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Panel: Collaboration and Digital Projects

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Panel: Collaboration and Digital Projects

Session Type

Event

Abstract

In 2011 the University of Iowa Libraries began crowdsourcing the digital transcription of its manuscript archives. Four years and over 50,000 transcribed pages later, that project, known as DIY History, has garnered considerable internet attention via Buzzfeed, Twitter, Tumblr, and the NBC News blog. At the same time, it has been threaded into undergraduate classrooms at Iowa as a means of introducing students to primary source research, information literacy, and multimodal design.

Matt Gilchrist and Tom Keegan will discuss how faculty members and librarians collaborated on an assignment that emphasizes course objectives while strengthening student connections to the UI Libraries. That assignment, Archives Alive!, resulted from a partnership between DIY History and Iowa Digital Engagement and Learning (IDEAL). Students are asked to transcribe a document, compose a brief rhetorical analysis and historical contextualization of it, and create screencasts of their work. By making use of narrative primary source material like letters and diary entries, Archives Alive! helps students see themselves in research material. Building an assignment around the crowdsourcing model provides students with two attitudes important to project success: a sense of ownership (through crowdsourced participation) and a sense of purpose (through a dynamic assignment with a real audience). The success of the project rests upon a flexible, design-centered approach to program structure that fosters an audience for library collections while asking students to create work with the public in mind.

Paul Soderdahl will discuss the administrative considerations and costs in moving digital library operations from project to program. The UI Libraries have made deliberate efforts over the past several years to achieve this transition – in particular a reorganization of Digital Library Services into Digital Research and Publishing. He will also discuss the relative leap of faith and return on investment associated with large-scale digitization projects and audience engagement.

The James Merrill Digital Archive (JMDSA) is comprised of digitized Ouija board session transcripts, poem drafts, and other materials toward Merrill's epic narrative poem, "The Book of Ephraim," part of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Divine Comedies*. The JMDSA is the result of expertise and input of many collaborators across the Washington University campus. Shannon Davis and Joel Minor will speak on various aspects of the ongoing project, including successful cross-campus collaboration, employing student workers to perform high-level encoding and exhibit curation, and how Omeka was used to develop the digital archive.

Location

KIPJ Theatre

The James Merrill Digital Archive: Channeling the Collaborative
Spirit(s)

Presented at the 2015 Digital Initiatives Symposium
April 29, 2015
University of San Diego

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Louis

Abstract

The James Merrill Digital Archive (JMDA) is comprised of digitized Ouija board session transcripts, poem drafts, and other materials toward Merrill's epic narrative poem, "The Book of Ephraim," part of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Divine Comedies*. The JMDA is the result of expertise and input of many collaborators across the Washington University campus. Shannon Davis and Joel Minor will speak on various aspects of the ongoing project, including successful cross-campus collaboration, employing student workers to perform high-level encoding and exhibit curation, and how Omeka was used to develop the digital archive.

James Merrill – The Poet

Hello, and welcome to our presentation, “The James Merrill Digital Archive: Channeling the Collaborative Spirit(s).” I am Joel Minor, Curator of the Modern Literature Collection at Washington University in St. Louis. I will be starting our talk with some background on the materials we are using on the website and the person who created them.

James Ingram Merrill was born in 1926. He was the son of Charles Merrill, co-founder of Merrill Lynch, and Helen Plummer, a former professional reporter and southern debutante. James Merrill devoted his life mainly to writing. He published 16 books of poetry, two novels, three plays, a memoir and a book of essays.

Merrill is considered one of the most significant poets of the latter half of the 20th century. He was known a master of lyric, formalist poetry early in his career, and then of epic narrative poetry, which is the phase the James Merrill Digital Archive (JMDSA) represents. He was (and still is) praised for his stylish elegance, moral sensibilities, wit, wordplay and transformation of autobiographical moments into deep and complex meditations. He was not a “confessional” poet, however, like some other well-known poets of his generation, such as Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath. Common themes in his poetry include: memory, nostalgia, loss, translation, limitations and revisions of self, and the interplay of autobiography and archetype.

He was consistently recognized by peers and critics with prestigious awards. He won the Pulitzer Prize, National Book Critics Circle Award, National Book Award (twice), and the Bollingen Prize, and was a Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

James Merrill Papers

The images here are from the James Merrill Papers: Jimmy at about 4 years old (circa 1930), and his bronzed death mask (1995). I chose these two to represent the James Merrill Papers as what we call a “cradle-to-grave” archive.

How did Washington University end up with all this? In 1964 Merrill started sending us manuscripts after his good friend and fellow poet Mona Van Duyn requested them. The Washington University Libraries’ Special Collections were building the Modern Literature Collection at the time and Merrill was one of the first 15 poets we sought for the collection, which now houses primary and secondary materials from over 175 authors, presses and journals.

Merrill had no other connection to Washington University except his close friendship with Van Duyn and her husband Jarvis Thurston, a Washington University English professor. Merrill said in an interview years later that he agreed to send them to Washington University because we asked so nicely (by contrast, the Beinecke Library at Yale sent him a form letter, which we have in his archive). He continued donating to us until his death in 1995. His mother donated more after that.

The collection has grown to 175 linear feet—310 boxes, or over 35,000 items—and we continue to acquire correspondence and other materials from his many friends and acquaintances. Merrill also left us his literary copyright and an endowment for building his and other literary manuscript collections.

The James Merrill Papers is perhaps our most accessed collection, bringing in an average of 1-2 research requests per month. Earlier this year the first biography of Merrill was published by Knopf—the result of years of research within the collection by author and Yale professor, Langdon Hammer.

The Ouija Board and “The Book of Ephraim”

Merrill and partner David Jackson (pictured here—Jackson on the left) started using the Ouija board in the early 1950s—the start of their relationship coincided with their mutual interest in it. Merrill’s first poem to reference the Ouija board was “Voices from the Other World,” published in 1959 in *The Country of a Thousand Years of Peace*, Merrill’s third volume of poems.

But it wasn’t until seventeen years later that he revealed the extent of their Ouija board séances with “The Book of Ephraim,” an epic which comprises over half of the book, *Divine Comedies*, published in 1976 (and upon which the JMDA is centered). “Book of Ephraim” had many false starts as a novel, but after losing the manuscript more than once he turned it into a twenty-six part narrative poem—one part for each letter of the alphabet, reflecting the layout of the Ouija board itself.

The narrative is basically about Merrill and Jackson being guided via the Ouija board by a 1st century Greek Jew named Ephraim. Presented as a series of conversations spanning 20 years, where the dead mingle with the living, we are introduced to an afterlife world where spirits act as patrons for the living, who in turn serve as the spirits’ representatives on earth. In one section of the poem, Merrill expresses his own doubts about these revelations and in turn his own sanity, but he commits himself to the concept, with episodes of personal history and personal flaws uncovering hidden, archetypal stories for the reader.

With *Divine Comedies & “Book of Ephraim”* his poetry moved from formalism to a more a conversational style (i.e. lyric to narrative), and so is considered his breakthrough into a new artistic phase. The book won the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1977.

Two more Ouija books soon followed (first *Mirabell: Books of Number* which earned him his second National Book Award; then *Scripts for the Pageant*), introducing many more characters, with each book based upon an aspect of the Ouija board and going higher up into the spirit world. All three combined into the book, *The Changing Light at Sandover*, published in 1982, which included a new coda and totals 560 pages. It won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Poetry.

So these books were taken seriously by critics and many readers, perhaps partly because Merrill was following long tradition of renowned poets and writers communing with spirits or muses, or visiting the afterlife or Other World, to uncover mysteries of the universe and existence (e.g., Homer, Dante, Milton, John Keats, E.A. Poe, Victor Hugo and W.B. Yeats).

The James Merrill Digital Archive got started because of the popularity of the Ouija board manuscripts (which include séance transcripts, extensive notes, poetry drafts, as well as a homemade Ouija board itself, seen here). Scholars and students want to look at these materials quite regularly. Washington University English Professor Joe Loewenstein teaches “Book of Ephraim” every year even though his area of scholarship is early modernism. He brings in his students to see the manuscripts so he knows of their potential for more deeply understanding the poem.

Dr. Loewenstein is also a co-director of the Humanities Digital Workshop (HDW), which is a partnership between faculty, students and staff on digital humanities projects. Dr. Loewenstein started the project as part of HDW’s annual summer workshop in 2013 and he continues to serve as its main faculty advisor and advocate.

Now Shannon Davis will talk about the project itself.

Development of the Digital Archive

The JMDA has been a collaborative project since its inception, requiring the work of faculty, staff, and students. Along with Dr. Loewenstein, staff from the HDW, Doug Knox and Steve Pentecost contributed to the planning and development of the project, as did Shannon Davis of the University Libraries' Scholarly Publishing unit, and Joel Minor, of the Libraries' Department of Special Collections. HDW and Scholarly Publishing have worked together closely for many years, as a natural partnership between the two developed. HDW focuses on fostering digital humanities, faculty driven projects, and Scholarly Publishing develops digital collections and digital publishing projects in collaboration with Library units and other campus partners. With their two separated, but related concentrations, HDW typically begins development work on digital humanities projects with faculty while the Library plays a sustainability and preservation role once projects are past their initial stages. This process has worked well in delivering the Merrill Archive and also projects such as the Bizet Catalogue (<http://digital.wustl.edu/bizet/>) and the F.B. Eyes Digital Archive (<http://digital.wustl.edu/fbeyes/>).

HDW and Scholarly Publishing have also worked together in training and overseeing students as part of HDW's annual, six-week summer workshop, where significant progress is made on faculty projects with the help of undergraduate and graduate students. Work on the JMDA first began during this workshop in 2013. During the workshop, students are supervised by HDW and Scholarly Publishing staff, receiving training in many areas of digital humanities, including data entry, XML encoding, data visualization, and research. Students often come with digital humanities knowledge of their own, including programming or analytical skills. Students' previous experience, combined with their workshop training and close collaboration with staff allow their skills to be leveraged to develop forward thinking projects. Moreover, the progress that has been made on the JMDA would not have been possible without the help of student workers, as staff and faculty are typically juggling multiple commitments. The JMDA is still currently under development, with the project team continually assessing new material and new functionality to be added to the digital exhibit.

Project Team

Faculty, staff, and students all bring unique perspectives and expertise to the development of the JMDA. Professor Loewenstein provides direction for the project, helps the team set priorities, works with James Merrill's literary executors to ensure the project honors their intentions for his estate, and helps the team recruit undergraduate and graduate student workers. Student workers mainly focus on transcription, OCR, and encoding work, and have also experimented with Juxta collation software to compare drafts of Merrill's writing. Staff working on the digital archive supervise and train students, organize and provide access to archival materials, create TEI XML document models, and oversee the development and design of the Omeka digital exhibit. With all of these groups contributing to the project, it remains an extremely collaborative effort, sometimes requiring more student time to execute the work, other times more staff time in planning and building workflows. Faculty, staff, and students continue to meet regularly to discuss progress, generate new ideas, and agree on best practices.

When initial work on the JMDA started in summer 2013, there was one dedicated undergraduate student, Samantha Rogers, and one graduate student, Annelise Duerden. The students were either getting their degree in literature or had a research interest in Merrill's work, which gave them a personal connection to the material. Rogers and Duerden scanned hundreds of pages of Merrill's writings using an Atiz Pro overhead book scanner. The RAW images were

then processed into preservation quality TIFFs and later cropped and processed into JPEGs for display in the digital archive. In tandem with scanning, the students created metadata for the digitized images based on the Manuscript unit's finding aid for the James Merrill Papers archival collection. The process for creating metadata records began with an InfoPath form accessible on the Libraries' SharePoint driven Intranet. The WYSIWYG form contained fields based on the MODS XML standard. Students entered metadata into the form, which Scholarly Publishing staff then transformed to a FOXML XML document wrapping both Dublin Core and MODS XML. After using an XSLT stylesheet to perform this transformation, the FOXML record was ingested in the Libraries' Fedora repository for preservation. Staff in Scholarly Publishing created an Omeka exhibit for the project and trained students to create Omeka items using the Omeka Fedora Connector plug-in. The plug-in allows Omeka records to be populated with metadata from an existing Fedora digital object. Once the metadata record was complete, students uploaded the associated images and arranged items into exhibit sections.

The project team agreed on initial sections to provide structure for the exhibit and to organize content in a way that is useful for researchers. The exhibit sections include The Book of Ephraim, Ouija Transcripts, and Merrill in Process. The Book of Ephraim focuses on Merrill's first epic poem of the same name, which was part of his Pulitzer Prize winning book, *Divine Comedies*. This section contains manuscripts, notes, and other material towards The Book of Ephraim. The Ouija Transcripts section chronicles the Ouija board sessions in which Merrill and his partner, David Jackson, conversed with the spirit Ephraim. Merrill wrote Ephraim's communications by hand and later typed these transcripts for use in his poetry. There are over 500 leaves of Ouija transcripts, all available in the JMDA. The last section contains notes, manuscripts, and typescripts documenting development of each section of the poem. This was initially curated by a graduate student, Annelise Duerden, and remains a work in progress. Once the exhibit started to take shape, it was clear just how much content was to be delivered in the digital archive. Because of the number of items and the unique nature of the material, the Omeka exhibit was modified to ensure navigation was clear and users could view materials easily. Customization included modifying an Omeka theme to present a unique design and creating navigation for the Book of Ephraim and Ouija Transcripts sections. Scholarly Publishing staff created an accordion style JavaScript menu to better navigate these two sections, which are organized by folder number and present the entirety of the archival collection. After selecting a text only layout for an Omeka exhibit page, staff then used HTML and JavaScript to code the custom menu. The accordion menu shows each folder number, which, when clicked, expands to show the metadata for that folder. Clicking on the folder number within the metadata section takes users to a page turning application that shows the entire folder of images. The Internet Archive's BookReader plug-in for Omeka was used for this purpose. Development of the digital exhibit, including scanning and metadata creation was the major work on the JMDA for the first year.

In 2014, work continued on the JMDA during the HDW's summer workshop with two new graduate students in the English department, Heidi Lim and Claire Class. The students began work on transcribing and encoding Merrill's manuscripts. The project team saw this as the next logical step, to add search functionality to the digital archive. To achieve this, staff in Scholarly Publishing created a TEI XML document model that students could use in encoding the first section, Section A, of The Book of Ephraim. With a baseline document model, the students used their knowledge of the subject matter, independent study of the TEI guidelines, and input from HDW and Scholarly Publishing staff to inform how they would proceed with

encoding Merrill's poetry drafts and annotations. The encoding process was very involved and tedious because of Merrill's writing and revision style. One line of a typeset poem with handwritten annotations quickly became twenty lines of encoded XML. Encoding had to include references to each medium Merrill used to make notes on his manuscripts, which often included some combination of pen, pencil, and multiple colors of markers. Merrill also had various methods of adding or deleting text, at some times striking out text, overwriting letters, or writing vertical notes in the margins. Because of all the variations in writing and annotation, there were many considerations in how the material would be encoded in TEI. It was also important to set standards that others could follow in marking up this material in the future. To this end, Lim and Class created a set of TEI encoding guidelines, which was their major contribution to the project that summer. The students also experimented with collation software to display two manuscript drafts side by side to see the variations in Merrill's work.

To keep momentum going on the project, an undergraduate student, Katie Engsberg, was hired to continue work on JMDA in fall 2014. Using the established encoding guidelines, she was able to complete the markup of Section A, including transcription of Merrill's handwritten notes. In the spring 2015 semester, Lim resumed work on the project and began supervising another undergraduate, Derek Schwartz. The two are reviewing images on the website to ensure they are of the highest quality for legibility and making progress towards a more sophisticated image viewer, created by staff in the HDW. Development of the new image viewer is nearly complete, with a magnifying feature and also a zoning feature, which allows users to roll over the page image and see a highlighted transcript of the text.

JMDA: Next Steps

Because of the volume of material in the collection and the complexity of the material, work on the JMDA will be ongoing for some time, with faculty, staff, and students continuing to lend their skills and expertise. The project team has compiled a wish list of features they would like to see developed for the website and TEI encoding of The Book of Ephraim sections continues. This collaboration has been a great learning experience for all involved and reinforced how useful talented students can be in delivering quality digital projects. By leveraging students' technical skills and topical knowledge, and combining it with staff and faculty expertise, we have been able to create a robust teaching and learning resource