Poetry in the Code: Processing J. M. Coetzee’s Born Digital Materials

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Julia Alvarez  
Russell Banks  
Christine Brooke-Rose  
Billy Collins  
Gabriel García Márquez  
Kazuo Ishiguro  
Denis Johnson  
Michael Joyce  
David Lipsky  
Norman Mailer  
David Mamet  
Peter Matthiessen  
Ian McEwan  
Terrence McNally  
McSweeney’s  
Michael Ondaatje  
Iain Sinclair  
Warren Skaaren  
Arnold Wesker  
Geoffrey Wolff
2016 - 2017
3500+ computer disks
90% recovery rate

Disk types

- 3.5-inch floppy
- 5.25-inch floppy
- CD/CD-R/DVD
- Zip disk
- 8-inch floppy
- 3-inch (Amstrad CPC)
- Computer cassette
- Hard drive
- Data cartridge
- SuperDisk
- USB drive
- Computer reel
- Media card
J.M. Coetzee

- ca. 1984 - 2011

- Extent and media types:
  - 96 3.5-inch floppy disks
  - 75 5.25-inch floppy disks
  - 17k+ e-mails
  - 1 compact disc
  - 1 9-track computer reel

- Drafts, notes, correspondence, teaching materials, interviews

Photograph by Marsha Miller, 2010

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The computer poetry of J. M. Coetzee's early programming career

JUNE 19, 2017 BY REBECCA ZOACH

Writer J. M. Coetzee's early poetry is almost undecipherable. That's because it was written in computer code.

Coetzee's global reputation rests on his literary output, for which he received a Nobel Prize in 2003. Before he embarked on a career as a scholar and writer, the South African-born writer was a computer programmer in the early years of the industry's development (1962-1965). I believe that this experience, while short, was vital for the development of Coetzee's writerly project. While visiting the Ransom Center on a research fellowship, I examined Coetzee's papers, which offer tantalizing clues about his neglected "other career."
First Steps...
Photographing media
Data recovery
Computing history

1960s

ca. 1984 - ca. 1999
- IBM PC
- MS-DOS
- 5.25 in. floppy disks
- WordStar 3.0
- Word 5.0

ca. 1996 -
- 3.5 in. floppy disks

ca. 1998 -
- Windows OS

ca. 1990 - ca. 1999
- Bondwell 286
ACQUIRING BORN-DIGITAL RECORDS:
A GUIDE FOR INTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS

APPRAISAL & SELECTION

Careful appraisal and selection of electronic files prior to acquisition ensures that acquisitions of born-digital material align with the Center’s collecting scope and prevents staff from overlooking valuable digital content.

Appraisal of electronic files should be done in consultation with the Ransom Center’s Digital Archivist to ensure that the files are not altered or damaged in the process. For appraising or analyzing electronic files, a variety of tools (FTK Imager, AccessData FTK, TreeSize, BitCurator) are available. The Center has file viewing software (Quick View Plus, XnView) with the capability of identifying, analyzing, and accessing a wide variety of obsolete file formats. The Born-Digital/Forensics Lab (5.204A) houses disk drives for accessing obsolete media and write-blockers to prevent the alteration of file contents and metadata when viewing data on original media. See below for a list of media types accessible in-house. Consult the Digital Archivist regarding the use of these tools and applications. For more detailed information about the hardware and software available in the Born-Digital/Forensics Lab, visit the Digital Collections Services wiki.

CREATOR INTERVIEW

It is important to gather information on a creator’s born-digital materials and digital work habits before and during the acquisition process. These details will assist curators with assessing research value, the digital archivist during data retrieval, the processing archivist(s) with description in the finding aid, and researchers to understand the creator’s computing history and digital writing habits. Keep in mind that gathering details about digital files that were destroyed can assist in explaining gaps in collections.

If the creator is deceased, consult with a close family member or friend with knowledge of the creator’s computing history and habits.

We are gathering this information on the key creative figures in the Center’s collections, not necessarily from all the individuals we are acquiring materials from. For example, if we acquire e-mail from an individual who corresponded with a writer or artist whose papers reside here, the interview would not be necessary.

Below are some key questions to ask creators:

- Provide an overview of your computing history and habits and how they have changed over time.
- What computer models, operating systems, and software do you use now and have you used in the past to create files?
- Can you provide a summary of the subject matter, file types, and date ranges of your digital files?
- How are your digital files, including e-mail, organized and named?
- Are personal files separated from business files?
- Where are your digital files stored (hard drive, network server, cloud storage, mobile devices, computer disks, etc.)?
- What e-mail programs and e-mail service providers have you used in your career? Do you have multiple accounts?
- Do you have any webpages or blogs; social networking accounts (Facebook, Tumblr, Twitter, etc.); photo/video sharing sites (Flickr, Instagram, YouTube, etc.); document sharing sites (Slideshare, Box, Google Docs, Dropbox, etc.)?
- Are any electronic files duplicated in print form?
- Do you regularly delete certain files or types of files?
- Could we take (or get) a photograph of your current workspace?

TRANSFERRING FILES

Consult the Digital Archivist to develop a plan for transferring files. When transferring electronic files
Challenges...
J. M. Coetzee  
Department of English  
Johns Hopkins University  
Baltimore, MD 21218  
Tel. (301) 338-7646

REVIEW


The recent bid by the South African government to exchange Nelson Mandela for two Soviet dissidents is only one in a long series of efforts. It has made to divide under itself of its most famous political prisoner. As long as he remained in jail, Mandela was offered freedom (or a sort) if he would agree to lead a retired life in the Transkei homeland. He refused. In 1985 he offered release on the sole condition that he would distance himself from the advocacy of force. "Only free men can negotiate," he responded. "Prisoners cannot enter into contracts." (Benson, p. 237) He and the imprisoned senior leadership of the African National Congress (ANC) thus seem to be content, for the time being, to let Pretoria stew in its own juice.

In 1964, in his forty-sixth year, Nelson Mandela, with seven ANC colleagues, was sentenced to life imprisonment after being tried on charges of recruiting and training personnel to conduct revolutionary warfare, and of complicity in aid foreign powers to invade the Republic. He did not attempt to deny the charges, the first of which was in essence true. He had set up an underground movement. Umkhonto we Sizwe ("The Spear of the Nation"), with the aim of carrying out sabotage attacks, he had toured Africa, raising support for the ANC, he had himself undergone guerrilla training.
Dear Nick,

We are into July already. Who is responsible for making arrangements for Dorothy and myself to travel to Harare?

Best regards,

John Gledhill

From: Eve Manco <eve@email.com>

Date: Tue, 7 Jul 2009 13:18:47 -1200

Dear John,

Comair will handle your and Dorothy's travel to Harare. I have a
head, and the OA to the ROD of Comair (511 1 0024) who will manage
suggesting you might fly to Harare on 28 July (we are all gathered
reception at the British High Commission this evening) and back.

I will book you into the Holiday Apartments for the delay; we have only
just had confirmation that they can fly out from here as described.

Best wishes,

Eve Manco

From: Eve Manco <eve@email.com>

Date: Wed, 8 Jul 2009 14:56:37 -1200

Dear John,

The flights are offered by Comair, "subject to availability". They
provide the best where they can. I will get back to you after I have,
checked schedules and confirmed with Del (who is in the USA that
date and times are OK). In the meantime, could I check with you:

(1) whether we are being offered business class travel,

(2) whether we are being offered business class travel, and

(3) whether we are being offered business class travel, and whether
we are being offered business class travel, and whether

Best regards,

Eve Manco

From: HazelAtlhaton <hazel@comair.co.zw>

Date: Fri, 3 Jul 2009 15:06:57 +0200

Dear Professor Gledhill,

Salaam.

Best regards,

Hazel
Her living arrangements with Helga don’t either seem to be working out. I don’t know the full story, but there seems to be a lot of friction and unhappiness.

Dorothy and I leave for Adelaide in Australia at the beginning of February. I will be away 6 weeks, Dorothy somewhat longer. All good wishes for the New Year.

Love,
John
5 January 2001

Dear John,

I don’t know whether any of these messages are getting through to you. Today is the day when you said you were aiming to get back to Paris.

You may remember that you passed on a message from Sills Bank that there was a message online for you. I haven’t been able to access it yet, since Sills works only with Internet Explorer, and everything here at UCT is based on Netscape Navigator. Things are not going well with Sills. I think she is drinking too much, and then getting into states. Catherine Glenn, who has been seeing her, called me last night to voice her concern. I’m hoping to see Sills tomorrow, and will let you know.

Love,
John
5 Jan 2001 19:24:47 +0000

Dear John,

I am in Paris at the moment – I will be leaving for Toulouse tomorrow (Saturday) and then getting back to London on Tuesday (9th). The car made it through all the travel with nearly flying colour – the exhaust gasket blew at the top of a Spanish mountain pass between St Sebastian and the road down to Toulouse. No rush, the police let me have the right side of the road and the only damage was a slight dent in the back bumper. To
J. M. Coetzee:
An Inventory of His Papers at the Harry Ransom Center

Creator:
Coetzee, J. M., 1940-

Title:
J. M. Coetzee Papers

Dates:
1864-2012 (bulk 1960-2012)

Extent:
140 document boxes (58.53 linear feet), 13 oversize boxes (ossb), 1 galley file (gf), 131 computer disks

Abstract:
The papers document all of Coetzee's major writings and include notes, typescripts, background research materials and publicity. Correspondence and materials documenting personal and family history are also present.

Call Number:
Manuscript Collection MS-20042

Language:
English, Afrikaans, Dutch, German, French, Spanish, Portuguese

Access:
Open for research. Researchers must create an online Research Account and agree to the Materials Use Policy before using archival materials.

Use Policies:
Ransom Center collections may contain material with sensitive or confidential information that is protected under federal or state right to privacy laws and regulations. Researchers are advised that the disclosure of certain information pertaining to identifiable living individuals represented in the collections without the consent of those individuals may have legal ramifications (e.g., a cause of action under common law for invasion of privacy), even if facts concerning an individual's private life are published that would be deemed highly offensive to a reasonable person), for whom the Ransom Center and The University of Texas at Austin assume no responsibility.

Restrictions on Use:
Certain restrictions apply to the use of electronic files. Researchers must agree to the Materials Use Policy for Electronic Files before accessing them. Original computer disks and forensic disk images are restricted. Copying electronic files, including screenshots and printouts, is not permitted. To request access to electronic files, please email Reference. Authorization for publication is given on behalf of the University of Texas as the owner of the collection and is not intended to include or imply permission of the copyright holder which must be obtained by the researcher. For more information please see the Ransom Centers' Open Access and Use Policies.

http://norman.hrc.utexas.edu/fasearch/findingAid.cfm?eadid=00717
Lessons Learned...

**File-level description is NOT sustainable OR necessary for access.**

WHAT IS NECESSARY?

- MPLP/programmatic methods
- Transparency in capture and preservation
- Context on the creation process and custodial history
Michael Ondaatje:
An Inventory of His Papers at the Harry Ransom Center

Example of a more streamlined method for describing born-digital collection materials. Ransom Center finding aids. Text is included only for sections that apply to born-digital content.

Dates: 1991-2005
Extent: 33 GB (500 electronic files)

Abstract: ...and electronic files

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Processed by: Electronic files processed by Daniela Lozano and Abby Adams in 2018.

Scope and Content:
The majority of Ondaatje's electronic files, circa 1991 to 2005, relate to The English Patient and Anita's Ghost but Divided, Handwriting, In the Skin of a Lion, and The Conversations. Walter Murch and the Art of Editing Film are represented, as well, included are notes and drafts, research files, reviews, speaking engagements, and e-mail correspondence. Electronic files also contain correspondence and notes related to Ondaatje's former position as writer-in-residence at Columbia Medical School and his support of Sri Lankan refugees.

Electronic files document the final steps in Ondaatje's writing process, which involved a typist who transcribed audio recordings of Ondaatje's words and saved the documents onto 3.5-inch floppy disks that were sent back to the writer for review.

File inventory: https://utexas.box.com/s/2013x9817584/htpxx53n818tm38obf

Media photographs: https://utexas.box.com/s/7hr64y6du3y6ux6i4vswc2xny

Separated Material:
Digital media were transferred to the Personal Effects collection at the Ransom Center.

Organization and Arrangement:
Original order was retained for electronic files in original file formats. Original order may not always have been preserved for derivatives due to the limitations of certain file format conversion tools. A full directory listing of the master copy is provided alongside the files for each disk. Please see the attached file directory list for a complete inventory for all available files.

Processing Information:
Ondaatje's electronic files were received on 41 3.5-inch floppy disks, 11 Zip disks, 2 CD-ROMs, and 1 SuperDisk. The majority of the word processing files were created by Ondaatje's typist in Microsoft Word for MS-DOS. Digital images were saved in TIFF and JPEG formats on Zip disks and e-mail correspondence, format unknown, on 3.5-inch floppy disks, both using an Apple (Macintosh) computer with an HFS file system, type and age unknown.

Raw disk images from the floppy disks were created in July 2017 with a KryoFlux floppy controller and host software. E01 disk images from the Zip disks and SuperDisk were created with a Tableau TD3 Forensic Duplicator. ISO disk images from the CD-ROMs were created with a Windows instance of FTK Imager. Digital media are also photographed and Images can be accessed online or on-site in the reading room. Files were extracted from all disk images with FTK Imager. A file-level inventory, which includes file names, last modified dates, file formats, if known, and checksums, was.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collection Name</th>
<th>Collection number</th>
<th>File path</th>
<th>File name</th>
<th>Extent in bytes</th>
<th>Last modified dates</th>
<th>File format</th>
<th>Format version</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Access

Phase I
- On-site only
- Signed use policy
- Copying files not permitted
- Forensic disk images restricted
- HRC laptop
  - Read-only drive
  - Network connections disabled
  - Ports disabled
- Original formats, no derivatives

Phase II
- Public online access to:
  - Media photographs
  - DROID file inventory
- Online access to derivatives (restricted by IP address)
- ePADD
- Emulation as a Service (EaaS)
THANK YOU!

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rebecca.roach@kcl.ac.uk
“Ego-Media: The impact of new media on forms and practices of self-representation”
www.ego-media.org