

“The Oak Tree Grows”: Transcript

Welcome to The Oak Tree Grows: Feminist Succession and Sustainability in the Orlando Project. My name is Kathryn Holland, and I am joined by Susan Brown and Isobel Grundy, my colleagues on the project executive, who are also founding members of the Orlando Project as well.

Based primarily at two Canadian universities, the University of Alberta and the University of Guelph, the Orlando Project is one of the longest-running initiatives in Feminist DH, founded in 1995, and with its literary historical text base published from 2006 onward.

In this video, we will discuss highlights from its history and ongoing activities, with a focus on how succession and related changes in the executive team and our larger collaborative organization have enabled scholarly and technical continuity for the project itself.

I would argue that much of Orlando's resilience is due to the leadership team's attention to issues in transition from the outset, in the mid-1990s, with the project developing after the publication of *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English*.

With its training of student and postdoctoral cohorts who remain with the team for one to two academic years, or move into senior positions.

And with its ability to manage unexpected personnel and other changes. So my first question for the group is this. What are some of the highlights of Orlando's approach to collaboration?

Isobel Grundy

01:47

I think it was a key moment when the consultant whom we had commissioned to produce for our schemas, DTDs, we were calling them, document type analysis, pulled out.

That compelled the team of literary historical scholars to take possession ourselves of the schemas, to build them from scratch, with everybody discussing furiously

what we wanted to mark, and I think that although if we did it today, some things would be different.

But the schemas we constructed have stood up very well to uses around data which were not foreseen at the time.

Susan Brown

02:34

Yeah, and I think that one of the things that was quite a breakthrough for us was the fact that it really was a team-based approach to the research that involved the students, and especially the postdocs, alongside the co-investigators in actually figuring out what the methodology of the project would be, rather than really understanding it and having worked it out in advance. So the research methods developed very much in tandem with the technical approach. The technical approach wasn't baked in, neither were the research methods. They evolved out of a dialogue between the two.

And, I think one of the things that was really exciting about Orlando was we had this team of students, it feels like there were, like, 8 or 10 students in the early days, and they were so actively involved in the research process in ways that were not typical for research in the humanities at the time. Typical RA work would be, like, combing through microfilm, reels and trying to find related sources relevant to the research. Or doing a lot of photocopying, or getting books from the library, maybe preparing an index at the end, but they didn't tend to be involved in the writing process and the process of preparation for publication.

But because we were creating the digital materials themselves, they were researching and writing content, and then seeing it revised and incorporated into the tech space, in close collaboration with the more experienced researchers on the project. Likewise, the postdocs were absolutely essential to the development of the methodology of the project. And we all, together, students, postdocs, co-investigators, really worked out, with some false starts, how we were going to go about doing this. So it was fabulous training in writing for the students, because we were, like, sitting down and revising the text alongside them, and sort of helping them understand what it meant to create really good, crisp, clear scholarly writing.

Postdocs like Susan Fisher got sent off to TEI camp.

We had people like Jeanne Wood, who were members of the Feminist Companion team, so they were really trained in the research. Katherine Binhammer coming in, really fresh from, working on feminist scholarship in other contexts, so the sort of mix of people made it a really, I think, great context in which to sort of ferment this new approach.

Isobel Grundy

05:22

I think it was key for the students when we got into producing profiles of authors and also chunks of chronological background material.

Because nothing had a single author, people would work on it, check each other's work, so it led to students not only having errors or imperfections in their work pointed out by senior scholars, but catching those errors in the work of the senior scholars and pointing out how they ought to be improved.

That was important to students.

Kathryn Holland

05:55

Yeah, I would say, picking up on all of that, as someone who joined the project as an RA several years after the beginning of Orlando itself, I think about the importance of that regular and close collaboration between faculty and students that happened in a very specific space, which was the set of offices on the fourth floor of the Humanities Building, first at the U of A, and now in the THINC Lab at Guelph.

And there was so much, in addition to that, like hands-on, focused, in-depth collaboration on the research material itself. There was so much intellectual and pre-professional modeling and mentorship that really paved the way for junior members of the project to take on different roles over time.

And I would say that that, as someone who moved into more of a training and supervisory role, that changed, of course, during the pandemic, when we shifted to primarily virtual collaboration, but there are still really exciting, and meaningful opportunities to connect and to develop opportunities for transition in hands-on ways.

I think, too, the success of the project is also really due to its history of looking outward and demonstrating the varied uses of the text base as our flagship publication, in writing by team members and others further afield. So my next question is, how has Orlando's evolution over the years contributed to the reshaping of the study of women's writing, the field to which we belong.

Isobel Grundy

07:32

I think, partly this is the wedding of biographical detail to consideration of the writings, because at the time we began, literary biography was in very bad odor. Everybody felt that it was, assuming an unauthorized voice to talk about lives, and I think recent books of feminist literary criticism have commented on the fact that ignorance is damaging. The various incarnations of ideas of Jane Austen as a writer, which have varied according to understandings of her life, which I would regard as having improved from a damaging stereotype, and also the way that whole groups of women writers, because nothing was known about individuals, could be cast as a kind of undifferentiated mass, and that worked very much against noticing the individual strengths of the writing, and that things were not merely formula fiction, but were reworking formulas in creative ways.

Susan Brown

08:42

Yeah, and I think that we came out of the impact of second wave feminism on the academy. And so, in many ways, some of the early reviews, and I think our own thinking about the project, was very much influenced by popular mainstream feminist thinking. There was an early review, I think, that compared the project to

Judy Chicago's Dinner Party, right? Trying to bring forward women from history who had been overlooked and juxtapose them with each other and see what comes out of that kind of juxtaposition. There's a reference in another one about the project having made many rooms of one's own, right, with a reference to Virginia Woolf, whose Orlando gave the project its title after some debate. And I think that, in addition to that sense of sort of making space for and representing women writers in a way that rectified some of the omissions and silences.

Mainstream literary history, which was itself, sort of alongside biography, really being questioned as a mode that supported a certain kind of, canonization and, selective, very selective understanding of history.

The digital component was really important to the early reception of the project, because it stood out against a lot of primary text projects that were digitizing existing text. What we were doing was creating born-digital scholarship.

And using semantic markup to provide new ways of navigation. So on the surface, it looked like a standard reference work, but, in practice, it could slice and dice the data in so many ways, thanks to the semantic markup. So I remember there was one review that talked about it changes how you think, that the navigation of the project really did make it possible to understand literary history in new ways, and Toni Bowers talked about it as having changed the parameters of the scholarship and teaching of British women's writing, and I think our sense throughout the team was that the digital work was intrinsic to a new way of doing digital scholarship, and that made even the sort of minutiae of the digital side of the work much more meaningful to people.

Isobel Grundy

11:14

I think that the digital side has kept the stories complicated, because there are so many different ways of investigating the same text through the encoding, and I mean, the tide is turning against interest in women.

As a group nowadays, I think minority groups of all kinds are losing out, and the old stereotypes based on oversimplification just never die. Give them a chance and they creep back. So Orlando is always working against that.

Kathryn Holland

11:51

I would say picking up on the importance of the digital is an intrinsic facet of Orlando. Orlando is such an important instance of feminist literary historians taking control of the means of production. Primarily, of course, in terms of the textbase, but in addition to that, the kind of experiments with multimodal scholarship that we've been undertaking, in the form of our podcast, a podcast on women's writing, the kind of public writing undertaken by members of our volumes project in *Slate* and *The Conversation*, and then the volumes project itself, the work that we're now doing with a team of 10 co-authors in Canada, the States, and the UK on our collection of four prose narratives, taking the textbase as our dataset, drawing on the expertise of new collaborators who are not part of the original team. All of that is, I think, pushing the parameters of Orlando and feminist literary history, more broadly, farther out, in really exciting ways.

Speaking of the textbase, as its content continued to grow, and I think this was about from 2009 to 2010 onward, the leadership team created new partnerships and began to use the text-based data in different ways. How has this work related to Orlando's longevity?

Susan Brown

13:14

So the project really was sustained by the data side of things, I think, in a range of ways. It was published in 2006 and it was not published as open access, so in some sense it was done, even though we're continuing to augment it, and had ongoing costs to sort of continue to expand it, but those experiments with data, which were, supported by various SSHRC grants, the SSHRC had a DH-oriented, grant program called Image, Text, Sound, and Technology, I think there are a

couple of those grants, maybe an Insight grant, too, on mining literary history, and so these experimental prototypes that you see here of visualizing the networks in Orlando, visualizing the degrees of separation between people and retaining the context.

That brought people together within the tech space, and even visualizing the labor that went into the tech space, through the credit visualization tool, were based on the responsibility tags and the documents that had tracked all of the activity.

We had documents that had been touched, like, 100 times, and so we were able to visualize the contributions both to a single document, which is what I think you see in the left of the image on the bottom right, and, one person's contribution, where they contributed a lot to a couple of entries, a little bit in the form of editing to a countless number of entities, which could be counted by the computer and then visualized in that pie chart.

I think it was really important to sustaining the project, financially, to have that money coming in to support that work, but also really intellectually stimulating. It gave us that expanded sense of what we could do with what we'd created beyond the tech space and in dialogue with it.

Kathryn Holland

15:19

Hmm. Yeah, I think, those experiments with data visualization in particular, have been really essential in terms of encouraging users to think about the textbase material in new ways, and being able to navigate it in new ways. And I remember, for instance, a chapter in a volume, I think it was about 2014, called *Reading Modernism with Machines*, I contributed a chapter, with my Orlando colleague, Jana Smith-Elford, on using the Orlando Visualizer to represent, relationships documented in the textbase related to or based at Newnham College, Cambridge, and the National Union for Women's Suffrage Societies, in order to make the argument that both of them, were institutions of modernism, and we were able to make a new argument about both of those places as really valuable hubs of activity for modernist literature and art. And it wouldn't, we wouldn't have been able to do that without, without that tool.

Susan Brown

16:39

Yeah, and I think Jana was a student at the time, right?

Kathryn Holland

16:42

I think she was. Jana was finishing up her PhD, and I had ... I think I had just finished mine.

Turning again to the leadership team, when and how did we begin to think about succession and work toward transitions?

Isobel Grundy

17:03

Well, in the beginning, the team was picked for reasons that they seemed to have expertise in this or that. Multimedia, for instance, which was a big thing at that point, and in the early stages, we really had no idea where we were going or what we were doing. We had learned lessons from the feminist companion, to the effect that there wasn't enough space in a printed book for the kind of index we had envisaged that would enable you to pull out all the writers of a particular nationality, or active in a particular genre, or even from a particular period.

So, we knew that we wanted the power of the digital. It was actually Susan Brown, who, when invited to join the project, said we ought to use computers. Oh!

And, it was the very early days of using computers. We didn't know how we were going to publish. We thought about CD-ROMs. But, we were clear that there were new possibilities, and that we needed to use them.

So, it goes back a long way, adapting to knowledge of the technical aids available, and we had no idea in those days about data, very little idea about where we were going. So new leadership has always arisen at the moments that it was needed.

When people have left the project and we have thought it was a disaster, the new person coming in, changing that role according to current needs has been a huge improvement on even the excellent former person.

Susan Brown

19:00

Yeah, but I think there have been challenges, too. The shift from second wave feminism and the sort of sense that it was necessary to build women's writing into the curriculum in a significant way has meant there have been fewer hires in that area, and so trying to find people who were keen on this kind of work, who would be able to move into leadership positions because they would get that research time as part of their positions, has been an ongoing challenge. I mean, obviously, there have been relatively few academic positions over the last couple of decades, period, and a shrinking number.

So that shift away from feminism, from historical scholarship, I think, just meant there were fewer, even still, of those sorts of positions. There is, the sense that sometimes, people needed to go off and establish, like, their own sense of their scholarly identity after working very closely with Orlando for a period of time.

And then sometimes came back to the project with new perspectives, and sort of invigorated it.

There was, you know, the inability of people to move. U of A tried to recruit me to lead the project at a certain period, but for personal reasons, I wasn't able to move to Edmonton at that point in my career, and so I think we were blessed by a really creative administrative decision, and also, times that were not as lean as they are now, when the U of A actually offered to second me to Alberta to take on leadership of the project when the initial director, Pat, was looking at retiring.

So that was, I think, a real blessing for the project at the stage at which it really needed to apply for significant funding to renew its back-end infrastructure, to have that institutional support at the university where the project was based.

So that was really helpful, and then we were also blessed that we had some income that we could use to hire you, Kathryn, after you had finished your degree, but were still in a precarious position.

So that you could really be involved in the project and have the time to build up the relationships and did real help with the training of students and become our main person as far as the training and direction of student, activity in the project goes.

And then, we've been absolutely delighted to see you moving into a full-time position and be able to sort of cement that relationship.

Kathryn Holland

21:53

The flexibility and the capacity of Orlando to fund that position was very important to me, and really appealing. The overall vitality of Orlando at that time, which was about 2015, 2016, it was irresistible, because I knew that Orlando offered something real and meaningful to the academic community, and that I would be able to leverage that to support my own career goals and to be able to contribute to, you know, feminist scholarship in a variety of ways. So the impact of all of that sort of keeps branching out. And I see that a lot, not only in my own experiences, but also in the way not only the executive committee has expanded, say, over the last five years with Katherine Binhammer coming back, initially our first postdoctoral fellow in the mid-90s, and now one of the co-directors, and also our recruitment of Karen Borrier at the University of Calgary as a member of the executive who connects us not only to, a different generation of literary and technical studies, but also kind of bolsters our relationship building with the co-authors on the volumes team, who are taking, kind of less formal and less tangible leadership roles in terms of representing the project farther afield as well.

Regular, sometimes intense attention to the technical needs of the project has been essential to the survival of Orlando. What have Orlando's major challenges and opportunities been, and how have we responded to them?

Isobel Grundy

23:33

It has been a challenge for humanities granting agencies to understand that a project like ours needs to be paying professionals.

Because people with qualifications in computing come very expensive. Even the most devoted worker in Orlando has been really lucky in the people on the science side who have been fascinated by the project and wishing to work for it.

The factor for that outgoing in professional salaries is hard for granting agencies to understand.

And that's been a difficulty.

Susan Brown24:17

We need to advance the slide.

Kathryn Holland

24:20

Thank you.

Susan Brown24:30

Were you going to say more, Isobel?

Isobel Grundy

24:31

Well, I was just going to comment on our choice of publishing through an academic publisher, Cambridge University Press. Our experience of applying to Cambridge was very encouraging back at the beginning.

The then literary editor at Cambridge, Linda Bree, had all the managers of all the departments raised for a demonstration of very, very embryonic Orlando on a big

screen. And the marketing manager said, I could sell this. Cambridge became very enthusiastic.

Now, it's been useful to us, and still is, having the Cambridge name on the website, and as part of the URL of the textbase, because it gives people confidence, we don't need to harp on it, but people see that we are a Cambridge publication.

And also, there has been the side effect of the royalties, which have enabled us to build up a bit of a buffer against financial blows and unexpected needs.

So, of course, there are downsides. We can't manage our own subscription or marketing, but on the whole, that academic scholarly connection has been valuable.

Susan Brown25:55

Right, and in a way, Cambridge has provided us with some kind of infrastructure for publication, even though we've developed it and provided it. And they've been extremely flexible in that way, which has been really important to us, so that the strengths of the semantic markup and so on could be evident in the interface. So had we needed to go into a sort of standard epub- oriented interface that would not have served us well, so we've been very, I think, lucky in our relationship with Cambridge and the freedom that they've given us to deliver the material the way we thought it needed to. And infrastructure, I think, has been the theme from the very beginning in many ways. We found early in the project that people were overwriting each other's work. This was long before Google Docs or Web 2.0 or anything like that. And so we had to develop what we called the Document Archive in order to manage that, and it was pretty sophisticated for its time, which was, like, the later 90s.

In terms of having built-in reporting features and querying features and so on alongside, locking of documents and so on. But as time went on and it started to age, we realized we had to renew that infrastructure from that homegrown product to something that was more standards-based, and so we built on open source software to develop, something that would serve Orlando's needs, but also serve

other digital scholarship projects more broadly, because one question that we used to get quite regularly after we presented on Orlando was, how can I do this myself?

And we were like, we have this infrastructure, but it's not really generalized, and it might be really hard for you to adopt, and we're sorry. And so, the Canadian Writing Research Collaboratory, which was the platform that we built to replace the document archive was then opened up to more than 30 other projects to publish a wide array of types of scholarship, not just text, but, image, audio, and video materials as well. So that, again, sustained the project, and helped keep it going technically, and, also shifted us towards the sort of open source, open data movement in the way we were thinking about what Orlando was doing, even though we were published through a subscription model in partnership with Cambridge, and so we started thinking about, okay, the textbase is being marketed quite effectively in this way and made accessible through university libraries, but how can we make the data itself more open? And we started thinking about how we could create data that linked to the textbase and drew on the textbase, but was able to be used in some of the newer ways that we were experimenting with ourselves for things like network visualization, mapping, and so on. So more collaborations across a broader range of projects with not just Orlando data, but other projects in women's writing that were, sometimes using our data, like the Women Writers Project, for instance, to expand what they were offering to people, and also technical experiments with other projects interested in using data in ways that paralleled ours.

This dialogue with other projects basically led to, kind of, ongoing technical improvements and thinking about Orlando as based on, but also, expanding from the textbase itself.

Kathryn Holland

29:55

When I introduce Orlando to students or workshop participants, I like to note at the beginning that Orlando is older not only than something like Google Docs, but also Google itself. Often a great icebreaker. Two points. One, I would want to note that project management for Orlando itself has really shifted and become kind of

differently amorphous over the last several years, with, really important, leadership work being undertaken by our technical leads.

Some of whom have been with the project for many years, such as Jeff Antoniuk and Mihaela Ilovan, for slightly less time, and also, members of the CWRC and LINCS teams, such as Alliyya Mo.

And then my second point would be, to note the challenges of opening up the project and what we do when people say, how can I do this? And also, when we want to collaborate with external contributors who have really important expertise in, feminist literary history. We've started several years ago opening up the workflows and new content creation to external contributors at a variety of universities around the world, which has been challenging for a number of practical reasons, some to do with the process of infrastructure migrations, which are more time-consuming than we might have anticipated, Shortage of staff for training, and managing the editorial process and so on. And so, we've been able to make some progress on that, and we have a good number of new profiles authored by external contributors, but it has been slower than we might have expected.

And so: funding. The maintenance and extension of funding to run the project also has been a major preoccupation for the team. How has our approach to funding ensured the ongoing life of the project?

Isobel Grundy

32:08

Susan Brown has been a genius at pulling down grants of every kind.

Kathryn Holland

32:12

Yes.

Isobel Grundy

32:13

You've reached the stage where you have had most of the grants, and people don't want to see you coming back again.

Susan Brown

32:21

Yeah, I mean, obviously I didn't get the first grant, and there were a number of grants in the early years that were really focused on the literary project of doing the project as we thought of initially as a book project that had a sort of a digital sideshow that flipped over time to, a recognition that we were a digital project first, but always with a view to creating narrative literary histories that were more synthetic than the author profiles.

Isobel Grundy

33:00

But the very first grant, the big multidisciplinary, the first one that SSHRC gave, was based on the notion of being a digital project.

Susan Brown

33:12

True, yeah.

Isobel Grundy

33:13

That brought in the big money in the very beginning.

Susan Brown

That's true. I didn't mean to suggest it was non-digital at first, but I think we did think that we would get the books done within the scope of the first grant, and we didn't even get the textbase done within the scope of the first grant, because it just turned out to be so huge.

And there were a number of grants that followed on in terms of helping us get the textbase out.

And then we, as you suggested, sort of shifted towards these more infrastructure and technically-oriented grants for a period, they really did sustain the project quite significantly through infrastructure funding as well as research funding, so both the Canada Foundation for Innovation, and, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Lately, with, as you've indicated, things having run dry for a period of time, and there are always ups and downs when it comes to these long-standing projects. But we're in the position to be able to take our royalties that we sort of salted away over the years from Cambridge. None of the principals in the project have taken any royalty money personally. Instead, we saved it up, and that meant that we could rebuild our main interface with Cambridge and help to sustain the infrastructure work. So that's sort of come full circle.

Kathryn Holland

I think, too, the kind of through-line for me in relation to all of these questions has been Orlando's emphasis from the very start on flexible and outward-looking creative collaboration and relationship building, and so I think for those of us from different generations or across generations in the project.

The connections that we've been able to build.

Outward-facing ones have continued to serve us well, and I think about not only, like, the big, you know, major partnerships, particularly among Orlando, CWRC and

LINCS, but also others, say, with, Bucknell University and our ongoing discussion about expanding the institutional homes of Orlando into a larger consortium.

The experience and the expertise that we've been able to build up over the years, really, is really doing important work now, in the present.

And that brings us to my final question, which relates to Orlando's timeline and history, maybe lifeline. We are now marking 30 years of Orlando, from 1995 to 2025, and so my question for all of us is this: what are our priorities for Orlando's future?

Isobel Grundy

36:16

I very much hope, I realize this is not a given, but I very much hope it can survive as a live project, because these stories change, even the stories of the long ago, research is ongoing.

And some central place where you can look and expect to find the right story about a writer, or group of writers, or category of writers, and not something which is either bowdlerized or oversimplified is really extremely valuable, and again, particularly as interest in women's writing, perhaps trickles out of the academy, is important for the work not to be lost, and if the work is not up-to-date, in some sense, we've seen this with so many fine reference books on paper, it is, in effect, lost.

So, that would be a high priority. Again, the stereotypes creep back, given half a chance.

Susan Brown

37:24

Right, I do think that the dynamic nature of Orlando, that we do keep updating it, adding to it, a lot of the authors that we cover in Orlando are still living and producing, but also, as you say, knowledge changes, the discourses change.

We have new evidence and new perspectives to add. All of that is really key, and I do think that hopefully, with the rebuild of CWRC, which just relaunched this year.

we're looking at a situation where we can actually open up much more widely to other collaborations. As you said earlier, Kathryn, having the staff capacity to manage that process is key. You don't get citizen science or crowdsourcing for free, ever. Nothing is free, and we want to keep up the quality of the contributions. So there is a management side to that.

But we also know there are a lot of people out there whose expertise would really enrich the tech space, and it would be fantastic to be able to scale that up more.

I know my own preoccupations in digital humanities really have a lot to do these days with thinking about what long-term sustainability means for digital scholarship. There's a catchphrase, or a set of principles in the research data management field called the FAIR principles, which stand for Findable, Accessible, Interoperable, Reusable.

And one of my contentions is that humanity's data, the kind of data that we provide through Orlando, to be fair, to be really findable and accessible and reusable, it's got to be online. It has to stay online. So how can we do that?

The site that we have right now is a wonderful database site based on the Drupal open source software. Drupal is an expensive stack to maintain in a range of ways, and the rebuild was pretty costly and took a long time. We're looking at the kind of static site solutions advocated by the Endings project and other groups that are looking at how we try to ensure that this kind of scholarly contribution can remain accessible over the long term without really high maintenance costs. So, that's one of the directions I'd like to see us exploring what we can do with the linked open data that we've created from Orlando. It gives us a way of connecting the more structured representation of the knowledge that we've produced to the textbase, so that we retain the context, but we can also do much more with it as data, and we can also, I hope, look forward to linking it into the narrative volumes.

Kathryn Holland

Yeah, I would say, picking up on that, I'm excited about the ways in which Orlando continues to kind of morph, as a kind of groundbreaking or path-finding, instance of multimodal scholarship. I'm excited by the interplay between the textbase, our recent podcast series, and the volumes project, for example.

In addition to that, the pedagogical benefits and uses of Orlando, for student training, not only for students who use and access the text base around the world, but also, members of the project is valuable, particularly at a time when digital literacy and questions of how we in the university can support students' trajectories from their arts degrees into their professional lives are increasingly important.

Kathryn Holland

41:40

Terrific. This brings us to the end of our discussion, thank you both, for your time, and thank you to Lynne for including us in this project.