Gender Anomalies in a Biographical Database

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Collective Biographies of Women

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for more thanks, see http://cbw.iath.virginia.edu “ABOUT PEOPLE”

http://womensbios.lib.virginia.edu annotated bibliography

8500+ persons, including male and female biographers

1272 collections=books with 3+ all-female biographies

14,444 chapters in these books, primarily biographies of one woman

Recognition? Typecasting? Beyond binaries?

Alison: “Strategic typologies”

Susan: “Categorically provisional”
Prosopography = personae-writing
biographies in and about groups, collective biography

• “Prosopon” = mask or persona
  • Appearance, visual representation

• Prosopopeia, the rhetoric of invoking/animating an absent or dead entity, is the archivist’s voice!
  But...death had undone so many!
Prosopography

To deal with the many

in parallel lives

A method by historians, philologists, digital humanists to interpret patterned data re populations
SNAC is prosopography

Linked CBW and SNAC records  NEH
Startup Level II 2015-2017
Who does what to whom?

Persons in printed prosopographies are already framed or labeled. Sometimes written by friends, sometimes still living.

Rarely based on archival research.

We infer types and categories from implied audience

And from other paratext: Prefaces or comments in the narratives. Titles and TOCs already indicate types, e.g. African American; Methodist.
The why of representing women

Reading can reveal the criteria for selecting the subjects.

Broad title:
*Great Wives and Mothers* (New York, 1917-1927)

All 18 women are Catholic in chronological TOC.

Being Catholic is more remarkable in post-Reformation, but not stated by paratext.
Mary Read, pirate of the Caribbean
strategic typologies.
Team of student RAs and project leaders choose from controlled vocabulary. Each person has multiple types, not just nationality, occupation. We identify “race” as the book and chapter state it (white is default).

adventuress (36)
cross-dressing (55),
military women (104),
• sexual agency, bissexual or queer
• Sexual agency, transgression (hetero)
• sexual agency, transgression (homo)

Writers, artists, etc.
Genius is often considered a gender transgression (“the brain of a man, the heart of a woman”).
Search Persons

NAME (AUTO-COMPLETE):

SEARCH BY FULL NAME:
- Last Name
- First Name
- Middle Name
- Prefix
- Suffix

LIFE DATES:
Filter by year Person was alive

GENDER:
- Assumed-F
- Female
- Gender nonconforming
- Male
- Transgender
- Unknown

About CBW Person Records

CBW contains over 8600 Person Records: one for every person who is the subject of a chapter in a collective biography of women. All authors, editors, illustrators, and translators (classified as "presenters" in CBW) have Person Records as well.

A Person Record has
- Annotated bibliographic information about every book in which the Person is featured.
- A documentary social network in similar collections.

Most Person Records also have
- Life dates
- Gender
- Alternate Person names
- Thematic categorization by Collection (book) Type
- Thematic categorization by Person Type
Can we ethically provide access to the nineteenth century’s ways of labeling people?

Are we clearly designating our new labels as anachronistic?