OSU Libraries Undergraduate Research Prize

Library Research Journal

Name: Kelsie King

Course Title/Qtr & Yr.: American Colonial Literature/ Spring 2011

Title of Research Project: American Literary Reactions to the Pétroleuses of the Paris Commune

Instructions

The research journal, designed to help you stay organized, allows you keep track of the steps you take as you go through the research process. Consult with a librarian at least twice during the research process: the first visit for help in developing your research plan, and later to review your research journal, before you submit your project to your instructor. Ask the librarian to sign your journal form where indicated below.

Include the following in your journal (attach pages to this document):

1. Discuss your information needs for this project with a librarian and state them in your journal. For example, you may write down the points you wish to pursue in your project or the type of information (statistics, case studies etc) you think would be useful.

2. List the various research tools you used to locate relevant materials (journal databases, catalogs, Web sites etc), and some key resources that you identified using those tools. Write a sentence for each of the resources indicating what they added to your project.

3. Reflect on your experience, noting the successes, difficulties, and surprises you encountered. (2 – 3 paragraphs)

Librarian Assistance

Research Planning:

Librarian: [Signature]

Date: 4/21/11

Research Review:

Librarian: [Signature]

Date: 6/17/11

Rev. 6/16/2011
I. Research Topic

This past quarter, I was enrolled in English 590.08H: American Colonial Literature, taught by Professor Elizabeth Renker in the Department of English. Professor Renker laid out three goals for this class. First, it was a methods class that introduced us to conducting archival research. Second, it focused on American literature from 1865-1910, conventionally characterized as the era of “American realism.” Third, it trained us in the practical dimensions of writing an original research paper. This paper was to be 15-20 pages on a topic of our choice relating to the historical literary period of American Realism.

Though we were not required to have a fixed topic for our papers until midway through the quarter, I was immediately intrigued by the third day of class by a specific subject. We were assigned reading from an anthology by Paula Bennett of poet Sarah Piatt’s work, including the poem for which the anthology is titled, “The Palace-Burner (A Picture in a Newspaper).” Though I was not quite certain as to the exact meaning of the poem, I knew from my French history class the previous quarter that it alluded to the Paris Commune. What I was puzzled by, however, was the reference to women incendiaries. In my studies of the Commune previously, I had never come across these female incendiaries, these “pétroleuses,” much less poems about them. I therefore decided to do some digging to see if I could find any more poems about this topic. Unfortunately, I found nothing after a brief Google search.

The following Tuesday, April 12, Professor Renker had scheduled our class to meet in Thompson Library at the Rare Book Room to listen to Professor Geoff Smith and Professor Anne Fields. Professor Smith introduced us to the world of archives and Professor Fields gave the class a brief overview of some research databases that could prove useful to us. One such database that grabbed my attention was American Periodicals Series Online. I knew that I might be able to plug in some search terms about the pétroleuse when I returned home. Sure enough, that very evening, I stumbled across three poems and a short story with the pétroleuse as the central speaker.

I decided to consult with Professor Renker to discuss the possibility of a project on the American literary reaction to the pétroleuse, and met with her Friday, April 15. She was very enthusiastic about the idea, mentioning that she believed that no one had written about this topic. As a French and English Honors double major, both she and I felt that this idea would be a perfect niche for my scholarly interests and studies.

II. Information Needs

During this consultation, Professor Renker and I decided that my next steps were to 1) contact several librarians about this topic and see what input they had, 2) do further searches for key about the pétroleuse in American Periodicals Series Online and other historical/newspaper databases, and 3) do a library catalog search for possible archived periodicals about this topic.
Professor Renker then helped to get me in contact with Professor Fields, Professor David Lincove, and Assistant Curator Lisa Iacobellis.

I first met with Professor David Lincove on Wednesday, April 20 to discuss my research needs and possible resources about the Paris Commune, the pépéroleuses of the Commune, and American reactions to it. He was pleased that I had already looked through the *American Periodicals Series Online* database and then introduced me to the *America's Historical Newspapers* database. He also helped show me how to do specific subject searches through the OSU Libraries' online catalog regarding my topic. However, Professor Lincove was not certain if I would be able to find much information.

The next morning, Thursday, April 21, I met with Professor Anne Fields to discuss my research project from a literary point of view. She, too, was not familiar of any research done in this field, but was very excited to help me find resources. I told her of my discussion with Professor Lincove and my findings, both from *American Periodicals Series Online* over the past week and the *America’s Historical Newspapers* database from the night before. I had already discovered a few more poems, as well as newspaper articles about famous pépéroleuses’ exile to America. She and I were both fascinated. She also helped me to look at libraries’ stores from across the country through WorldCat Local. Although I felt it would take too long to order the books from other states, I made sure to take note of this resource for future reference.

The following day, Friday, April 22, I met with Assistant Curator Lisa Iacobellis, with whom I had been corresponding throughout the week about my project, in the Rare Book Room. She had pulled the 1871 and 1872 issues of *The Capital*, a newspaper based in Washington, DC edited by a relative of Sarah Piatt, as well as several issues of *Every Saturday*, a weekly periodical based in Boston. We poured over the pages and were amazed at the sheer amount of political cartoons found within. I was also thrilled to be able to look through one of the only surviving editions of *The Capital*, which was shipped specially from the Piatt Castles to Ohio State.

Each of these sessions supplied me with numerous resources to delve further into my research.

**III. Resource Tools**

As aforementioned, I looked at various online and archival resources given to me by Professor Renker and the three librarians.

In looking on *American Periodicals Series Online* over numerous weeks, I did several advanced searches to find literary works about the Paris Commune. Initially, I did a key word search for the words “petroleuse,” “Paris,” and “Commune.” I then constrained the search by date and only looked at responses from January 1871 to December of 1900. Next, I decided only to look at poems, which greatly refined the number of hits I received. I eventually expanded it to articles and features when I realized that short stories also appeared with the figure of the petroleuse as the protagonist. I then did key word searches in this database for “fire,” “furies,” “Seine,” “France,” “women,” “woman,” “incendiary,” and “incendiaries,” “revolution,” and “revolutionaries” in almost every combination possible with the same date constraints listed
above. Professor Fields’ direction to this database helped me enormously. Indeed, without her guiding me there, I may not have further pursued my project.

Next, I looked at America’s Historical Newspapers using the same key terms. Instead of dates, the database confines the search by period. I therefore searched under the “Gilded Age” period as that time housed the years I was examining. Here, I also found several more poems, as well as articles about the pétroleuse. I found it exceedingly interesting that poems would appear in multiple newspapers, and learned from Professor Renker that newspapers during this time often used poems as fillers. Famous ones, then, would be cycled throughout various periodicals during the time. Without Professor Lincove’s guidance to this database, I would not have understood just how widespread America’s phenomenon with the pétroleuse was. Moreover, three of the four short stories I found were from this database, which only helped further my case.

The two newspapers that Assistant Curator Iacobellis pulled up for me were instrumental in my research for two major reasons. First, Professor Renker’s class was focused on archival research, and through Assistant Curator Iacobellis I was finally able to do the same digging into the physical (not just electronic) archives that my classmates were doing. Second, looking at the pages of articles, instead of merely online articles, allowed me to see what else was being printed on the page. For example, on the first page of The Capital from the first 1871 issue, there was not only a poem about the Commune, there were two poems (one by Piatt), as well as a newspaper article about the Commune. Being able to contextualize my findings only added to a better understanding of what American writers were saying and what American readers were reading about the Commune. Furthermore, Every Saturday was full of political cartoons that, although I did not use in this paper, I will hopefully be able to use when I expand this paper into my thesis. In fact, there was so much information in both of these sources that I came back for six more hours in the Rare Book Room just to look at all of them.

Finally, Professor Renker helped direct me to secondary research about the Paris Commune through the Libraries’ catalog, as did Professors Lincove and Fields. I was able to find invaluable books, such as by Robert Tombs and Philip Katz, to contextualize my research for myself, for my paper, and for my readers.

IV. Reflections

On the first day of class, Professor Renker told us that archival work was all about patience. And while I did not initially believe her, she was certainly correct. Patience proved to be one of the most difficult challenges to my archival research in the sense that I never knew exactly what I was looking for, and I could only search through database upon database, newspaper upon newspaper, and book upon book to find something relating to my topic. However, I know for certain that without the generous help of the various librarians, I would not have been able to find nearly as much information as I did. With their guidance, I learned how to call up books from the vault and to cautiously analyze them with care. When I was overwhelmed with materials and evidence, outside input, both from them and from Professor Renker, helped to direct me and remind me how important patience was in a process like archival research. Their aid was truly invaluable in keeping me, and subsequently my project, going forward.
The process of archival work, with the help of the librarians, taught me how to actually do true research (though I prefer the term “detective work”). I learned how to literally start from nothing—no secondary criticism on my topic, no pre-arranged poems by other authors—and to slowly compile a compelling argument. I did so with the help of the library faculty, something I take to be the most rewarding part of this entire experience. In learning to collaborate with and reach out to other scholars, I gained a singularly valuable insight into the research experience at Ohio State: scholars are meant to work with and learn from one another through the research process. I had always been taught (or at least no one contradicted this mindset) that scholarly writing was done alone, at home, in front of a computer. Working with the librarians has revealed the possibility of what can happen when working with others: I can take an idea, one I did not think would ever amount to anything, and turn it into my own original research.

Overall, I am truly excited about the work I have done in collaboration with the librarians and Professor Renker, and am elated to have the opportunity to turn such work into an honors thesis next year. I am grateful for the time and efforts of Assistant Curator Iacobellis and Professors Field, Lincoke, and Renker, and am proud to present this research paper to you for submission for the Ohio State Libraries’ Undergraduate Research Prize.