

## Whence Feminism? Assessing Feminist Interventions in Digital Literary Archives

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### Abstract

This essay is a meditation on the possibility of a feminist assessment of digital literary archives and the interdisciplinary tools needed to do such work. Using the Women Writers Project and The Orlando Project as exemplary instances of digital literary scholarship, I discuss possible sites of feminist intervention (content, technological politics, labor structures, etc) and the kinds of theoretical paradigms one might use in such work. I also argue that such assessments are essential to recognizing the ways in which feminist digital literary studies have impacted the field of digital humanities.

Drawing on recent work in technology studies and feminist theory, the essay problematizes simplistic celebratory claims and troubles the idea that simply saving women's work in digital form is enough. I conclude with a set of reflections on the impact of shifting ideas about the value of feminist work and theory in both public and scholarly contexts. This includes a proposal that more established scholars proactively highlight the feminist interventions that they make and that all digital literary scholars consider increasing access to not only the work of women, but to the technologies that are integral to that access as well.

In 2011, I presented a paper titled “Encoding Women: Are Digital Archives Feminist?” at the Renaissance Society of American conference in Montreal. Among other things, I argued for a recollection of the feminist effects of many digital humanities methodologies — including the much-lauded cooperative or collaborative project. One of the audience members asked me why we should consider such practices to be distinctly feminist, as opposed to part of a “more general liberatory” ethic that derives as much from the civil rights movement and cultural studies as anything else. I was troubled by the question, but not entirely sure why. I have come to see that his question supposes that digital tools and methods can be either (narrowly) feminist or “more generally liberatory,” but not both. It also suggests that the ethical and political agendas of feminisms cannot encompass concerns with race, class, or sexuality — something that runs completely counter to the work of most third-wave feminists and theories of intersectionality. Finally, by suggesting that I had to write a history that was either feminist or “more general,” his question encouraged a dangerous kind of appropriation, one that incorporates many of the insights and practices of various feminisms but strips out their identification as such, thereby eliding the many ways in which feminists and feminist paradigms have effected change. This growing invisibility is something with which I have grown increasingly concerned, as it seems to me that the salutary work of feminist scholarship has been systematically subsumed under some other — any other — banner. Not only does this make the work of scholarly feminism invisible, once again writing women out of history, it also creates a vision of 21st-century feminism as what is left over, what has not been claimed by other now mainstream methodologies, merely the hysterical rantings of angry women (again).

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Over the course of a couple of years now, I've worked to find a methodology that would allow me to answer the question that motivated that 2011 paper — can we describe digital archives as feminist? — and have consistently run into problems. Where should I look to find evidence of feminist engagement when considering digital archives? What metrics should be applied to measure the degree of feminism embodied by a digital archive, and what is the subject of that measurement? Are digital archives feminist because the content is by women, or because the modes of production are feminist, or because the technologies themselves are feminist or used to feminist ends? Is it all three? Do we have to

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account for both the historical and social contexts from which particular archives arise when thinking about the nature of their feminism? What tools might be helpful in thinking through the sense that tools like XML are neutral? These are important questions not only because the answers enable a feminist critique of what have become cornerstones of digital humanities and literary work — digital archives — but also because the answers may help clarify the nature of the impact of feminism on digital humanities work.

Within literary studies of the past, the major locus of feminist intervention was a text or set of texts, initially in the text “itself” and then also in its materiality and historical context. Such work provides models for thinking through text technologies, social conditions of reading and writing in print media, and rhetorical analysis, but not for working with digital media or with the large archive. Scholarship on brick and mortar archives offers models for thinking through collection building practices, information management, and certain kinds of access. To find models for assessing the hardware, software, and usage practices that are central to digital literary archives I had to turn to work within Science and Technology Studies, Media Studies, and feminist theorists of technology. This is the future of digital literary studies work — a complicated but necessary traversal of multiple disciplinary zones. Work in the history of the book has reminded literary scholars that we cannot ignore the social and material history of a text, an insight no less true when those texts are digital. Rather than answer the question that launched me on this project, what I’ll be doing here is attempting to sketch out the possible methodological terrain — answering not “are these digital archives feminist?” but “how might we understand the feminisms of digital literary archives?” Much of this essay can speak to issues around digital archives generally, but my focus is particularly on literary archives and implications for literary studies. There is a historical reason for this — both Orlando and WWO arose out of needs articulated by literary scholars for access to the work of women writers and to their histories. They were imagined as critical interventions in the way literature is taught and studied, and, indeed, many scholars and students use these and other digital archives as their primary sources for women’s writing. Thus, to understand the feminisms of digital literary archives is to understand how feminist theory and digital practices are critical contexts for literary scholarship, whether digital or analog, in the 21st century.

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## Work by Women

Content is perhaps the easiest place to begin, especially when the test cases are the Orlando Project and WWO. Both projects began as efforts by feminist literary scholars to address the gaps in literary history that persisted in the 1980s. The cofounders of Orlando, Susan Brown, Patricia Clements, and Isobel Grundy, saw the “potential of the new electronic medium” as a powerful counter-agent to the ongoing marginalization of women’s writing [Brown et al. 2007]. Likewise, to the founders of Women Writers Online “the electronic archive seemed like the ideal successor to the physical archive, since it promised to overcome the problems of inaccessibility and scarcity which had rendered women’s writing invisible for so long” [WWP History]. Recovery of women’s work to visible archives has long been a goal of feminist literary scholars and is critical to how many understand WWO and Orlando as feminist. One can still read exuberant celebrations of abundance and presence in analyses of the two projects. Take, for example, Susan Fraiman’s excitement at a potentially infinite electronic list of “history-making women” [Fraiman 2008, 143] or the impulse expressed in Anne Lake Prescott and Betty Travitsky’s article on editing women to edit everything available and use the Internet as an infinitely expandable archival space [Travitsky and Prescott 2009, 14]. In such narratives, digital archives are “tirelessly productive” and “grand” operations that fulfill feminist desires simply by creating a massive storage and retrieval mechanism for a plurality, perhaps even the totality, of women writers [Travitsky and Prescott 2009, 14]. In these kinds of stories, digital tools are imagined as leveling the production and preservation playing field. Yet, such stories also draw on an old hope for the resurrection of the mythical Alexandrian archive in a new digital form and with it a more accurate or complete literary history. If only we could accurately capture all the work of marginalized groups, then we could have a complete view of our literary past, or so such arguments seem to suggest.<sup>[1]</sup> From this perspective, an archive could be understood as feminist to the degree that it participated in this recovery effort. But the emphasis on familiar patriarchal tropes of size, mastery, and comprehensive collection trouble this relatively easy approach. To what degree is what Ellen Rooney has called the “additive approach” — where recovery is an endless process of just adding to the list of recognized women writers — actually making women’s work a visible, central part of literary history [Rooney 2006, 3]? <sup>[2]</sup> Perhaps a feminist analysis should be suspicious of any project where bigger is better? Should feminist interventions block the avalanche of undifferentiated data suggested by the impulse to collect

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everything? Is mere presence — the fact of being there, of having women’s work exist in digital archives — enough to address the continued marginalization of women’s writing?

In a moment where so many texts are available, sometimes through multiple sources, we need digital archives to help users discover and make sense of women’s writing. Rooney’s critique suggests that presence — the fact of being archived somewhere — is not enough. Editing everything won’t get move us much further along in the effort to end oppression of women if we don’t use those editorial opportunities to recenter the role of women’s writing in historical and contemporary debates about gender, sex, ethics, and the social dynamics of power. Reading the celebratory rhetoric around digital projects such as Orlando and WWO suggests that a feminist recovery project is also about size; the excitement around the digital was and sometimes still is about an infinite scale. It seems absurd, however, to suggest that there might be a scale of feminism that maps onto the size of an archive (the bigger the archive, the more feminist it is?). In fact, a celebration of plentitude reproduces certain commercial metrics — notably production as value and information as capital — of which there is significant feminist critique.<sup>[3]</sup> The images of a “tirelessly productive” and “grand” archive are themselves haunted by gendered subject positions: the “productive” woman, valuable so long as she is endlessly bearing fruit, and the “grand” monument, the size of which is an index of its value. Amy Earhart’s discussion of the troubling ways that NEH measures “impact” suggests that a monumental logic is at work not just in celebrations of archives, but also in the funding practices that enable most digital projects [Earhart 2012].

Consequently, I might look for a feminist archive to facilitate access by helping users sort through an abundance of data and push against monumentalism in some way. In a co-authored piece on the WWO, Julia Flanders and I used facilitation of access in precisely this way as we argued that “WWO, and digital collections like it, offer the literary scholar an example of an archive that exceeds the project of ‘mere’ recovery. The ability of digital technologies to offer information about genre and form, while also enabling the blurring of generic boundaries, positions such archives as both repositories and sites of translation” [Flanders and Wernimont 2010]. In that same piece we argued that the blurring of boundaries enabled by interpretive markup “exemplif[ies] the insights of feminist literary critiques.” [Flanders and Wernimont 2010, 428]. What is at stake here is access not only to the texts, but also to the intellectual paradigms that situate women’s writing as transformational with respect to canon and as central models of textual genres. Access, as a way of sorting through data, is also a way of valuing texts. Perhaps, then, I could use a metric that balances presence and access to assess digital archives. But how, I wondered, should I think through the value of plenty and that of particularity in feminist terms?

Even as people continue to laud the expansive possibilities of the Internet as literary archive, we also hear laments at the loss of early digital literary projects — a different layer of “content.” Earhart, for example, sounds alarm at the loss of many of the recovery projects of the late 20th century. For her, these projects manifest an early sense that “digital literary scholarship [was] a tool that might be utilized to meet the theoretical demands of scholarly work that reinserted women, people of color, and queers into the canon” [Earhart 2012]. These early projects then were evidence of the ways in which digital tools enabled feminist scholarship. Earhart offers a nuanced analysis of why such projects are disappearing, pointing to economic issues (electronic editions are expensive), structural problems with activist scholarship (when the scholar leaves, does her archive go too? who shepherds these projects?), and infrastructural issues that place the work of individual scholars at greater risk than those working in larger DH centers or programs. We might read each of these causes as symptomatic of a larger “resistance to cultural studies constructions” that Earhart (like Alan Liu and Martha Nell Smith) posits within digital humanities practice more generally [Earhart 2012].<sup>[4]</sup> In which case, there is a kind of repetition of the canon wars subtly at work in digital literary studies, and indeed, this is the point of Earhart’s argument — that patriarchal habits of assessment, value, and quality continue to support a “New Critical canon” within the supposedly gender-neutral circuits and networks at the heart of digital humanities. A feminist response to such resistance and loss might be the kind of “individual” action that Earhart suggests can help to recover the recovery project, developing short-term storage solutions for projects that threaten to melt back into oblivion.

Not only would such collection represent a continuation of the feminist recovery effort, it might also represent the kind of feminist preservation of process — scholarly or otherwise — described by Alex Juhasz. Such a model takes plentitude not as the sign of a monumental logic, but as a feminist response to the elisions at the heart of sorting and editing. In

her work on the film archive at the Los Angeles Women's Building, Juhasz reads a potentially overwhelming record of everything (daily conversation, group work, leisurely tours of the space) as a critical feminist response to the elisions performed when a documentary filmmaker selects and edit the "raw" material to produce a product. In her reading, the collection of everything creates an "archive of process," a material manifestation of a "theory and practice for being seen and remembered" [Juhasz 2010]. Juhasz's essay reads the archive of process as a deliberate refutation of the aestheticized, linear, patriarchal narrative characteristic of other documentary film production. The oversized archive is a record of feminist engagement with technologies — here film — and it seems to me that the preservation envisioned by Earhart's call to save the early recovery projects could function as a kind of archive of feminist literary engagement with early web technologies. In some ways this addresses the problems identified by Rooney: rather than understanding the proliferation of recovery projects and their contents as an endless list, we might see them as representations of a particular historical moment in feminist engagements with technology. We might read the volume as indexical, pointing to the ongoing struggle to give voice to women's work and to develop methodologies adequate to the challenges of feminist theories. While revaluing process may help us think through the work of recovery differently, thereby shifting emphasis away from metrics aligned with patriarchal and corporate production and the spare, elegant end product, there remain a number of challenges. The burden of plenty and its encounter with mortal limits is real — it's important to think through the kinds of archives we are leaving for those who come after us, and if that archive cannot be read, cannot be seen, cannot be processed because it is simply too large and undifferentiated then we risk burying our subjects in a new way. The Woman's Building for Juhasz represents precisely this kind of challenge to human constraints; the collection is "outsized." What balance, then, between both kinds of presence — process and works — should we seek? When should we push for access to volume or to detail and particularity? Can feminist scholarship partake of both big data and small digital worlds? What balance might I hope for between tactical ephemerality and strategic monumentality?

My discussion assumes a feminist assessment of presence and access that pertains to women's writing. However, the issue of data overload is hardly unique to feminist archives or feminist scholarship. Is this then an issue of medium, rather than of feminism? Is it possible to differentiate in this way? Tara McPherson, quoting Marsha Kinder, has suggested that such a partitioning of media and ideology is in fact problematic, a "cyberstructuralist" approach that disavows feminism, critical race studies, and other forms of politicized inquiry [McPherson 2012, 142]. McPherson's argument suggests that if presence and access are intertwined features when we are talking about women's writing, they must also be equally intertwined in the preservation and representation of men's work. While men's writing does not suffer the same dearth of presence, it is equally important to consider the operations of the privilege of presence. Recognizing the ways that men's writing is everywhere present and appears not to need the same level of critical intervention in order to be understood as valuable might be a clue to why structuralism and cyberstructuralism have seemed so hospitable to the study of male authors, but less so to women's work. That we seem not to need an intervention to understand or value men's work bears reiteration as we continue to build digital collections. My suggestion that we assess archives in terms of presence and absence is also a reminder that women's writing is not exceptional in being shaped by these forces; we can and should denaturalize the familiarity of men's writing in engagements with digital tools and methods.

It had seemed to me that content was an easy place to start talking about how to understand feminism and digital archives, but I have found that it is actually rather murky terrain. While the presence of women's work seems like a common sense measure of feminist content, the intertwining of presence and access draws attention to the losses incurred if we extricate the content from its media form or from its social discursive contexts. This is not new. Feminist histories and theories of technology have taken account of the "technosocial" context for some time. Additionally, "intersectionality" as a critical term that speaks not just to the experience of power over subjects, but also to the media expressions of power, and should have suggested to me that looking at content alone would be problematic from the outset.

## Power Tools

Perhaps, then, a turn to a different look at the politics of digital work, as the "power relations" expressed in the tools themselves [Bianco 2012, 97]. Digital archives unite two historically gendered fields — computer and archival sciences.

Literary scholars who depend on archival or rare book materials still confront, whether they acknowledge it or not, the legacy of an institutional form through which patriarchal power exercised the authority to determine value, classification, and access. A struggle made all the more important by the transmutation of archival materials into historical fact by scholarly alchemy. [5] While digital archives were envisioned as the answer to women's exclusion from the power relations that constituted literary archives, we have yet to parse the relationships between gender and the tools central to digital archives. I, myself, have excitedly proposed reading XML and SGML as political rather than neutral tools. I turned to feminist scholars of technology in search of the right frame for thinking through how data modeling, interpretive markup, or the recording of paratextual information might represent gendered information structures. Unfortunately, I found that utilizing a broad feminist theory of technology threatens to widen the scope too far — to leave behind the valuable local context or technological specificity. Judy Wajcmann's suggestion that technological developments have historically been gendered male and consumption has been gendered female works as a generalization about industrial and early post-industrial technologies. [6] But it seems a bit too easy to suggest that a simple men-create/women-use paradigm is still at work in 21st-century feminist archives like WWO and Orlando, where women are clearly doing a great deal of creating. It also felt imprecise to suggest that manufacturing and data modeling operated under the same gendering logic — although McPherson's analysis of UNIX suggests that there are logical paradigms that enable and operate through technological development so pervasively that such comparisons may be worthwhile.

At the same time, it is precisely in the specialized technologies of digital humanities — computer science in particular — that we continue to see a distinct gendering of work and product, as well as a significant gender gap in participation. As Bianco and others have noted, there has been a 29% drop since 1984 in the number of women computer science majors [Bianco 2012, 99]. [7] Things have gotten worse, not better, when it comes to women's participation in computer science fields. This suggests that there is indeed a gendered separation of those who can make with computational tools and those who consume. As important as participation parity is, it is only one part of the way that we can theorize the gendering of technology — we should also be thinking in terms of gendered structures and logics. Pointing to the excellent women working within digital humanities, including the women who code, markup, and build the Orlando Project and WWO, misses the point. Part of the useful insight of McPherson's analysis is that the power operations imbedded in certain technologies and their habitual use are not the result of willful user sexism or racism. It's not that UNIX developers themselves worked to sequester race, but rather that that our difficulty talking about race and digital media is “an effect of the very designs of our technological systems,” the modularity and spare aesthetics of which work to “cordon off race” [McPherson 2012, 140, 143]. Similarly, the logic of the maker/consumer paradigm is a gendering one regardless of the sex or intentions of the participants. Consequently, those who cannot make find themselves in subordinated, devalued, “user” positions that deny agency and expertise (and funding!). As the work of Alan Liu and Martha Nell Smith suggests, developers/designers who foreground design standards that emphasize modularity and a spare visual interface are creating “docile” or unchallenged readers. [8] Just as an author creates his or her ideal reader, those who make digital literary projects are making particular kinds of users — users who are imagined, more often than not, as welcoming an unchallenging, “clean” experience that facilitates comfortable and easy interaction. However “open,” “collaborative,” and “connected” Digital Humanities purports to be, if computational tools are wielded in ways that continue old patriarchal privileges of expertise and authority and create merely receptive users, then we miss an opportunity to leverage digital tools to transform literary scholarship in meaningful ways. [9]

Let me offer an example from the Orlando Project that can shed some light on how to understand certain kinds of tools and their public presentation as transformative, even if it creates an abundance of information and a technical challenge to the user. Document Type Definitions (DTD) are expressions of rules. They define the structure of related XML or SGML documents and articulate the set of allowable elements and attributes. They are essential to the kind of publication that both the Orlando Project and the WWO provide. It is possible to read a DTD as an expression of fact or scholarly opinion; something like “this is the set of categories and relationships that hold for these texts.” I would argue, in fact, that this is precisely what happens when a DTD operates silently and invisibly for users. But, the public DTD can be read as generative, as productive of a model of the text, but not the sole or authoritative model, in which case it becomes visible as feminist intervention. Orlando project directors suggest that they use markup to encode a “text that does not currently exist,” which is to say that their texts are born digital and structural markup like <p> is part of the

formation of the scholarly entry itself. Each entry is a newly authored digital text, and the structural markup does not refer to the presence of a particular feature in a source text (unlike much of what appears in WWO).<sup>[10]</sup> However, the picture is more complicated than just a DTD that establishes the parameters for the creation of secondary, scholarly texts. Orlando also uses a set of DTDs for interpretive markup, like that of the Writing DTD, that can be read as paratextual with respect to the absent primary texts — the literary texts written by women that Orlando articles discuss. Consequently, we can see this markup as generating a feminist and materialist hermeneutic space through which a reading of primary texts is enabled.

Within the Writing DTD, a “production” semantic grouping locates the text in terms of thirty tags, which include designations of print scope (press run, circulation, type and location of press), media type, and print related interactions (rejections and relationship to printer). Thus, the primary texts are presented as artifacts of a publishing world, in which meaning is mediated by particular material and social conditions. The “textual features” semantic collection, on the other hand, defines the texts in terms of literary analysis, genre, plot, character, etc. These are clearly not natural categories and their use provides productive limits for both searching and subsequent reading. For example, a chronological query for “Feminist” within the genre tagset (identifying a text, rather than as a person) produces a timeline that begins with a 1589 “feminist polemic” by Jane Anger and a late 1660’s “proto-feminist” treatise by Mary More. What does a retroactive genre designation, such as “feminist,” do to or for a 16th- or 17th-century text? In the terms laid out here, such paratextual identification generates a literary historical world in which feminist discourse and writing practice antedates the beginning of feminist political/social movements by two centuries. Orlando documentation argues that beyond simply structuring the secondary texts, the markup “offers myriad new ways to probe women’s literary history,” allowing a reader to explore the argument that the history of writing in the service of women’s rights and equality is a long one [Brown et al. Documentation]. Rather than taking each historical narrative expressed by the DTD as declarative, I am suggesting that we understand them as creating speculative historical narratives that offer new ways of reading women’s texts. While this is not how the Orlando project authors have articulated the nature of their feminist interventions, the publication of the DTD enables a reader to see the craftedness of the archive and to imagine alternative interventions. If read as expressions of scholarly fact, Orlando’s “new ways” of navigating history seem constrained by processes of production and appear to reproduce some of the failings of older archival models. When the encoding is read as generative, however, the archive becomes a paratextual machine that enables users to contextualize and read primary texts. This is an important shift in the transactional nature of the paratext, which now is directed back at the reader herself or between communities of readers.

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There is another way to think about a gendered genealogy for the technologies of digital literary archives like the WWO. Thinking of content not *qua* content, but as a “testbed” for digital humanities tools and technology research offers a different way to think about hitherto invisible effects of gender in tool making. NEH grants do not primarily fund the expansion of the WWO collection, but rather the development of new encoding practices, interfaces, or tools. Applying for these particular grants is a practical decision on the part of the WWP staff that accounts for different cost sharing models for different kinds of externally funded work (another site of institutional effects). Thus women’s writing is the “testbed” for digital development, rather than the subject of development itself. Is there an impact on technological development when the test cases are exclusively the writing of women? I would argue that there is, although the particular effects deserve essays of their own. In some ways this makes women’s work absolutely integral to the history of WWO technologies. Given the profile of the WWP within DH, this might suggest that women’s work lay at the heart of digital humanities. Yet, the case of Henrietta Lacks, whose cells were the unacknowledged source of the “immortal cell line” used in biomedical research, points to the ways in which a source may be both fundamental and silenced [Skloot 2011]. Nevertheless, women’s writing-as-testbed suggests that the experimental subject might be a locus of feminist intervention. Such a relationship also raises the possibility that there might be a feminist basis for tools and methods, even if those are not themselves feminist. As important as it is to not silence the effects of women’s work and feminist motivations, this scenario raises a difficult question: While a historical analysis might uncover such political origins, would we then say that the tools were in fact feminist? What if they were deployed in anti-feminist work?

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## The Technosocial Scene and Visible Feminism

Writing gender-aware histories of digital literary studies and the use of digital tools therein will certainly begin to address how and where we might locate feminist ideology and politics within digital archives. The histories of technologies are always social histories, and feminist scholars of technology have emphasized the need to account for the technosocial scene — the complex network of relations between institutions, participants, funding entities, etc. Bianco describes this scene simply as the “politics” of DH [Bianco 2012, 97]. It strikes me that while computing is obviously a significant part of digital literary scholarship, such work is not the same as computer science, nor are individual digital archival projects going to have the same local contexts. It seems to me that what is needed for a social history, and therefore a more complete theory of technology in digital literary studies, is fine-grained study of the interactions between content, product(s), technologies, participants/creators, institutions (funding and academic), and users. Perhaps this is something akin to going “back to the object” suggested by Bruno Latour’s Actor Network Theory approach ([Latour 2004]; see also [Latour 2005]). This is very much what McPherson does with her analysis of UNIX and a feminist analysis of digital literary tools needs similar approaches.

A first pass at sketching the networks of authority that crisscross projects like WWO and Orlando helps to illuminate just how complex this work can be. The Orlando Project is based in the Research Institute for Women’s Writing at the University of Alberta, with a site at the University of Guelph, and receives support from both institutions. Funding has also come from external granting agencies in support of collection development [Brown et al. 2010]. For an archive of born-digital secondary texts, responsibility for representation lies with project directors, and authority derives in part from the scholarly status of those who author each entry. The project’s objective is to produce both the digital archive and a set of print collections [Brown et al. 2010, 62]. Accordingly, a traditional academic press, Cambridge University Press, owns the publications. Consequently, Orlando’s production history is tied to traditional print models of publication like those of the thematic literary history. While scholarly publication with a press like Cambridge confers stability, provisional permanence, and prestige upon Orlando, it also tucks the resource away behind paywalls. Institutions, consortia, and scholarly societies can pay for access on behalf of their members but open access is not (currently) a possibility with the Orlando archive. WWO is also a subscription resource, although publication happens through the project itself rather than with a publishing house. As a result, both archives runs the risk of falling subject to economic choices at individual institutions that do not value women’s work enough to purchase the resource. While they began with hopes for a new media that might break through old economic and social models, in both cases, older models of dissemination and collection continue to shape interactions with these digital archives.

WWO is the production of the Women Writers Project (WWP) and is housed at Brown University. While the brand recognition of a private, Ivy League institution is a certain kind of capital, unlike the Orlando Project, the WWP has historically received the majority of its funding from external grant agencies and through its cost-recovery subscription model for WWO. Begun as a project to address the marginalization of women’s writing from the canon, print, and classroom, the WWO moves women’s work closer to an academic center of power, while remaining at least partially economically marginalized from that center.<sup>[11]</sup> While the WWO was initially conceived to address the lack of access to work by women authors, efforts by Google Books and EEBO to expand their digital offerings mean that many of these texts are available through one or both of those resources as well, although neither resource make search by authorial gender possible.<sup>[12]</sup> This contextual change means that the logic of value for the project shifts somewhat from that of redress of simple presence/access issues, to redress of the kinds of access. WWO remains the single best source for full text access and for the study of women’s writing as such. Additionally, as an index of the ongoing imbalance in print editions, the WWO is critical. A recipient of significant grant funding, it has been marked as a worthwhile, fundable project, valuable during a period of 24 (thus far) years during which feminist critique went from central to academic work, joined by cultural and ethnic studies, and then declined, most notably in the view of rising students.

The scene, so to speak, includes those working as part of each project as much as it does the institutional and academic contexts in which they work. Both the WWO and Orlando depend on scholarly collaboration to create and maintain their materials. At this point in most digital scholarly projects, collaboration is happening between a small set of trained graduate students, faculty, and IT and library staff. This is often due to a complex nexus of concerns, including interest, scholarly expectations, expertise, and where funding and labor cycles are consistently available. The reliable, citable edition that was the initial model for so much digital literary work entails the marshalling and production of certain

kinds of academic authority. Such authority depends upon degrees conferred and field expertise, which often is, paradoxically for the digital archive, predicated upon the experiential authority gained by time in brick and mortar archives [Steedman 2002]. In some sense, the WWP and the Orlando Project embody collaboration as a feminist strategy; this is certainly a major part of how the Orlando team understands the project as a feminist intervention.<sup>[13]</sup> For Brown, Clements, Grundy, Balazs, and Antonik this has been manifest as a more “egalitarian” method of scholarship that has also addressed some of the very real financial pressures faced by those at the “bottom” of the field — graduate students. Both projects have included graduate students as partners in work, moving some way to address patriarchal models of authority that traditionally cordon off graduate students from “real” work. At the same time, the pressures of producing citable, teachable resources mean that these are not entirely open projects. Does this mean that reliable scholarly digital projects are doomed to reproduce the hierarchies that separate the scholar from other users? Are good digital editions and resources only to be had from scholars who have had access to the traditional institutions and resources that confer academic authority? A recent proliferation of crowd-sourced digital projects raises questions about academic privilege and gate keeping in digital literary projects. Cathy Davidson observes that while projects like NINES have opened up to user contribution, the issues around “decentered” authority remain unresolved within the digital humanities and academic communities [Davidson 2008, 711]. Are we keeping non-professional users out of production to protect both academic privilege and the status of the traditional archive? Should we be looking to feminist digital literary projects to push the possibilities of decentering even further? How might we compare a feminist archive that depends on the power of the doctoral degree to assure reliability with one that invites non-credentialed users and readers to push scholarship into a more radically inclusive mode? Feminist digital archives and other digital literary work clearly do not need to operate in a single mode — but if we are looking to assess a feminist project as such, how important is it that production be informed by feminist values?

Working to include students and other young feminists strikes me as a particularly urgent project now at a time when students too often fail to see the relevance of either academic or political feminisms to their lives. Part of what is at stake for students is their own sense of agency — it is not always clear how they might intervene in an academic context where traditional hierarchies still largely dictate what counts as good or useful scholarship. There are good reasons for digital literary projects to want to claim certain kinds of authority and relevance; they are the currency of academic value. These motivations, however, are in tension with feminist calls for a more decentered model of authority — one that eschews that knowledge is only valuable when dispensed by a credentialed elite. Perhaps a model of constructive or transformative authority — the authority developed by a student as she or he engages in synthetic or creative analysis — can be a helpful guide for thinking about the kinds of authority expressed through different scholarly outputs.<sup>[14]</sup> It strikes me that the University of Richmond’s History Engine (<http://historyengine.richmond.edu/pages/home>) is an excellent example of how to produce and publish the scholarly work of undergraduates, expressing precisely this kind of transformative authority.

As I noted above, “feminism” has become worse than an irrelevance, a new “national dirty word”: a term that is meaningful as a warning sign, rather than as an entry point to a complex set of historically and geographically specific ideas and practices [Rowe-Finkbeiner 2004].<sup>[15]</sup> The shifting academic and social status of feminist critique is an important context because it speaks to the question that I discussed at the opening of this essay: why, asked that audience member, should we read particular tools, features, and so forth as feminist rather than more generally liberatory? As I suggest, his question elides the place of feminist work in the history of digital literary studies — appropriating the successes of feminist work for a more general, and more palatable, liberatory agenda. Such appropriations are, in some sense, an effect of feminisms’ historical trajectory from marginalization, to relative centrality and institutional prestige, and now into a perilous kind of irrelevance, one that repeatedly renders feminist interventions invisible as such. I think there are at least two ways that this happens. First, in a context of both real and perceived hostility to feminist discourse and critique, there is pressure to hide explicitly feminist agendas. Despite the evidence of successful funding of WWO and Orlando, among other feminist projects, I have repeatedly heard scholars suggest the NEH’s policy that it will not fund projects “that seek to promote a particular political, religious, or ideological point of view...or projects that advocate a particular program of social action,” necessitates that grant applicants mask or hide the feminism of their projects.<sup>[16]</sup> Do such recommendations arise from sour grapes over past failures to secure



funding? Perhaps. But such assessments make up the social ecology in which digital archives exist and, valid or no, they echo similar experiences in print culture. Take, for example, Jack Halberstam's experience with editors for the book *Gaga Feminism*, who suggested that he remove the word "feminism" in order to get published. There is a sense that "feminism" is a dirty word for more than just our students and that there is good reason to cloak feminist work in other language, even at the risk of losing the history of that work.

The second path to invisibility is perhaps less sinister, but equally harmful to efforts to bring a new generation of students into feminist engagement. I have had a number of conversations with feminists who are a generation or two older than I am over the last year and I have been struck by the ways in which many of them talk about their feminist work as a fundamental, if not always visible, component of their current scholarship. This has taken a couple of different forms, from "I've moved to different topics but the issues are still central to my work" to "its all there, I just don't call it that anymore." It is great to hear that various feminisms are cooked into everything these women do; but it is also a little terrifying. A cooked in feminism is visible in the way that nutmeg is in a cookie — if you're looking, you'll find it. If you're not looking or, as is the case for many students, you don't know how to look for it, you're eating just another delicious (or perhaps just palatable) cookie. A hidden feminism may leave us in a contemporary context where it seems plausible that our tools and methods are all operating out of just a general liberatory ethics, rather than being a set of practices and tools fundamentally linked to the work of women and feminist scholars. We are at an interesting moment for scholarly and public feminism, one in which older power paradigms have shifted, perhaps making the operations of oppression a bit more difficult to see. At the same time, activism and certain ethical positions have become more central to academic and public thought (perhaps also rendering them less radical). While it is a hard moment to ask "where/how feminism?", it seems especially critical if we are to see the real effects of women's work in contemporary culture and productively trouble the sense that we are in some kind of post-feminist moment.

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## Conclusion: Opening Out

I began this project hoping to offer a critical analysis of the Orlando Project and the WWO as feminist digital literary archives. My goal was an assessment of both projects, in particular their technical tools, in feminist terms. Instead, I have written a meditation on the challenges of such a project and included some initial gestures toward the extensive work entailed. I would like to conclude not with a judgment of either project, but a kind of wish for the future that has developed as I have been working on this project. Bianco endorses a range of "digital, creative critical interactions" in her "This Digital Humanities Which is Not One" and I would like to suggest that the facilitation of such *interactions* is crucial for ongoing feminist work in digital literary studies. "Interaction" resonates with the ongoing emphasis on collaboration in the field, but it also suggests the use or inhabiting of the space between actions — between "use" and "creation/making," or between "making" and "theorizing." As "thresholds," digital archives are complex negotiations of the spaces between "thing and theory" — where "thing" signifies both the media through which a user interfaces and the material object being represented or reproduced [Freshwater 2003, 736]. I would add that digital archives are also thresholds between actions. That "thingness" and those actions are as much an experience of the user as they are of the encoder, programmer, and editor. Finding ways to enable user engagement in production would allow us to more fully consider the operations of the archive and the ways in which it serves as a threshold. It also would embody a more radical feminist approach to our understanding of technology as entailing "interplay between designing and use, or between designer and user" [Rosser 2005, 11]. Radical feminist digital literary studies can embrace the cyclical processes of interaction, leveraging rather than resisting change, and bring in a range of producers. Whether through crowd-sourced initiatives, interfaces that express not just the textual instance but the process by which that instance was developed, or critical play zones where small worlds can be created, there is room for greater experimentation with a more radical and creative model of the feminist archive.

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## Notes

[1] See also Margaret Ezell's argument that while we can, theoretically, publish what we please, we still do not due to selective pressures [Ezell 2010].

[2] See Alex Juhasz's discussion of the challenges and pleasures of this kind of plentitude [Juhasz 2011].

- [3] See for example [Fraser 2009].
- [4] See [Liu 2011], [Liu 2012], and [Smith 2007].
- [5] On archival “tacit” narratives and the building of scholarly fact see [Ketelaar 2006].
- [6] For a helpful summary of this see [Wajcman 2010].
- [7] Responding to a panel on Feminist Technologies, Cathy Davidson spoke at the 2012 Society for the Social Studies of Science about the precipitous fall in women majoring in computer science at the undergraduate level (down 80% over the last ten years).
- [8] See footnote 11.
- [9] These are the terms highlighted in Lisa Spiro’s value statement for DH in [Spiro 2012].
- [10] On performative vs declarative markup see [Renear 2001], [Buzzetti 2009], [Flanders 2006], [Flanders and Fiormonte 2007].
- [11] The WWP history traces a longer trajectory than I personally experienced, from being housed in the English department to Computing and Information Services, and, now, in the library. <http://www.wwp.brown.edu/about/history/>. For more on labor and the institutional position of the WWP, see [Flanders 2011].
- [12] Personal communication, Julia Flanders, Monday January 14th
- [13] The theme appears repeatedly in writing on the project, including in [Orlando 1997] and [Orlando 2007]. For theorizations of collaboration as a feminist practice, see [Kaplan and Rose 1993] and [Peck and Mink 1993].
- [14] See [Flower 1994, 218]. Also discussed in [Bauer and Rhoades 1996] in response to pedagogical issues with a complete decentering of authority.
- [15] See also [Hall and Rodriguez 2003], [Beck 1998], and [Schaffer 1998].
- [16] This is standard language for NEH grant guidelines. An example can be found on page three of the Digital Humanities Start Up Grant information, available from the NEH web site at <http://www.neh.gov/files/grants/digital-humanities-start-sept-2011.pdf>

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