After Candidacy: Digital Humanities and Integrated Research

An Interview with Dr Brett Hirsch

During the first semester of 2011, Marco Ceccarelli and Sally Carlton conducted an interview with Dr Brett Hirsch, the 2010 University Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Faculty of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences at The University of Western Australia. Dr Hirsch’s work focuses on the literature and culture of early modern England, with a particular interest in the drama of William Shakespeare and his contemporaries. With such interests, his loyalties are divided between the School of Humanities, the School of Social and Cultural Studies, and the Centre for Medieval and Early Modern Studies.

In this interview, Dr Hirsch delves into a fascinating range of subjects as befitting his wide-ranging scholarly endeavours and interests. Among other topics, he shares with us his current understanding of and future expectations for ‘Digital Humanities’, stresses the professional importance of personal websites, gives us tips and opinions on publishing in the Humanities and provides suggestions for producing strong grant and postdoc applications. Such information will undoubtedly prove invaluable to postgraduates seeking to remain in academia!

Sally Carlton: Dr Brett Hirsch, what exactly does a postdoctoral fellowship entail?

Brett Hirsch: Postdoctoral fellowships in the Arts and Humanities appear to come in two different flavours. The traditional model involves proposing and undertaking your own research project (much like a doctoral thesis), which you (ideally) complete within the term of your fellowship. Teaching is optional: in North America, fellows usually take on additional teaching work to supplement their salaries, whereas in Australia fellows are often given the choice between a research-only or part-research part-teaching fellowship, the latter usually a 25/75% split and over a longer term. In addition to these traditional individual fellowships, team-based research fellowships typical in the Sciences are becoming more common in the Arts and Humanities. These fellowships involve joining an existing team and contributing to an established program of research. The New Oxford Shakespeare, for example, has two postdoctoral research fellows attached to the project working alongside the project leaders and other contributors to produce a new edition of Shakespeare’s Complete Works. Terms for these Science-style postdoctoral fellowships tend to be shorter (one or two years) but with the option of renewal if funding permits.

Marco Ceccarelli: A postdoctoral fellowship is something that many postgraduate students aspire to. As a recipient of such a coveted position, can you offer any advice?
BH: It’s never too early to start building a research profile. While publication is an important aspect, it’s still just part of a larger picture which includes relevant professional service and teaching experience. If the opportunity to do some teaching presents itself, take it. I find I learn much more about a subject by teaching it than by studying it. Teaching is a collaborative enterprise, so you’ll build new links and strengthen existing ones with your supervisors and other Faculty.

It’s just as important to start networking with other postgraduates, early career researchers, and established scholars, as these people will be your future colleagues, collaborators, and critics, or even perhaps your future rivals. Professional service is an excellent way to build these networks. Join all of the relevant societies and organisations in your field and, if the opportunity for professional service presents itself (for example, by serving on a conference committee, helping with the administrative tasks, or standing as a postgraduate representative), take it. Membership of these societies and organisations will also often include access to competitive postgraduate travel grants to attend conferences, as well as news and notices of upcoming conferences and job vacancies.

Don’t underestimate the importance of attending conferences: in addition to facilitating the expansion of your circle of contacts (and the equally important job of maintaining existing links), conferences offer invaluable opportunities for feedback on your work. In much the same way that peer review can strengthen the final article, conference feedback can help to shape the directions of your research and improve your thesis. If you’re presenting a paper at a conference, it’s an added line on your CV. The simple act of preparing a conference abstract and then presenting a paper are all helpful ways of focusing your research and making it sensible outside of your own head. I suppose the message I’m trying to convey is to be proactive, since anything you can do to flesh out your academic CV and expand your research skills and academic network can only be beneficial.

SC: I see you have already held a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Victoria in British Columbia. Is there a limit to the number of postdoctoral fellowships one can hold?

BH: While there aren’t any theoretical limits on the number of postdoctoral fellowships you might hold in a lifetime, practical limitations do crop up in the form of eligibility rules and, more simply, time. For example, according to the 2011 eligibility and assessment criteria for the Newton International Fellowships Scheme (funded by the British Academy and the Royal Society), ‘applicants should have completed a PhD and have held no more than two postdoctoral positions or equivalent experience at a comparable level’. Other fellowship schemes, such as the new ARC Discovery Early Career Researcher Awards, are only open to ‘early career researchers’, variously defined in terms of a limited time after your PhD was awarded (usually with allowances for career interruptions). Since the length of your tenure varies from scheme to scheme (from short-term fellowships of a month or two through to long-term fellowships of up to three years), the number of postdoctoral fellowships you can hold will depend on how many you can fit into the time you’re still eligible. I’m hoping to apply for a third while I’m still able to.

SC: Are there any particular people (besides supervisors) we should look to when putting

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together grant and other applications? You have been awarded two grants (a University Postdoctoral Research Fellowship and a Research Development Award from UWA) so you must have some good ideas and solid techniques!

BH: After your supervisors, it’s beneficial to consult with the dedicated Research Services staff (or equivalent) or the Dean of Research for your Faculty, since they’ll be familiar with the grant rules, requirements, and procedures. Other members of Faculty who have had grant success are often more than willing to share their experience and expertise. Don’t dismiss the importance of peers, both within and outside of your particular field, as well as friends outside of academia, who can read over your applications to ensure they make sense to a non-specialist audience.

As for grant-writing advice, it’s crucial to read over the instructions and rules and to make sure you address the assessment criteria fully. Play to your audience – they aren’t going to fund you if they can’t understand you or your project. Don’t be afraid to ask for help, be willing to accept criticism (both good and bad), and be flexible about making revisions as required.

MC: When did you start and finish your PhD? Your publication list starts in 2005; were you still in the process of writing your doctorate or were you already an Early Career Researcher? When did you start this postdoctoral fellowship?

BH: I started work on my PhD in 2005 and began publishing quite quickly, partly to aid my chances of obtaining a scholarship in the following round. My first publication was a revised version of my honours thesis on the Kabbalah and *The Merchant of Venice*. It was rejected by the first journal I submitted it to on the grounds that it was too esoteric a topic (pun intended), but it was then accepted by a prestigious international journal, *The Ben Jonson Journal*. The remainder of my publications were based on parts of or spin-offs from my doctoral thesis, which I submitted in 2008. I was not yet an ‘early career researcher’ when I first started publishing in the sense that I didn’t have a doctorate. I started my University Postdoctoral Research Fellowship in July 2010.

MC: As postgraduate students, we often hear the phrase, ‘publish or perish’. Do you think this is the case in the Arts and Humanities? What are your recommendations for current postgraduate students in relation to publishing?

BH: Research outputs, of which publications are the most valued, are becoming increasingly important in the Arts and Humanities. Whereas earlier generations of scholars could retire as full professors without having published more than a few articles, a strong track record of publication is now expected of graduates when applying for entry-level academic posts. At the same time, funding agencies around the world are increasingly eager to develop systems for measuring research outputs in the Arts and Humanities qualitatively and quantitatively. There have been attempts to apply models of research impact from the Sciences – such as citation counts and other bibliometrics – to the Arts and Humanities in order to assess and rank journals and, by extension, the scholars that publish in them. Not without controversy, funding bodies in Australia and Europe have produced ranked lists of journals in the Arts and Humanities, which have already influenced how and where research is published: ‘where’

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being the top ranking journals in any given ranking period, and ‘how’ at present being in print, as print journals on the whole are typically ranked more favourably than electronic journals. It’s outside of the scope of this interview for me to discuss the relative merits and shortcomings of these ranking schemes as I see them; suffice to say that they are here to stay, at least for the immediate future. It’s important for postgraduates looking to publish to be aware of these rankings, since they will certainly be relied upon when assessing your applications.

How much effort postgraduates should devote to publishing their research is best considered on a case-by-case basis, as some disciplines publish more frequently than others. Whether a doctoral thesis even works as a monograph is likewise a decision best made on an individual basis. It’s also vital to remember that academic publishers will not consider publishing a monograph based on your doctoral thesis if a large portion – anything above 20% – has already appeared elsewhere. While there are benefits to publishing portions of your thesis while you’re working on it, such as improving your research through processes of peer review and revision as well as building up your academic CV, these should be weighed against the potential (or the desire) to end up with a monograph. My only practical advice when it comes to publishing as a postgraduate is never to be discouraged by rejection.

SC: You hold a number of editorial positions, including co-editorship of the Routledge journal Shakespeare. What do you look for in submitted articles? What makes these articles stand out?

BH: There are two types of articles that I’m always on the lookout for, both as an editor and more importantly as a reader. The first are articles that are provocative but sound; articles that challenge accepted wisdom, current critical trends and/or disciplinary practices. In literary studies, Franco Moretti’s series of articles on ‘distant reading’ are a case in point. Whether you agree with it or not, Moretti’s argument, like his writing style, is elegant, and the methodology he proposes has the potential to initiate a re-orientation of the field. The second type of article is the ‘I wish I had written that’ article, the one whose argument seems so ingenious and yet so obvious that you wonder why you hadn’t thought of it yourself. We’ve all read articles like that. The best articles leave you shaken or stirred, awed or entirely engrossed, or any combination of these. Readers are unlikely to respond well to articles that don’t take risks. When you’re writing a thesis, it’s tempting to toe the line and stick to safe topics, rather than to put your neck out. Unlike a thesis, the point isn’t to make sure that all of yours readers agree with you.

MC: Your interests lie particularly with Shakespeare and other early modern dramatists. What are you working on at the moment?

BH: I’m working on a few things at the moment. I’m writing this from the Huntington Library and Botanical Gardens in Los Angeles, where I’m consulting a copy of Fair Em, an anonymous Elizabethan comedy, of which I’m preparing an electronic critical edition. I’m still to look at other surviving copies of the play in the United Kingdom, so I’ll be busy with that for a while yet. I’m also hoping to start working with Professor Hugh Craig, the Director

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of the Centre for Literary and Linguistic Computing at the University of Newcastle, on a larger project to examine stylistic patterns across a representative corpus of English Renaissance drama. We’ll know in October if our funding bid has been successful. Last, but not least, I’m planning to start work on my first monograph, which will be a study of animal narratives in early modern England, building upon earlier work from my doctoral thesis.

MC: Your profile mentions you are looking at the role of spit in The Merchant of Venice. This sounds intriguing – can you give us some information?

BH: Everyone wants to know about the spit paper! I’m looking at the various cultural and social meanings of spit and spitting in Shakespeare’s England, and offering a reading of The Merchant of Venice in those terms. It started as a conference paper and a bit of fun, but it’s now destined for an edited collection on transgressive behaviour in early modern England. I’m attracted to the obscure and the esoteric, so a lot of my research tends to start with something marginal and small (like two references to spit in The Merchant, or a single reference to lycanthropy in John Webster’s The Duchess of Malfi) that intersect with larger cultural questions, such as the nature of Jewish identity in Shakespeare’s England or the permeable boundaries between the human and the nonhuman/animal. In the end, what I’m doing feels like literary and cultural detective work.

SC: You have a personal website (http://www.notwithoutmustard.net/). In your opinion, what are the professional benefits of having a website?

BH: With more and more PhD graduates entering the job market, it’s increasingly important to be visible. After leafing through your CV, a potential employer will almost certainly seek out more information about you on Google. No doubt you’ve left digital footprints scattered across the Internet, and perhaps there’s even a little blurb about your research on the School or Faculty listing of current postgraduates, but there’s no substitute for a well-managed web presence. Your website should be a one-stop shop about you as an academic – offering your contact and brief biographical details, a statement or two about your current research interests, your current CV and list of publications, and your teaching portfolio (with sample syllabi if you’ve developed any) – over which you have complete control and can keep up-to-date.

Potential employers aren’t the only people using Google to source academics: journal editors and academic publishers looking for suitable readers for peer review, students seeking appropriate and available supervision, the media on the hunt for expert commentary, as well as other scholars exploring future collaborations and organising conferences or professional organisations, all rely on the Internet to aid in their searches. Your website should therefore cater to a wide audience, since it will be accessible to the public-at-large, but that’s not to say it needs to be sterile and detached. As long as the overall tone remains professional, your academic website can include more personal content. I’m an avid bagpiper, so I have a section of my website devoted to my passion for Irish and Scottish traditional folk music. I know other academics who maintain similar sections of their websites devoted to hobbies such as competitive cycling, commonplacing, and gourmet cooking to mention but a few. You also don’t have to be an award-winning graphic designer or programming guru to put together your own academic website. There are a number of free hosting services available.
(such as Blogger\textsuperscript{5}, Wordpress\textsuperscript{6}, or Webs\textsuperscript{7}), many of which come with ready-made templates and easy-to-use interfaces for putting together your website. If you’re more tech-savvy, register your own domain name and build your website on whatever platform you’re comfortable with. Just remember: once it’s online, it’s out there!

\textit{SC: In your profile description we noticed ‘Digital Humanities’ features as one of your research interests. Could you give us an explanation of Digital Humanities and inform us on its role in the future of academia?}

\textbf{BH:} I’ve heard Digital Humanities described as ‘the computational turn’ in the Humanities. This is an apt description, because it suggests both a practical turn (e.g. the application of methodologies from Computer Science in the Humanities) and an abstract turn (e.g. computing and new media as subjects for Humanities study). This includes everything from the creation of innovative electronic scholarly editions, such as the Codex Sinaiticus Project\textsuperscript{8} and the Internet Shakespeare Editions\textsuperscript{9}, through to computer-aided quantitative analysis of literary and historical data (for use in authorship attribution studies, for example) and visualisations of the same materials, such as The Map of Early Modern London\textsuperscript{10} and the Simulated Environment for Theatre\textsuperscript{11}, which produce interactive maps and three-dimensional models of performance spaces respectively. Whether under the banner of ‘Digital Humanities’ or ‘Humanities Computing’, the intersection and collaboration between Computer Science and the Humanities offers potentially new and exciting avenues for research as well as pedagogy, and is gaining more mainstream recognition in academia and beyond. The New York Times, for example, now has a column named ‘Humanities 2.0’ to showcase research in this area for a wider, public audience.

As for its future in academia, I believe there will come a time where the ‘Digital’ is no longer needed as a prefix to distinguish between research done in the Humanities, and that more training in Digital Humanities principles and practices will be offered at the undergraduate and graduate level as public interest and student demand increases.

\textit{Dr Hirsch, thank you kindly for your thoughtful and insightful answers to our questions. On behalf of the Limina collective, we would like to wish you the best of luck in what is evidently a wonderful and promising academic career.}

Marco Ceccarelli and Sally Carlton

\textsuperscript{5} Blogger, Google Inc., 10 May 2011, \texttt{http://www.blogspot.com/}.
\textsuperscript{6} Wordpress, Automattic Inc., 10 May 2011, \texttt{http://www.wordpress.com/}.
\textsuperscript{7} Webs, Webs Inc., 10 May 2011, \texttt{http://www.webs.com/}.
\textsuperscript{8} Codex SinAITicus Project, 10 May 2011 \texttt{http://www.codexsinaiticus.com/en/}.
\textsuperscript{9} Internet Shakespeare Editions, Gen. Ed. Michael Best, University of Victoria, 10 May 2011 \texttt{http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/}.
\textsuperscript{10} Map of Early Modern London, Gen. Ed. Janelle Jenstad, University of Victoria, 10 May 2011 \texttt{http://mapoflondon.uvic.ca/}.
\textsuperscript{11} Simulated Environment for Theatre, Experimental Reading Workshop, 10 May 2011 \texttt{http://www.humviz.org/set/}.