



How Creative Writers can work with Archivists: A Crash Course in Cooperation and Perspectives

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INTRODUCTION

“Barely typeset, its apparent undesignedness brings us physical intimacy: reading we are aware of Carson’s hands, even if it’s an artifice, as they pressed snippet x into place with staple or with glue. That is, you’re aware of Anne, you’re interfacing Anne” (Monson 153). Ander Monson wrote these words about the poet Anne Carson in his book *Letters to a Future Lover: Marginalia, Errata, Secrets, Inscriptions, and Other Ephemera Found in Libraries*, a work of creative nonfiction that makes the connection between history and creative writing visible. Archivists assist creative writers in interfacing with the people and events of the past— an inherently creative pursuit. By focusing on the practicalities of bridging these borders between past and present, writers can create a set of practices for success.

This article will focus on concrete ways creative writers can interact with and understand archives and archivists in the most successful way possible, as well as approaches for integrating archival collections into teaching. The authors come to this article with a broad perspective that is twofold. First, they are drawing on their own experiences working in archives and with creative writers. Second, both are creative writers themselves. In addition, the authors also reached out to creative writers they know who have done work in archives to glean further perspective. Through sharing these perspectives, we hope to dissolve some of the boundaries keeping creative writers from effectively using archives for their work and show that in addition to research, creative writers can find moments of inspiration in archives where they may least expect them.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TWO DISCIPLINES

A common misconception about archives is their intent. They are nearly all research-based. This is the true beauty of an archives. The records within are not cloistered away from the public eye but rather made accessible through finding aids, digitization, and research hours. They are a resource to be utilized by the public so we can better understand and contextualize

the history which surrounds us.

One of the focus areas for the Society of American Archivists' "Core Value of Archivists" is the area of history and memory which is explained as: "Archivists recognize that primary sources enable people to examine the past and thereby gain insights into the human experience. Archival materials provide surrogates for human memory, both individually and collectively and, when properly maintained, they serve as evidence against which individual and social memory can be tested."

Primary sources are essential to the work of historians and creative writers. Not only can additional research in archives inform and enhance the historical accuracy of creative work, but archival research and its findings can also provide new inspiration to authors. Primary sources can breathe new life and insert new perspectives into a writer's work. Archivists see the evidence of the interesting snippets and full stories that can be found in primary resources in their work daily. There are very few collections that are so straightforward that they contain no surprises. These are real moments of possibility for creative writers. A single detail may be the catalyst for the next short story or essay or poem. Creative writers can make these moments live more fully than they have since that actual moment in time. It could be argued that creative writing can more accurately provide a "surrogate for human memory" (Society of American Archivists) than traditional approaches to history.

The intersection between creative writing and history transcends genre boundaries, infusing itself into work of all kinds. It can clearly be seen in creative nonfiction, a genre noted for its combination of boundaries, including the line between truth and memory. Authors of creative nonfiction must do their best to accurately understand the reality of what they are writing about.

In Jennifer Sinor's *The Extraordinary Work of Ordinary Writing: Annie Ray's Diary*, Sinor includes her own memories in partnership with her ancestor's diary, blending memoir with archival materials. Some exciting and experimental work using archives both as inspiration and as an artifact is done within poetry. Nicole Stellon O'Donnell's book *Steam Laundry*, for example, pairs poetry alongside archival documents from the collection the poet was exploring. Poetry presents an opportunity to play with archival materials in numerous ways— from language to images to excerpts to contest. For example, in Sean Hill's poem "In Memory Hill Cemetery," we see the poem take direct control over this intersection of history and creative statements:

I expose the film again.
I pull it from the camera and wait.
I separate the positive from the negative
and two graves cloud to one. (24)

Here, the photographer superimposes an image of the graves of Georgia slaves over the grave of Flannery O'Connor, crafting a powerful statement of connection both within the context of this particular poem and also between ourselves and history.

Archivists can also be said to employ the skills of a creative writer when they process collections. To process a collection, the archivist works to make the collection accessible to researchers. This can take many forms— putting papers in order, cleaning, photocopying or photographing fragile portions of the collection, etc. In processing, archivists are tasked with presenting the purest version of the collection that they possibly can. Their job is not to organize a collection how they feel it should be organized, but to follow (as closely as possible) the original order, which is an archival term for the order that the creator of the collection intended and used. This is preservation of that person's or organization's story as well as their papers. Think about it this way— by identifying and preserving the original order of a creator's collection, the archivist is attempting to preserve a piece of that person's mental existence that may not be discernable in another way. This work of processing can, in itself, be a creative act. They are piecing a world together, bit by bit, in the most accurate way they can.

The relationship between creative writers and archives is about more than gaining a deeper knowledge of history. Archival materials are very unique. They are singularly rare. For many of these materials, particularly before the advent of word processing devices and software, these documents are the only copy in existence in the world. That is a very powerful and significant reality. The relationship is physical as well. The tactile experience of researching in an archive, of picking up and handling documents, is a unique experience. We have seen writers visibly moved by the touch of the vellum of a rare book or the correspondence of a historical figure for which they have found a particular affinity. Many would assume that documents with this kind of rarity and significance would be locked away, unavailable to most people. This is a real beauty of using archival materials— the actual interaction with rare, real moments of history.

A READING LIST FOR CREATIVE WRITERS USING ARCHIVES

Works focusing on collaboration between writers and archivists have either taken the form of advice from creative writers to colleagues on using archival material or examined the challenges of digital archiving approaches regarding writers. Few articles have been written by archivists sharing approaches for creative writers wishing to integrate archival items into their work and teaching and tips for creative writing-focused research.

At the top of every creative writer's mind as they consider using archival resources for their creative work is the question of how to integrate these sources. Henrietta Verma's "Working Together: How Librarians and Archivists Support Authors' Research" focuses on how authors such as Michael Woodsworth and Ann Little have worked with archivists. Little, author of *The Many Captivities of Esther Wheelwright*, describes working with the Massachusetts Historical Society (MHS) to gain the information she needed for her book. Ships' logs and published almanacs are some of the sources researchers might consult at the MHS. Verma's article

provides examples for writers on integrating archival materials into their work.

Access to archival materials is always an issue, as not everyone has the money to travel to get access to materials. Because of this, many researchers need to rely on digital archives for research. In “Incipit: On the Present and Future of the Field,” David Bell and Catherine Witt discuss how the digital world can be used to increase collaboration in the humanities. Bell and Witt also argue that digital authoring tools can invite new ways of presenting research results, including new forms of writing. Collaboration in this context transcends geographic and disciplinary boundaries, inviting projects and ways of thinking that previously have not been possible. Bell and Witt describe the ways that digital archives make it possible to instantly access material without physically visiting an archive and how this changes their approach for writing about the material. These developments are exciting and worthy of celebration. They are essential to online instructors who would like to include archival material in their classes and to writers who may not be able to travel to the archive.

Adjacent to the usefulness of digital archives, this article by Devin Becker and Collier Nogues goes into detail about how writers organize their own information. This insight into actual practice of record creators provides a window into the reality of what an archivist may be dealing with when they receive collections. In addition to that, it also gives writers some tips for the organization and safeguarding of their own work. The article “Saving-Over, Over-Saving, and the Future Mess of Writers’ Digital Archives: A Survey Report on the Personal Digital Archiving Practices of Emerging Writers” paints a pretty picture of creative chaos. A survey of 110 writers’ homegrown digital archiving strategies leads the two to “[conclude] that writers, due to a lack of knowledge and instruction in archival practices, do not, at this current time, sufficiently value their digital files” (Becker and Nogues 484). While Becker and Nogues note that much is being done incorrectly by writers at home, the surveyed community expressed being receptive to guidance from professionals to safeguard their legacy. Becker and Nogues join Hobbs in encouraging archivists and writers to sit down together and work through these minor issues towards a more coherent, long-term solution. Catherine Hobbs’ “New Approaches to Canadian Literary Archives” from the *Journal of Canadian Studies*, takes a similar vein and does some of the work this article also hopes to achieve, in that it asks archivists to consider the often different intentions of modern writers and how they could alter their organization practices to reflect those intentions, therefore preserving the author’s relationship to their materials more accurately. Coupling soundly with our own interviews and hopeful perspective, this article reframes the connections between author, papers, and archivists in useful ways— a must-read for those on both sides of the aisle.

Moving into the actual research life of a writer, and with a nod towards teaching these skills to students, Chris Cokinos’ “Organized Curiosity: Creative Writers and the Research Life,” from the March/April 2015 issue of the *Writer’s Chronicle* describes research as a way of life and being in the world. Writers including Jennifer Sinor, Kim Barnes, Kate Bernheimer, and Adam Kullberg describe the way they connected to their subject, sometimes through site visits. Approaches such as historic scene reconstruction and manipulating scale in writing are

discussed. The writers break down their process, giving concrete steps that can be followed or integrated into the classroom environment.

Literature written by archivists and librarians about how creative writing and archives connect is lacking and piecemeal. Both sides of the aisle would benefit from a more robust, detailed, and connected conversation. This article will address the relationship between creative writers and archivists, providing concrete steps for collaboration.

THE QUESTIONS

It became clear, early on in our research process, that the amount of published, particularly peer-reviewed, literature outlining partnerships between creative writers and archivists was insufficient for the needs of our article. Much had been written in the way of interviews, narratives, and editorials on the subject, but we could find no one resource comprehensive enough to satisfy our needs. Therefore, we developed a simple set of questions that we hoped would garner the kind of responses we were hoping to obtain and sent it out to authors across many genres to collect responses. Herein lies our rationale, process, and results.

To supplement the sources we had already collected, we settled upon a qualitative set of questions that we would send via email rather than a traditional in-person or phone interview or quantitative data because, having experience in the field of creative writing ourselves, we were well aware that the desire of creative writers to construct the perfect sentence (or in this case the perfect response) would naturally require a bit of time and thought. An emailed set of open-ended questions would allow our population to craft their responses at their own pace and to a point of perfection that they were comfortable with, thus easing some of the burden of immediate reply. We hoped for anecdotes, advice, and other answers to add to this article. We crafted our questions purposefully, leaving them open-ended or broad to allow the writer to interpret their answer in the most genuine way for their own experience. We also made sure that the questions included space for digital and physical archives, encompassing a range of research experiences.

Contacting writers for responses can be difficult. We decided to pull from three main pools: writers who have published books making use of archival collections, writers who are in the midst of work on manuscripts using archival collections, and our own pool of acquaintances, gathered through our years of experience in the fields of creative writing and archives who we know are working on, have written, or have published creative works utilizing archives. It is a flaw in our own collection of interviews that we drew upon a pool so closely aligned with ourselves and our own knowledge. A larger study would yield a broader range of answers and representation of writers. For the purposes of this initial exploration, we were quite pleased with the responses we managed to collect.

In the end, 12 authors responded to our request for interviews. Of those responses, there was 1 poet, 1 fiction writer, 3 creative nonfiction writers, and 7 writers who identified as writers of multiple genres. Of the creative writers who responded, 2 were friends of the article authors,

and 6 were creative writers we knew of through their work or had interacted with previously. These 12 authors answered six questions:

1. What do you write?
2. What role has archival research played in your writing?
3. Do you use primarily digital or physical archives? Please explain your choice.
4. What could archivists do to make the research process more successful?
5. What tips do you have for writers wanting to do research in archives?
6. What is your favorite find in an archive?

We appreciate that these authors took the time to share their experiences in archives and with archival materials with us. Some of the responses we received from these questions have been quoted in this article.

DISCUSSION

Just as archivists allow creative writers to “interface” with the past, creative writers can introduce the public to archives and their material. Writers from poetry, creative nonfiction, literary journalism, and memoir each take a different approach to creating that “interface.” Creating their work involves knowing the concrete details of how to do research in an archive and celebrating the material that can be found hidden within collections. After reviewing the surveys, we have chosen some of the highlights of their answers here.

Steve Pyne is a writer of biography, textbooks, essay collections, and big-screen histories of fire. As a history grad student, Pyne was trained to work in archives. He prefers to avoid dealing with “human subjects” and institutional review boards, another reason he likes historical documents. Pyne writes, “Access and reproducibility are the biggest issues for me. More physical records seem to be stored off-site and can be tricky to request in advance, which matters if I’m paying for travel. Mostly, I try to copy-photocopy, scan, photograph-documents that seem relevant. I’ll sort them out later, partly to hold travel costs down, and partly because I do not know all I will want from documents and having a copy makes re-examination easy.” Pyne recommends using online finding aids and reaching out to the relevant archivist so a personal point of contact is developed. Pyne describes a favorite story in the archives:

My wife, a dedicated family historian, spent a couple of decades pursuing the story of my maternal grandfather, who went to Mexico to establish a citrus industry in Montemorelos. Evidence was hard to come by. Then, at the National Archives, on our last day (I was also doing research,) she found extensive accounts of his experiences during the Mexican revolution as part of a submission to recover damages. There was of course no compensation, but she had a relatively complete record in his own words of a tumultuous time —his orchards were seven times struck by one combatant side or the other. Nothing remained in the end, save his written testimony. It was a remarkable archival pot of gold at the end of a long-questing rainbow.

At the time of the survey, Renee Angle was the program coordinator for K-12 Education at the University of Arizona's Poetry Center. She is also a writer of "poetry and hybrid texts that are poetry-nonfiction-fiction all mashed together." For Angle, archival research serves as a source of inspiration, a space for genres and different types of writing to intersect. Angle has used a combination of digital and physical archives and focuses on the fragments that exist in archives. She believes that for the research process to be more successful, that archives should be open not only to researchers, but to artists of all types. Small travel grants would help make it possible for artists to visit a variety of archives. Angle advises writers doing research in archives to "Pace yourself. Librarians are so helpful, ask lots of questions." Primary source research provides a deep level of excitement,

I love ancillary unrelated materials that give you a sense of aura for the subject, person, collection. I particularly like looking at ads that appear next to newspaper articles. I've used the Arizona Republic Newspaper archive recently in this way, and I almost spend more time looking at things like this than my actual topic.

A passion for the core subject and original mission always inspires the return to focus, while also embracing these alternative paths within the archive.

Jill Magi describes herself as a writer who creates "works which sometimes look like poetry, but are more accurately hybrid works that move between the essay, poetry, fiction, and often include visuals." Magi's most recent work, *LABOR*, is about entering the Wagner Labor Archive, held at NYU's Bobst Library, to locate "radical America" and to find solidarity in economic struggle. The archive becomes a setting for fictional characters. The finding aid for the Wagner Labor Archive was the literal start of *LABOR*'s manuscript. However, Magi then needed to go to NYU and physically touch the material to bring life to her topic. For her work on *Cadastral Map*, a work focusing on the social and literary construction of nature, Magi was introduced to relevant material by a librarian who was comfortable with her topic. Interacting with the librarian in real-time was essential to her work and could not have been done as effectively digitally. Magi advises writers who enter archives to be aware of their physical body in the space, "Notice how you arrive, how the space is designed, what the environment is like. This is part of the research experience also."

Like Magi, Evelyn Funda also benefited from being on site and interacting with a librarian in-person. Funda works in two genres, cultural memoir and literary criticism focusing on Willa Cather. Recently, Funda has been focusing on Cather's interest in and depiction of Czech immigrants. Funda describes her research experience in the Czech Republic to see the letters Cather wrote President Tomas Masaryk (first president of the republic of Czechoslovakia, after the Czechs separated from the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1918):

What I found in that instance was an almost comical version of an archivist who still obviously held to a rather Communist approach to archives. He was very stern and dismissive, especially of a suspicious foreigner asking to see into what he regarded as

his archives, and it was clear that researchers didn't often use their special archive just outside of the city that was entirely devoted to President Masaryk's papers. I had my cousin with me there to act as interpreter [she was then herself an archivist in a music library in another city in the Czech Republic so she had some authority], and she was able to finesse him into cooperating with lots of deferential "So sorry we didn't do the proper paperwork well in advance. We are so stupid. Many apologies. But my cousin is only here in the country for a short time. She is an important professor in America. Please, may we have your assistance? Thank you. Thank you." Between us, we jokingly referred to him as "Mr. Smiles" because his scowl seemed permanently affixed to his face, and I said to my cousin, "How different archivists in the US would be! They would be thrilled to have someone interested in their archives, to have the materials put to good use!"

Funda suggests that archivists read works that show the variety of ways that creative writers use archives. Archivists who are willing to follow the path research takes are the best ones for creative writers.

Brett Sigurdson is a creative nonfiction/literary journalism writer and PhD student at the University of Minnesota. As a journalist, Sigurdson has used archives to add historical background to a story. Sources include both physical and digital newspaper archives, as well as municipal archives and court documents. Sigurdson prefers physical documents over digital, he "silently geeks out constructing imaginary scenes of the document's creation." Sigurdson hopes that first and second year writing instructors encourage students to go into physical archives and take their research beyond a "cursory Google session." His favorite archival find comes from being an assistant curator at the Pearl S. Buck House outside Philadelphia: "After Buck died in 1972 and the house became a museum, someone discovered her Nobel Prize in Literature—which she won for *The Good Earth* in 1938 — stuffed in the bottom drawer of some out-of-the-way cabinet in the home, as if it were some random tchotchke."

Jennifer Sinor writes creative nonfiction, specifically memoir and research-based literary nonfiction. Her first project involved working with the diary of her great, great, great aunt Annie Ray, who homesteaded the Dakotas in the late 19th century. More recently, she has worked with the Georgia O'Keeffe archive at Yale's Beinecke Library, as well as the O'Keeffe Research Center in Santa Fe. When Sinor talks to her students about archives she uses a broad approach:

We know archives are kept formally in libraries, but I tell them their bedside drawer is also an archive. Some archives are mediated and maintained formally by those trained in the field, and some archives are more ordinary (and therefore missed and dismissed). I have worked in both and both deserve respect and attention. To take it even more broadly, the world is an archive and we are archivists of our lives. As writers, we need to understand that research doesn't just happen in a library. It happens every time we train our attention on a subject or an object or an idea and become curious, wonder, push.

Sinor believes there is no substitute for the actual physical material contained in an archive:

As a literary nonfiction writer, rather than an academic scholar, I am not looking for ‘facts.’ I am looking for a story. And part of that story is about being at the site, holding what can be held, touching, feeling, knowing the heft. I believe very strongly that our creative writers cannot write from the kitchen. They must go out and be in the world of things.

Sinor advises researchers to begin small:

It takes a long time just to learn how to read someone else’s handwriting. If you have 250 boxes to go through, you will quit before you get halfway. I am grateful I worked with Annie’s diary first. It taught me how to read and honor primary source materials. Second, go to the archive with curiosity rather than goals. The joy of being in the archive is the unexpected find. Every writer will say that. You are only open to the unexpected when you are not trained on what you think you need or want.

CAConrad is a writer who blends practice and poetry through (Soma)tic poetry rituals of their own creation, pulling from notes taken during these rituals to craft poems. A description of the ritual appears prior to the poem in their publications, though it is the poem itself that is the priority. Conrad’s approach to archives is unique to their work. As they described their work in libraries and archives they mention that,

Many other forms of research are required for my various rituals, for instance a long, ongoing ritual is titled “Resurrect Extinct Vibration.” With this one I collect audio field recordings of birds, insects, mammals and other animals that have become extinct in the past five or so decades. Sometimes I require city planning notes or building blueprints.

Here, Conrad is proving their interest in an array of archival materials. They also consider the larger world an archive in and of itself, referring to landscapes as “geological libraries” one can interact with in a way similar to our traditional library. This other definition of the world as an archive or library, can be seen throughout Conrad’s work as the earth becomes a document in their hands. One good example of this is the ritual “Anoint Thyself” in which they use dirt gathered from Emily Dickinson’s home as an artifact to create their poem “Emily Dickinson Came to Earth and Then She Left” (CAConrad 2012).

CAConrad’s advice for archivists touches on what may be one of an archivist’s worst fears: that the archivist will not do justice to the records they protect. Conrad wishes that archivists would “always make certain when indexing a particular body of work to include everything, no matter how insignificant it may seem” citing the indexing work librarians have done regarding an astonishing collection of channeled documents created by Edgar Cayce. Conrad accurately describes the danger of not asking questions in archives when they says that “shyness

only leaves you standing alone without the tools you need.” Their insights strengthen the belief that writers and archivists need to be willing to talk to each other for writers to be able to find what they need from collections, and even understanding collections so they can be processed intelligently and efficiently by the archivists. Although such a level of detail as Conrad found in the Cayce collection may make most archivists begin protests of time, money, and staffing (all very real problems archivists struggle with daily), creative solutions to these problems exist and should be utilized wherever they can.

Most often a poet, Jeff Gundy’s time in archives researching two creative nonfiction books about his family led him to develop a good list of researching strategies: “Nose around, ask lots of questions, take good notes/records of some kind. Allow yourself to get distracted. Look for the stories that are told (sometimes only hinted at) by letters and records.” Gundy’s advice is concrete enough to provide good guidance for writers and yet generous enough to allow for the creative sensibilities of researchers. His “allow yourself to get distracted” acknowledges a fact of archival research that creative writers familiar with it will understand—there are so many good stories in archives that everyone gets sidetracked. But sidetracked is only a negative experience if one lets it be. It can also lead to the next project or pull the work in an unexpected direction.

Nicole Stellon O’Donnell, author of the book *Steam Laundry*, which tells the story of an Alaskan woman in poems, was written after extensive research and reading in her collection at the University of Alaska Fairbanks’ Alaska and Polar Regions Special Collections & Archives. A mix of text and reproductions of original documents, O’Donnell describes a moment which altered the construction of her book:

My favorite find was a note written on a prescription pad from Sarah’s doctor to her son Tom. It informed him that his mother was dying and that she would not return from Seattle, where she was being sent to seek treatment. There was a note at the bottom saying, ‘do not tell your mother this.’ For me, that was a critical moment. I held this painful secret in my hands, the terminal diagnosis. Her son and doctor knew, but that was kept from her. That document [was] so important that it eventually led to the decision to reprint historical documents and photographs alongside the poems. Finding it transformed both my understanding of the people I was writing about and the final format of the book.

Identifying primarily as a fiction writer and poet who writes in other genres as well, Jennifer McCauley has spent time in archives for a variety of research projects both in relation to her creative work and to more academic writing. McCauley has valuable advice that many may not consider as they run to an archives, focused on records. Networking with actual humans there, and in the area, proved invaluable to her research. She suggests that

if you’re doing research that involves traveling or field work, get to know your subject before you go, for sure, but also the academics/scholars who live in your area.

After Speer Morgan read sections of my novel, he directed me to a number of helpful people at the Historic New Orleans Collection from working on projects there, who then directed me to more helpful people and ample resources.

Eowyn Ivey's newest book *To the Bright Edge of the World* has already caught a lot of attention for its quality, but authors and archivists alike will appreciate the struggle to do the appropriate historical research from a relatively remote location in Alaska. Ivey's answers to the questions show the extent she went to find the information she needed to craft the book. She owes a lot to archivists who have made a point to digitize portions of their collections, noting that "I am incredibly grateful to organizations, museums and libraries that have digitized their archives and made them available online. I know it is costly and time-consuming, but it is so important for researchers." Ivey is right that digitization, done correctly with a well-planned strategy, is expensive and time-consuming. Often archivists understand the importance but cannot move past these two hurdles.

Kate Partridge's work spans several genres, from poetry to essays to critical work and because of this breadth of interest she has spent quite a bit of time researching in archives. Partridge sees the archives not just as a place to get facts or story ideas, but as a living part of the history itself:

For me, the archive informs everything else about a project—it forms sort of a central node of form and theme, from which I move in lots of different directions of inquiry toward other sources of research or towards salient moments from my own life. I try to approach the archive from many angles, including collage and more traditional ekphrastic readings. I also write about the experience of working with the archive itself, because, for me, it's not only what's in the material that is interesting, but recording my own encounter with it that forms a relevant connection to the present. I imagine that anyone else looking at these collections would have an entirely different experience in how handling the material affects them—and although I think archives maybe give the impression of sterility and are generally very cold, they also make me feel really present in my own body and connection to the materials. I don't think of anything I say about an archive as in any way definitive, and I'm not trying to form a firm notion of what a collection is or means. I just write about where it takes me on a particular day.

Like many writers, Partridge feels that archives are more than buildings housing historical collections. Rather, they add to the stories they hold. Archivists would, no doubt, agree. There is a definite magical quality to being in an archives and being able to hold history.

The only writer on our interviewee list who also identifies as a conceptual artist, Nathan Shafer, takes blending genres to a whole new level, integrating creative and academic writing along with technology to create whole experiences of augmented reality. Perhaps because of his blended approach to his work, Shafer, like many, laments the lack of digital options for archival materials. His work in the realm of technology makes him well-equipped to understand the

roadblocks and frustrations archivists have regarding making collections accessible. He notes that “technology prevents us from having good formats because of obsolescence” and that “it is very hard to discern useful information in oral archives that are not properly kept.” No archivist would argue with him there. Walking the line between access and sustainable preservation is a constant struggle for most archivists. Shafer has excellent, brief advice for writers looking to utilize archival materials: “Know your place: who are you, where you are and how are you going to use this information?”

There are common threads running through the collected responses, like the emphasis on researching in advance and being familiar with the finding aids, as well as the importance of creating a collaborative relationship with the on-site librarians. Many of the writers also emphasized the importance of physically interacting with the material and not using digital surrogates. However, the writers also applaud how digitization can increase the accessibility of the materials. The importance of not ignoring items or details that may appear insignificant is highlighted as well. Every detail counts in archival research.

RESEARCH CHALLENGES FOR CREATIVE WRITERS IN ARCHIVES

The biggest challenge for a creative writer researching in an archive is most likely going to be the sheer amount of potential resources. Writers are always looking for a good story and being overwhelmed is a real possibility. Archivists know this as a rule: there is no collection that does not have a story worth hearing. Everything has something. Even a collection that seems very straightforward involving field notes of a local biologist can have interesting documents that might spark a poem or short story (such as the paperwork and correspondence written by a polar research station to order more sled dogs because they were being eaten by bears). The best way to counteract this is to accept it and plan ahead. In the survey, Pyne highlights using online finding aids and reaching out to archivists, developing “a personal point of contact.” A difficult, but essential fact for writers is understanding that it’s okay to use some material in a future work.

Similar to a library search strategy, choosing the right keywords can be the difference between a successful search and a laborious one. In the case of archives, time and vocabulary can play a large role in which terms are used and archivists can play an essential role in helping writers navigate the vocabulary. Understanding the historical context of the time period and region for research will make a big difference in the search. Funda chose to do this by traveling to the Czech Republic. For instance, looking for “funeral homes” in a city directory from the early 1800s will probably not yield much. That term was not in use until later. Changing to the term “undertaker” will produce a wealth of results (depending on the size of the city at the time, of course). Different regions can also use different terminology for the same thing. Who, for example, has not been momentarily confused by the “pop” vs. “soda” debate? These same rules hold true in archives. This is also where good historical and other reference books such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* can come in handy. Keep track of regional names, acronyms, and sayings, as they can all affect potential search results.

In a digital archive, many researchers have trouble trusting that what they are seeing is the real and authentic version of a document. Some digital archives may also publish duplicate letters, a copy and then a handwritten version. The researcher must conduct analysis to determine which is the duplicate or if they are really duplicates. As far as authenticity in digital libraries, most websites document their practices. This may include transcribing rules or how documents are processed. If this information cannot be found, it is totally acceptable to contact the archives and ask to know. Reviewing and understanding these practices can help writers put the collection into context and may offer other clues as to how the records lived in history. As Shafer mentions, archivists must constantly fight against the obsolescence of technology and the constantly evolving nature of the formats. In some cases, it may be best to remember Sinor's advice and consult the physical material.

When creative writers visit an archive they should be ready and willing to share. Erin Wahl, co-author of this article, once had a writer come into an archive with a bunch of questions, and then when Wahl asked for more information about certain aspects of those questions she was told, "I'm sorry, I can't reveal that information to you. My story is secret." Wahl found the author some possible sources and the author left reasonably satisfied, but Wahl was not. She knew the author had left with at least a sub-par, and maybe even a poor, answer. Archivists and librarians are trained to ask questions to help researchers get to the best sources for their work. They're trained to help them move to the answer they need with efficiency. Most take a lot of pride in being able to do that. These questions, often called "reference interviews" are used by librarians and archivists to help understand exactly what researchers need. So often, a researcher comes in asking for one thing and leaves with other sources that they hadn't considered but which provided the perfect answer to their questions. Researchers and archivists both know things. Each carries half the answers. It's only by combining those two halves that the two parties arrive at the best answer. Archivists are partners in researchers' success. If researchers share their struggles with archivists they may not just find themselves leaving with the answer they wanted — they may find themselves leaving with the answer they didn't even imagine possible.

DIGITAL ARCHIVES AND CREATIVE WRITING

As a digital archivist, Pamela Pierce, co-author of the article, is often asked to explain what writers and researchers can gain from using these collections. The answer she usually gives starts with the words "It transcends place." She tells people that they can see the holdings of Harvard from western North Dakota, a farm in rural Nebraska, or San Diego. They can be anywhere and access the material. The disadvantage is that writers do not have the opportunity to fully know the place. They do not visit archives and see the surroundings or talk with staff. The opportunity for serendipity in research disappears. It is the staff that often truly knows an archive and can assist in making additional discoveries. In the digital library, archivists do try to create opportunities for browsing. Related items may appear on the side of the screen.

In *Steam Laundry*, Nicole Stellon O'Donnell tells the story of a family coming to Alaska, specifically the story of the matriarch of that family. In some cases, she uses the actual archival

images. One of the advantages of a digital library is that it is image rich. In a digital library, one can scroll through images all day long. Resources include photographs, stereographs, postcards, and the covers of sheet music. For creative writers, this can be a treasure trove. When digitizing postcards, archivists at the Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library also scan the backs of each card, not just the image. Postcards in the Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library are cataloged based on who wrote the message of the card and who is receiving it. An example title would be: “Postcard from Ellie to Floyd Knobs.” Creative writers would see the messages on these postcards and could use them for piecing together a story.

In her work at the Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Pierce saw creative writers use the digital collections for their work. One way that the Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library (TRDL) has been used by creative writers is to create redacted poetry. This was done by beginning writers in a foundational poetry class at Dickinson State University. They worked with documents within the Library of Congress Manuscript Collection. A significant portion of the letters in this collection refer to Roosevelt’s time as President. The students worked with routine presidential correspondence and blacked out or redacted parts of the document. The words they left showing became the poem. Some of the most creative poems were created with letters featuring the most professional language. This activity was inspired by an April 2015 National Poetry Month event at the National Archives Foundation.

One of the most complex and interesting collections in the TRDL is the Inaugural Collections. Creative writers could be inspired by everything from a razor blade to invitation cards. The Inaugural Collection also represents what separates the Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library from other documentary editing projects like the George Washington Papers or the Thomas Jefferson Papers. The TRDL does not only include letters written by Roosevelt or sent to Roosevelt. We also focus on Roosevelt and public memory. As a result, objects like a razor blade, postcards, and campaign buttons are included.

Creative writers who use items in a digital library must rely on the metadata or contextual information that accompanies each item. Each digital archive takes a somewhat different approach to metadata. Debate also surrounds whether a description of a letter or postcard should go beyond what is represented in the item and include additional context. The TRDL strives to include information that will be most helpful to the researcher, including historical context. If a writer or researcher discovers an inaccuracy or a fact to be corrected in a digital library, this can also be quickly changed. The beauty of the digital library is how quickly edits can be made.

Reference questions can also be asked of digital librarians. There is generally a “contact us” prominently located on the site and emails are directed to a specific staff member in the archives. That staff member may include other staff in answering that question. Writers can also use the staff page and email a staff member directly. If a very detailed and specific question is asked, particularly one peppered with names of people and places, an email, followed up after a time with a phone conversation, can be the best route. Email affords the opportunity to give archivists exact details and spellings of names rather than the archivist scrambling to take notes

on the phone. A follow-up phone call allows an opportunity to have a dialogue with the archivist regarding the initial information and questions, drawing more clarity into the search and what might be available. Sometimes the best reference results can actually be had through a phone call or an in-person visit. Archivists may share more information through the organic course of a conversation.

Inspiration can be found in various websites, including Wikipedia and random collections of images on Instagram. However, digital archives provide trusted and well-researched metadata that can assist in the writing process.

COPYRIGHT AND RESTRICTIONS

Copyright and permission to publish statements are a common form of misunderstanding between archivists and writers. Each reads them very differently. Creative writers may not know that the copyright language within donation paperwork is fairly standard across most archives. Variations occur, but most archives agree on a certain verbiage that allows the same basic copyright. Most archival donation paperwork asks that the creator transfers the copyright to the archives. This is simultaneously a protection for the archives and actually an ease of burden for the author, and the donor and their family. If the donor retains the copyright, people must contact them directly to use the collection. This can be a problem if the donor moves or is hard to reach. It also presents a problem for the family after the donor has passed on, as the burden of copyright then typically passes to a family member. It is easier for archives, researchers, and donors if the copyright is transferred to the archives, eliminating these extra steps and potential uncertainty. This does not mean that the donor is now required to ask the archives permission to publish their own work. Rather, it gives the archives power to give permission for other researchers to quote or use appropriate portions of the collection, correctly attributed of course. Researchers and donors alike can trust archivists to make informed, responsible calls on copyright and permission to publish materials.

In a similar vein to copyright, it can be very tempting for donors to place restrictions on their papers, particularly if the donor is still alive. Creative writers may be concerned with this because restrictions would affect their access to the collection. However, archivists are considering the long-lasting access to and preservation of the records. Restrictions make providing access (which we may remember is the main point and purpose of archives) more difficult. Collections can be restricted for all sorts of reasons. It may be the wish of the donor themselves, it may be that there is personal information within the collection that is protected by laws; there are all sorts of reasons a collection may be restricted for a period of time. Donors want to have control over who uses their collection and how while they are still alive. This is something that an archivist and a writer may understand more readily. If a donor decides to impose restrictions during their lifetime, it is recommended and encouraged to provide an end date for those restrictions (typically the death of the creator) so archivists can adjust the access for their researchers accordingly.

One of the challenges of using digital archives in creative writing that will be published

is getting permissions from a variety of institutions. The Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library aggregates images from institutions ranging from Harvard to the Library of Congress. Library of Congress images are generally open access. They are “the people’s library.” Harvard must be contacted before high resolution, publishable images can be released for publication. In some cases, there are additional usage fees associated with using the images. Even if an image comes from the Library of Congress, it may have an additional individual holding the copyright. Due diligence must be done to investigate whether that person is still alive. Generally, items where the creator has been dead at least seventy years are considered free to publish. The archival server of the Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library includes TIFF files that can be released for use in publications. Web-ready JPEGs are shared on the site at 600 dpi. However, the permissions guidelines must still be followed.

Digital Public Library of America provides a guide and video called “Understanding Copyright” that is very useful to researchers. Topics covered include how to identify content in the public domain, identifying content under copyright and pursuing permissions, orphan works, fair use, understanding risk, and rights and access statements. Digital Public Library of America’s tutorial emphasizes that copyright law was “designed to limit the term of copyright so the public would eventually have unrestricted access to content.” Rightsstatements.org also provides a set of standardized rights statements used by cultural heritage institutions.

Though these are some of the most common problems, these may not be the only issues with copyright and restrictions that creative writers face while doing their research. Always ask an archivist if clarification is needed.

ARCHIVES AND TEACHING: A CONVERSATION

It is not difficult to integrate archival research into teaching though it may seem a daunting task at first. The most successful integrations are achieved when the teacher and archivist are in constant conversation with each other, the archivist’s role embedded within the course itself, each with an equal interest in the success of the class and the students within it. For a teacher, this is easy to achieve as they are already concerned with the success of their students within the class. As an archivist, particularly an archivist that does not do any regular teaching, this may be one of the more difficult forms of outreach to work up to, as a real engaged presence will require more work than a single class visit or a tour. Creative writing teachers take note that, though archivists are very used to classes in disciplines such as history or anthropology bringing their classes to the archives, some may be thrown by a creative writing class. Clear objectives about the assignment and skills can help create the best possible experience for everyone.

Good archivists and creative writing teachers alike will understand the potential for a collaboration of this sort. Most students do not get an introduction to doing archival research unless their teacher makes it a priority. If given this opportunity, students who eventually find themselves in an archive at some point in their life will likely have a smoother experience than a normal first-time user. This should be reason enough for archivists and creative writing

teachers to seek out opportunities to collaborate and get students into archives to do research. Teachers can feel they have prepared their students fully for a very specific, potentially frustrating, kind of research, and archivists can catch potential researchers early on and have a chance to address some of the most common issues that cause misunderstanding and frustration for creative writing researchers.

Though archivists obviously love it when creative writing teachers bring their classes to the archive, sometimes that is just not possible. Instructors can incorporate a range of primary sources into their classes through digital archives. The New York Public Library's Digital Collections are a particularly rich source of material for classroom activities. Items range from a book on ladies' dress shoes of the nineteenth century to Farm Security Administration photographs. Material is also organized according to public domain, as well as types of material including maps and atlases, book art and illustrations, and posters. Instructors looking for a starting point for incorporating primary sources can use the National Archives document analysis worksheets. Worksheets are included for photos, written documents, artifacts, posters, maps, cartoons, videos, and sound recordings. Students will need additional coaching to understand the context behind visual material like cartoons. Cartoons and images serve as a rich launching point for creative writing. Some archivists may be willing to visit a classroom or speak with students remotely if there is a need.

In addition to the wide range of materials provided by digital archives across the globe, instructors can also look to archivists to partner with them on class sessions on-site in the archives. This affords the opportunity for archivists to show off gems from their collections in person. Archivists and instructors should clearly communicate specific hopes and expectations for the session. This allows instructors to adequately prepare their students for the visit ahead of time and allows archivists to pull materials that may be of the most interest to the students or follow the theme of the class. For instance, when a science writing class visited an archives Wahl worked in, she took the opportunity to pull original field notes from well-known biologists, but when a creative writing class visited, she pulled out scandalous correspondence and odd snippets from diaries. Seeing students in person also provides archivists a great opportunity to advocate for their collections to a whole group of new researchers.

One of the mistakes instructors and archivists make when bringing students to the archives is making assumptions about how the students will perceive the collections. Typically, if a teacher is bringing students in, they recognize that archives have significant value for their students. Obviously, archivists understand the value of the work they do as well. Students, however, do not always acknowledge or interpret this value in the way teachers and archivists think they may. These assumptions can lead to a subpar experience for the students. Teachers and archivists alike should attempt to relate the students' time in the archives to relevant information in their lives. It may be as simple as relating the archives to an assignment in class, an effective, though temporary interest. The best class interactions make an effort to posit archives in the broader world, both in the idealistic terms archivists love and in more practical terms that students who do not subscribe to heavy idealism may understand and value. Concrete and

abstract, temporary and permanent, all must collide here for the experience to make a lasting impression.

A lasting impression is, after all, what teachers and archivists dream of from these interactions. A lasting impression has the potential to craft a new force for archives and creative writing. New researchers, new writers, new volunteers, new possibilities, new voices of advocacy to safeguard our history and promote its use both creatively and practically are all potential gains to creative writers, creative writing teachers, and their creative students having a better relationship with archives and archivists.

CONCLUSION

We can move forward from this moment towards a clearer understanding of each other's approach to archives. There are gaps in this understanding on both the archivist's and creative writers' sides. There are different, albeit connected, goals. Creativity and practicality do not always travel the same path. Archivists and writers must share in the excitement of primary source collections and support each other on the research path, wherever it may lead. Digital collections can provide access to archival material, but some writers prefer to visit the site of the archive as part of the creative writing experience. We have concerns that link us. Most of the writers who responded to our questions praised digital archives and lamented that this ease of access is not able to encompass more of archives' collections. Archivists lament that the difficulties of curating and caring for digital collections prevent them from providing more online access to the public—something they know is badly wanted by researchers across the board. This is not an impasse. This is not a cause for quarrels or indignation. This is an opportunity for collaboration; but to find a way to help each other, we must all be willing to give something. We hope that archivists and creative writers will make better efforts to launch themselves forward into mutually advantageous partnerships. Collaboration can help us alter the landscape of history creatively in the now.

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