'Lighting the Windows of the Past': Feminist and Queer Poetics, Data Visualization, and Creative Engagements with Literary and Historical Special Collections

SiR Proposal 2022, Claire Battershill

In 2016, Giogia Lupi, an information designer, and Stefanie Posavec, a graphic designer and artist, began to exchange postcards. Rather than serving their conventional function as souvenirs of travels or fleeting tokens of love or friendship, these postcards represented a durational artistic experiment in contemporary information practice. The task they set themselves was as follows: "Each week, and for a year, we collected and measured a particular type of data about our lives, used this data to make a drawing on a postcard-sized sheet of paper, and then dropped the postcard in an English "postbox" (Stefanie) or an American "mailbox" (Giorgia)!" ("Dear Data," par. 1). The project would become known as "Dear Data," and the result was a friendship formed from diagrams, charts, and drawings. Lupi and Posavec published a book from the project and offered an invitation: they shared their prompt with educators, students, and the public in order to invite the hand-drawn visual representation of personal data and the exchange of that data as a new and artful mode of community and relationship building.

For humanities researchers, particularly those working in historical fields, archives and special collections often offer a similarly intimate feeling of postcards received from the past with moments of illumination, scraps of information and data, and material experiences that we piece together in various ways in order to create scholarly narratives and analyses. Book historians and literary scholars often use these pieces of evidence to reconstruct the stories of books and of the myriad social, political, and epistemologies that survive in them. The conventional way in which researchers access materials from special and rare books collections is to call up a specific book or piece of material that interests them and look at it, carefully and often in fairly restricted circumstances, one book or archival folder at a time. Several scholars have written of the strange romance of this process, its material appeal, and its particularly rich potential for finding moments that, as Virginia Woolf put it, "light the windows of the past" just long enough for those of us in the present to take a fleeting look inside.

At the same time, scholars of critical information studies, intersectional feminist and queer studies, Indigenous studies, critical race studies, have been rightly skeptical about the ability of conventional institutional collections to include the diverse forms of memory work produced by under-represented populations. Museum and library studies scholars are deeply concerned with ethical questions, too, in these contexts, about whether such sites are appropriate spaces for housing particular kinds of culturally-specific or sensitive materials. For this Jackman SiR project, I would like to invite undergraduates in a variety of fields (ideally including literature & book history, computer science, visual studies, and creative writing and/or C&S) to work with me on developing a new research and research-creation project that involves seeing special collections differently through a variety of disciplinary and conceptual perspectives.

By collaborating with librarians and staff initially at two U of T Library collections, the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library and the Massey College Robertson Davies Library, I propose a series of experiments in research creation, data visualization, re-narration and community engagement with special collections. In conversation with poetic and theoretical works about

archives and collections by Susan Howe, Moyra Davey, and Saidiya Hartman, among others, this project deliberately foregrounds the poetic, visual, imaginative and narrative dimensions of special collections experiences. Just as artists' books have been important scholarly and pedagogical tools combining textual, material, and visual elements that help researchers conceptualize the particular character of the book as an object by testing its limits, playing with its formal properties, and offering artistic statements about the nature of 'bookness,' this project can be considered a way of constructing an 'artists' collection' – taking the concept of the special collection as a site for thinking about and materializing the nature of our relationships with history. Much of the research in this project will be truly experimental and collaborative in method and style, but I intend ultimately produce a new scholarly monograph structured loosely structured around the four elements of this project: Visualities; Poetics; Materials; and Data. For this SiR I would be inviting the students into the project at a very early moment in its development and hoping that they will help me to shape the project itself. Having worked with SiR students, I cannot imagine more curious, imaginative, and engaged collaborators with whom I could dream up a project and help it find its best form.

For the students the project would have several direct benefits: 1) we would engage together in creative practices as analytical exercises (so we might start for example by using the 'Dear Data' prompt together and recording personal data so that we can think together about the tools of creative visualization that we might apply to the libraries and develop additional creative 'prompts' or provocations relating to historical collections items and other aesthetic and poetic elements of the library-going experience); 2) we would be working directly with and in special collections for much of the project, and the students will be encouraged to think about these collections as sites for examining and investigating their own curiosities and interests; 3) we will work interdisciplinarily by thinking about data and metadata, narrative, poetics, and visualities of historical research all at once; 4) since the students would be entering this project at an early stage, they would (hopefully!) have future opportunities to continue to work with me on it through the rest of their degrees since I will be applying in the coming months for both a Connaught New Researcher Grant and a SSHRC Insight to support it and have costed in both another SiR for 2024 and continuing RA positions for the next 5 years.

This project will be in conversation with approaches in critical information studies, including the practices of redescription in archival context and critical approaches to metadata in a library and digital collections context. My background as a literature and digital humanities scholar and creative writer with a strong interest in and practice of material and visual interdisciplinary art makes me well positioned to see the ways in which research practices can be refashioned and reconsidered by applying the tools of literary and visual analysis and creation to the data generated by libraries and archives in the processes of collecting. As in 'Dear Data,' I see this project as an opening up, too, of communication and correspondence with students, with the public, and with other researchers, as we work together to think about literary and cultural collections focused on the past in the terms of the present. The hope is that this research and creative work would also occasion and eventually make possible more 'public humanities' experiences (through workshops, artists' talks, and installations) with special collections at U of T.

The Imminence of War: Canadian Intelligence in the Nuclear Era
A <u>*Canada Declassified*</u> Project

I am applying to once again lead a team of Scholars-in-Residence to help me investigate, curate, and share recently declassified records pertaining to Canada's Cold War. Having been a faculty supervisor in both SiR 2018 and 2019, I have worked with ten SiRs on *Canada Declassified* – a project that combines elements of digital humanities, scholarly outreach, and archival research. In 2020, SiRs will work with newly released files from Canada's intelligence registries.

The results from the 2018 and 2019 SiR sessions were simply outstanding. The students worked through a digital stack of primary materials and built digital exhibits with analytic essays. The digital exhibits are published on *Canada Declassified* (http://declassified.library.utoronto.ca). Several of the 2018 SiRs joined my 2019 SiR group to share best practices and help build a larger research community. A number of 2018 and 2019 SiRs continue to work with me as research assistants. Both a 2018 and 2019 SiR won University of Toronto Excellence Awards to continue work on Canada Declassified.

In 2020, SiRs will continue to develop exhibits for *Canada Declassified*. They will be among the very first scholars to have access to archival material that has been declassified at my request. This year, I plan on engaging them in new research methods that would be useful for graduate study in the humanities or social sciences. Where, in the first two years, I focused largely on history (including public history and digital humanities) skills, I will now encourage students to work with me in thinking of the primary records as a dataset from which we can find new methods of analysis.

This slight change in emphasis will correspond with my work but is also designed to provide a broader base of research experience for SiRs interested in different fields. The University of Toronto has recently begun offering free software licenses for the very expensive research software, NVivo 12 Plus. By integrating this software into our SiR research efforts, students will gain experience in methods they might go on to use in any number of different graduate programs. As an example: In the 1950s, Canada's Joint Intelligence Committee frequently published an iterative intelligence assessment, "Imminence of War," gauging whether general war was likely. NVivo 12 Plus will allow us to code these documents to analyze (and visualize) in what ways these assessments changed over time, while the other archival records will give us clues as to why. University of Toronto Libraries offers webinars during the academic year, and I will coordinate with them to provide SiRs with a training session.

I would like to use the $2,000 research fund, supplemented with other resources, to organize a trip for my SiR team to Library and Archives Canada for a special session with the archival staff and then to hold a SiR work session on site at LAC. LAC Archivists will offer the instruction and space for free. The students will gain experience researching in "real" archives to add to their experience working with the digital archive in Toronto.

The selection committee should know that I have agreed to attend another workshop during the first two days of SiR. These are the most important days of the session and, if selected, I will be in touch with my scholars and have an organized program so they can begin while I am away.

Timothy Andrews Sayle (History) – November 2019

JHI Scholars-in-Residence Program
Research Project Description
EUROPEAN REFUGEE MUSICIANS IN CANADA, 1937–1950
Robin Elliott, Faculty of Music

This Scholars-in-Residence application is for a project examining European musicians who fled from Nazi-occupied Europe and arrived in Canada during the period between 1937 and 1950. The project is funded by a SSHRC Insight Grant; it was under consideration for the JHI Faculty Research Fellowship scheme this year but was not successful. It would make an excellent project for the SiR program, as it would provide opportunities for undergraduate students to gain a wide range of research and communication skills. This application is for an "In-person, campus-based work in small research teams" project in May 2023. As the applicant for this project, I commit to providing active in-person support and collaboration with the undergraduate RAs throughout the four weeks that the program runs in May 2023.

This project examines the life stories of dozens of musicians who migrated to Canada during and in the immediate aftermath of World War II. The activities of this research project include:

- making an inventory of the primary source materials relating to these refugee musicians that are held in various archival collections around the world
- compiling a comprehensive bibliography of pertinent secondary sources relating to music and exile studies, music and migration studies, and cross-cultural adaptation and acculturation
- evaluating these primary and secondary source materials critically to shed light on the individual stories of the leading figures of this era, and to evaluate the impact that these artists had collectively on music in Canada
- creating an online biographical dictionary of the approximately 100 European musicians who migrated to Canada during this time period
- mobilizing the knowledge gained from this project to benefit both academic audiences and the general public.

In addition to gaining knowledge about European refugee musicians and their contributions to the cultural life of Canada in the twentieth century, students will develop practical skills in the use of archival materials, website development, academic writing, and twentieth-century history. Other skills relevant to the U of T Co-Curricular Record Competencies Framework that RAs will develop through participation in the project include goal setting and prioritization, investigation and synthesis, knowledge creation and innovation, advocacy, communication, technological aptitude, collaboration, design, project management, critical thinking, advocacy, and teamwork. The project in turn will benefit the wider JHI community, as work on the project will resonate well with the "absence" theme for 2023–24 that others in the JHI community will be exploring.

If this application is successful, I will commit $5,000 from the SSHRC Insight Grant for this project to further support the five undergraduate RAs for the Scholars-in-Residence program.

NB: a brief project description with selected examples of case studies is available online at
http://uoftmusicicm.ca/2020/05/07/european-refugee-musicians-in-canada-1937-to-1950/