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Review: Collective Biographies of Women

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Project

Collective Biographies of Women

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Project URL

<https://womensbios.lib.virginia.edu/>

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Project Overview**Alison Booth**

Collective Biographies of Women (CBW) is an open-source feminist digital humanities project that spans the disciplines of literature and history, focusing on a genre of English-language books printed since the eighteenth century. These 1272 books, by men and women, are not reference works but collections of life stories for general readers, portraying over 8000 women of many kinds, more than half of them almost unknown today. CBW began at the University of Virginia (UVA) Library E-text Center and Scholars' Lab (with guidance from Bethany Nowvskie, Joe Gilbert, Wayne Graham, and Jeremy Boggs). The library continues to host an [online annotated bibliography](#) expanded from Alison Booth's book, *How to Make It as a Woman* (Chicago, 2004), peer reviewed by [NINES](#) (2007). Booth directs the project with collaboration of graduate research assistants, and Rennie Mapp and Lloyd Sy have served as project managers. During fellowships in the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities (IATH) from 2009-2012, Worthy Martin (Director of IATH), Daniel Pitti (then Associate Director), and Booth, along with IATH developers, built a relational database from the XML-tagged bibliography. Instead of providing a corpus, we link to HathiTrust and WorldCat to help researchers find the texts. Our aims have been to interpret trends in representation of networks of historical women of many nationalities, eras, and social types. The database—after many hours devoted to biographical data, typologies, search functions, and visualizations—provides the context for measuring these trends, and the basis for documenting the narrative and ideological conventions of this neglected genre. For this, teams of editors use our

stand-aside XML schema, Biographical Elements and Structure Schema (BESS), which refers to paragraphs in TEI texts of samples of these books.

With the aid of an ACLS Digital Innovation Fellowship (2014) and NEH ODH Startup Level II (2015-2017) grant, as well as research funds from the UVA English Department and the Library, we pursued Linked Open Data: sets of CBW person records have been interlinked with Social Networks and Archival Context (see African American cohort; subjects in books that include Lola Montez). Wikidata includes CBW's person IDs. We manage workflow from an Admin interface, where some searches, data, and visualizations are easier to access than the public interface, which we designed with assistance of Anne Chesnut (vendor) based on feedback from the NEH Startup advisory board. The WordPress CBW Forum dates from 2015, and student blogs are in the pipeline (co-authored pieces by undergraduates were part of the earlier Featured Subjects, e.g. Lady Jane Grey). We have no user data but conceive of the audience as college level to advanced digital humanists, with interests ranging from women's history to narrative theory. We have been contacted by genealogists, archivists, and high school students; have been asked to speak to an alumni reading group; and were noted in *Smithsonian Magazine* (March, 2019) on gender bias in Wikipedia. Scholars such as Michelle Moravec and Karen Bourrier have tweeted about CBW's methods. Alison Hedley and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra term CBW "a bellwether of feminist prosopography," changing digital humanities approaches to data about historical women (165). Booth has presented on CBW at the annual Digital Humanities, Association for Computers and the Humanities, Modern Language Association, and Narrative conferences and published articles on CBW, including "Prosopography and Crowded Attention in Old and New Media," in *On Life-Writing*, edited by Zachary Leader (Oxford, 2015).

Works Cited

Hedley, Alison and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra. "Prototyping Personography for the Yellow Nineties Online: Queering and Querying History in the Digital Age." *Bodies of Information*, edited by Elizabeth Losh and Jacqueline Wernimont, University of Minnesota Press, 2018, pp. 157-172.

Project Review

Ali Gunnells

The Collective Biographies of Women (CBW) provides a rich resource for those interested in prosopography, a genre of publication in which short biographies of various figures are issued as a collection. The goal of CBW is to build an annotated bibliography of English-language books published in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that consist solely of three or more short biographies of women.

CBW is an explicitly feminist project, as it furthers the study of women's lives. It provides an avenue for unearthing a variety of histories that might be otherwise unknown or ignored. CBW provides access to biographies that allow users a richer and more nuanced perspective on history and literature from almost 1300 books written by men and women. With over 8000 individual and group biographies, CBW offers windows into the lives of those who contribute to, are the subject of, or serve as the audience of literature.

The website provides several options for interacting with the annotated bibliography. For instance, users can click on the "Browse the Bibliography" page to access an alphabetical listing of every included entry. The "Search the Bibliography" page allows users to search by entering key terms or names. One particularly interesting aspect of this project is the "Featured Subjects" page. This page provides a list of well-known women from this historical period, with a link to a page that includes more information about that figure and links to bibliographic entries. Finally, the "Pop Chart" page provides an overview of which women are most mentioned in bibliographies from 1850-1930. The website is straightforward in its design and quite easy for new users to navigate. The "About" page provides a very detailed and helpful overview of the project's aims, including a background on prosopography as a genre and the rationale behind its various features. In addition, the website indicates that there are new initiatives currently in the works, particularly the Sister Dora Project and a tool that will allow users to compare multiple biographies.

Further opportunities for development lie in expanding the work both in its representativeness and its connection to primary source materials. While the "Featured Subjects" page is a helpful avenue for becoming familiar with the database, it nevertheless primarily includes well-known women from history. A page that highlights lesser known, but nonetheless important, women could provide a helpful contrast to the "Featured Subjects" page. Additionally, while each entry does include links that allow users to search for each book in OCLC WorldCat and Google Books, it would be useful where possible to include direct display of digitized versions held by cultural heritage institutions.

The project has garnered funding in the form of grants from sources such as the American Council of Learned Societies and National Endowment for the Humanities, largely due to its innovative nature as a digital project. As a project spearheaded by narrative theorists, CBW highlights the importance of attending to the form and rhetoric of the prosopography genre. CBW's digital platform has been lauded for its groundbreaking work allowing users to examine large collections of women's biographies, facilitating a "feminist analysis of gendered biographical conventions" (Hedley and Kooistra 165). Thus, the Collective Biographies of Women demonstrates the possibilities for feminist literary scholarship in digital environments.

Works Cited

Hedley, Alison and Lorraine Janzen Kooistra. "Prototyping Personography for the Yellow Nineties Online: Queering and Querying History in the Digital Age." *Bodies of Information*, edited by Elizabeth Losh and Jacqueline Wernimont, University of Minnesota Press, 2018, pp. 157-172.