are working on for WRITE 297. (Any item you choose could be something thematically connected to your subject matter, or material that makes you think about creative possibilities for essay form or structure.) When you find what you want, take a screen shot or provide a transcription or descriptive summary of the object, whatever it is (a letter, photograph, newspaper item, map, postcard, etc.). In point form, prepare a brief summary of how this item sparked or stretched your thinking/imagination about your own draft-in-progress. List some various possibilities for how you might integrate this material into your current project. (As a structural device, as in Hakkim-Azzam's "How To Erase an Arab"? As an epigraph that stands before your text and anticipates some of its major themes? As an embedded text that your own main text directly addresses or writes around? As a "found" poem, somehow coherently deployed in parts or as fragments throughout? As a means of introducing multi-media elements to an experimental essay form? Etc.) Finally, are there any important historical, ideological or contextual considerations related to your archival material that require attention in order to use this material responsibly and sensitively, as well as creatively? If so, summarize these briefly as well.

Note: Your ideas can be strictly hypothetical for the purposes of this exercise only; *i.e.*, you aren't obliged to include this material in your final draft, if it doesn't work out.

Option 2: (seed stories not necessarily related to work in progress for this course)

Set aside some time to explore one of the archival collections of special interest to you, looking for any material that could provide you with a **seed story**. A seed story is any primary source material that has excellent potential for original development as a creative or literary work. For example, Truman Capote's famous 400 page "nonfiction novel" *In Cold Blood* –one of the first major works of "creative nonfiction" -- emerged from a tiny 200 word backstory newspaper clipping about the Clutter family murders in 1959: (https://www.rarenewspapers.com/view/661841?imagelist=1) . A similar relationship may be seen to obtain between factual source accounts of the Ohio State University shootings such as the ones posted to our eClass site and Jo-Ann Beard's creative nonfiction essay, "Fourth State of Matter."

When you find something in the archive that grabs you as a possible seed story, brainstorm the possible ways that this material could be notched up/re-imagined/re-worked for literary treatment as a well-crafted work of creative nonfiction, keeping in mind the genre's great range and flexibility of form, especially in its more experimental manifestations, as Robert Root discusses.

In thinking about potential story treatment of your seed material, consider, for e.g., whether there may be intriguing/complex characters or buried stories behind the cover story of the primary material. Where would you, as an author, want to begin and end re-telling this story, and why? What forces might have converged in the history/story of this seed material? What themes or dramatic tensions/conflicts coalesce in the seed material? What symbolic, metaphorical, allegorical, or mythological possibilities might it reflect or offer? What facts or further research would be needed to create the best treatment of this object for your purposes? How could the seed story as you can re-imagine it be most effectively arranged and presented for your readers? What literary forms, genres, and/or patterns of organization might be appropriate and why? You can complete this exercise as a series of point form notes or quick sketch of ideas.

****For both options #1 and #2**: **Please post copies/brief descriptive summaries of your project-related archival discoveries/ "seed stories" and your brain-storming notes to the eClass forum provided for exercises by the deadline**. **Rough working notes versus polished writing are fine for this exercise****