

*Irish Literary Feminism and Its Digital Archive(s)**Margaret Kelleher and Karen Wade*

[O]ne of the central tenets of feminist thinking is that all knowledge is situated. A less academic way to put this is that context matters [...]. Refusing to acknowledge context is a power play to avoid power. It's a way to assert authoritativeness and mastery without being required to address the complexity of what the data actually represent . . .

Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein¹

Once we recognize that digital resources, collections, and archives are not static, that they have a history, then we can begin to excavate that history. Moreover, it is a material history; it involves changes in technology, cultural factors, and commercial forces.

Stephen H. Gregg²

Feminist literary retrieval projects in Ireland quickly embraced the bibliographical and hypertextual possibilities offered in the early 2000s by the then burgeoning field of digital humanities. Many of these digital projects have an important prehistory in printed form, a genealogy which, as this essay will explore, has shaped the nature and impact of the online archive. Situating these projects in an international context of feminist digital humanities is also an important means of identifying what Irish projects have achieved to date, and their limitations. And looking to the future of the feminist digital, and the potential offered by big data, we will explore how long-standing digital questions of access, interoperability, and sustainability continue to influence the parameters of our field.

¹ Catherine D'Ignazio and Lauren F. Klein, '6. The Numbers Don't Speak for Themselves', *Data Feminism* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2020), open access at <https://data-feminism.mitpress.mit.edu/pub/czq9df5/release/3> (accessed 6 July 2022).

² Stephen H. Gregg, *Old Books and Digital Publishing: Eighteenth-Century Collections Online* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p. 101.

The Literary Archive: Digital and Feminist

The publication in 2002 of *Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*, Volumes IV and V of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, was a landmark moment in Irish literary studies, and not only for its feminist members. In their joint preface, the editors close with this invitation: 'We offer this anthology to all our readers as a sampler of texts which are historically interesting, aesthetically accomplished and politically indispensable.'³ The choice of the term 'sampler' is strategic in temporal and gendered terms; the *Oxford English Dictionary* definitions include: 'an illustrative or typical instance; a specimen' (first recorded usage c.1400); a 'piece of canvas embroidered by a girl or woman as a specimen of skill, usually containing the alphabet and some mottoes worked in ornamental characters, with various decorative devices' (first usage 1523); an 'electronic device or (occasionally) a piece of software used to sample sounds, excerpts of music, etc.' (first usage 1985); and 'a person who uses such a device; spec. a person who obtains digital sound samples (esp. from recordings by other artists) for use in his or her own music' (first usage 1988).⁴ Given that these two volumes had contentiously emerged from the disappointment and controversy generated by Volumes I–III (1991), the shifting claims even within this short line – from meek, through confident, to bold – are also noteworthy.

Critical reception of Volumes IV and V, however, was mixed from the outset, and the full impact of the scholarship contained within their pages, specifically its transformative potential for the teaching of Irish literature, is yet to be realised. Some early critics lamented that the very size of the two volumes, significantly longer in page count than their three predecessors, functioned against their use and accessibility, while simultaneously such critics were also keen to identify gaps and omissions. The title of *The Guardian's* review usefully illustrates this dual impulse: 'too much, but still not enough'.⁵ In one of the most positive and constructive of early reviews, published in the *Irish Literary Supplement*, Anne Fogarty identified a crucial shift in the modes of knowledge being offered: the volumes, she observed, are 'far less an anthology, in even the modified current understanding of that term, than a database that assembles a vast quantity of material and affords the possibility of multiple cross-connections'.⁶

³ Angela Bourke, Siobhán Kilfeather, Maria Luddy, Margaret Mac Curtain, Gerardine Meaney, Máirín Ní Dhonnchadha, Mary O'Dowd and Clair Wills, eds., *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Vols. IV and V: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions* (Derry and Cork: Field Day and Cork University Press, 2002), vol. IV, p. xxxvi (hereafter *FDA*).

⁴ OED, s.v. *sampler*.

⁵ Aisling Foster, 'Too Much, But Still Not Enough', *The Guardian*, 4 January 2003.

⁶ Anne Fogarty, 'Challenging Boundaries', *Irish Literary Supplement* 22:1 (Spring 2003), 3.

Fogarty's comment attests to the widespread move to database and hypertextual modes then occurring within archival or large-scale bibliographical projects. In 1992, just a year after the publication of *FDA* Volumes I–III, and reflecting in part on his own recently completed collection of romantic verse, Jerome McGann defined the work of anthologies in terms that pointed to his own growing interest in the possibilities offered by digital literary studies:

The anthology focuses one's attention on local units of order – individual poems and groups of poems. As a consequence, these units tend to splinter the synthetic inertia of the work-as-a-whole into an interactive and dialogical scene. Possibilities of order appear at different scalar levels because the center of the work is not so much a totalized form as a dynamically emergent set of constructible hypotheses of historical relations.⁷

One of the few commentaries on *FDA* Volumes IV and V to recognise a similar potential is Claire Bracken's analysis of the anthology as *event*: here she identifies how the volumes (divided into sections and subsections together with extensive cross-referencing with and between these elements) offer 'rhizomatic reading paths' ('rhizomes operate according to nomadic principles in that they are multifarious and multi-directional'), and contain 'in their very becoming the potential to extend the space of Irish feminist scholarship into the realm of the desubjectified'.⁸

In the years immediately following the publication of *FDA* Volumes IV and V, three projects, two financed by Irish third-level funding and one by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council, significantly expanded the known field of Irish women's writing; two combined print and electronic resources, and one was electronic only. In 2005, the publication of the *Dictionary of Munster Women Writers* and accompanying website provided bibliographic entries on 560 women writers, including 220 in Irish, who wrote between 1800 and 2000.⁹ Its stated objective was to advance 'literary and cultural as distinct from primarily historical research on the region of Munster over the last two centuries' and to 'enable a new view, as a whole, of the work of women writers', one which 'juxtaposes the work of Irish,

⁷ Jerome McGann, 'Rethinking Romanticism', *ELH* 59:3 (1992), 735–54 (p. 745). McGann began work on the Rossetti Archive in 1993, and the project was completed in 2008. See www.rossettiarchive.org/ (accessed 6 July 2022).

⁸ Claire Bracken, 'Becoming-Mother-Machine: The Event of Field Day Vols IV and V', in *Irish Literature: Feminist Perspectives*, ed. Patricia Coughlan and Tina O'Toole (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2011), pp. 223–44 (pp. 233–4).

⁹ Tina O'Toole, ed., *Dictionary of Munster Women Writers, 1800–2000* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2005).

English-language, and bilingual writers, and thereby helps to develop an understanding of the province of Munster as a diverse cultural milieu, and focus on the role of regionality in the process of cultural creation'.¹⁰ A notable strength of this resource, as with the *Field Day* volumes, was its extension of the genres of 'writing' deemed worthy of inclusion, ranging through 'unpublished diaries, journals, and letters, together with plays, documentaries, film-scripts and journalism, cookery books and manuals, as well as fiction and poetry' and, in the case of Irish-language content, 'contributions to the folk and song traditions rather [than] to more conventional forms of writing'. From the outset, the editor and contributors underlined their ambition that the *Dictionary*, published 'in conjunction with (and profoundly influenced by) the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions*', would work similarly to 'stimulate further research and inquiry'.¹¹

In 2006, the publication of Rolf and Magda Loeber's magisterial 1,672-page *A Guide to Irish Fiction, 1650–1900* transformed understanding of Irish publication history, especially so for the period prior to 1800.¹² In 2011, the An Foras Feasa team at Maynooth University's Humanities Institute launched an online searchable version of the *Guide*, whereby the bibliographic information for over 5,800 titles and the work of over 1,700 authors was now in electronic form.¹³ Under gender, search categories were constituted as 'female named authors', 'male named authors', 'pseudonymous authors, believed male', 'pseudonymous authors, believed female', and 'gender unknown', reflecting the presence and import of women's literary production during these centuries.¹⁴ One of the key objectives of the project was, in the short term, to link users with the increasing number of digital editions becoming available (thus each title contains a hyperlink to known digital editions of the works), but in the longer term to encourage reflection on what Irish works were being digitised, to what effect, and what works remained neglected and inaccessible.

¹⁰ O'Toole, 'Introduction', in *ibid.*, p. xv.

¹¹ See book description, www.corkuniversitypress.com/Dictionary-of-Munster-Women-Writers-1800-2000-p/9781859183885.htm (accessed 6 July 2022).

¹² Rolf Loeber and Magda Loeber, with Anne M. Burnham, *A Guide to Irish Fiction, 1650–1900* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006).

¹³ The project team members were John Keating, Aja Teehan, Eamonn Kearns, and Margaret Kelleher and the project was funded by the Irish Research Council.

¹⁴ Java Classes were designed and written by the software engineer to parse the basic MS Word files and generate the data structure, which is encoded in XML (Extensible Markup Language). Apache Struts was used as an open-source web application framework and Apache Tomcat as web server environment.

In 2007, the Women in Modern Irish Culture Database (WIMIC), under the leadership of primary investigators Maria Luddy and Gerardine Meaney, was launched, providing a bibliographical database of 9,647 Irish women writers, who wrote in both Irish and English, between 1800 and 2005. The team created a complex relational database to provide details on individual writers, place and dates of birth, dates of death, and marital and educational status, where such biographical details were available and reliable. An especially valuable aspect of the database is its provision of the various names and known pseudonyms under which women wrote and were published, along with details of printers and publishers for each work.¹⁵

Notably, none of the three electronic resources cited here survive in their original form. In the case of WIMIC, the original database is no longer available, but access was restored with a new interface in 2018.¹⁶ The Loeber electronic edition is, at the time of writing, in the process of migration to a University College Dublin platform. The original Munster Women Writers website is no longer available, yet the project is enjoying an unexpected digital afterlife; in September 2020, the *Dictionary of Munster Women Writers* was scanned and uploaded to the Internet Archive, and is now available to the general public (on the basis of individual short-term digital loans), with a searchable text.¹⁷ Although a welcome development, this repurposing of a no-longer-supported resource by a third party prompts questions about the survival and afterlife of digital projects, especially given some of the copyright controversies that have arisen in relation to the Internet Archive.

The challenges and problems facing Irish digital, feminist resources are not only ones of sustainability and technical maintenance, though these are currently the most obvious. Comparable digital projects elsewhere have generated incisive and unsettling questions regarding the status and achievement of feminist digital literary archives. In her analysis of race and the new digital humanities canon, Amy Earhart has highlighted how many small-scale but significant recovery projects ‘remain but a trace in the current digital literary canon’.¹⁸ And, as valuably summarised by Ellen Rooney in her introduction to the *Cambridge Companion to Feminist*

¹⁵ Women in Modern Irish Culture (WIMIC) Database, <https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/history/irish/womenwriters/database/> (accessed 6 July 2022).

¹⁶ The following note accompanies search results: ‘Access to the database was restored with a new interface in 2018 by the Digital Humanities team, and is now made available for the public on a “best effort” basis. There are known issues.’

¹⁷ Dictionary of Munster Women Writers, 1800–2000, <https://archive.org/details/dictionaryofmunsoooounse> (accessed 6 July 2022).

¹⁸ Amy E. Earhart, ‘Can Information Be Unfettered? Race and the New Digital Humanities Canon’, in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew Gold (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota

Literary Theory, key feminist interventions have ‘engendered the insight that systemic exclusions are not easily repaired by a simple additive approach, by the “inclusion” of once marginalized women and communities in a renovated theoretical totalization’.¹⁹ This issue is an especially relevant one for Irish literary studies, where a focus on ‘recovery’ is also, as Moynagh Sullivan has incisively observed, ‘in danger of replicating the logic of the oedipal model, which privileges a mode of intergenerational transmission that actually *needs* the absence of the woman-to-woman intergenerationality for its own continuing’.²⁰ Her comments on what retrieval may at once allow and disallow are still keenly pertinent for digital archival projects:

This necessary retrieval has often been called upon to justify itself in terms of the work’s relevance as an antecedent according to the values already established in a self-promoting tradition. However, accepting the terms already set as the means by which a lost work may be validated disallows the potential such work has to alter the model of tradition already in place.²¹

Relatedly, and building explicitly on Rooney’s observations, Jacqueline Wernimont has warned of the dangers of perpetuating in feminist-led digital work the ‘familiar patriarchal tropes of size, mastery, and comprehensive collection’, and poses the following questions:

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 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?²²

The continuing absence from university syllabi, or publishers’ lists, of many of the Irish women ‘discovered’ by digital research projects – coupled with the aforementioned difficulties in maintaining digital feminist resources – indicates that presence is only the first step in securing real engagement with the literary archive of women’s writings.

Press, 2012), p. 314; open access at <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/projects/debates-in-the-digital-humanities> (accessed 6 July 2022).

¹⁹ Ellen Rooney, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 3.

²⁰ Moynagh Sullivan, “‘I Am Not Yet Delivered of the Past’: The Poetry of Blanaid Salkeld”, *Irish University Review* 33:1 (2003), 182–200 (p. 187).

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Jacqueline Wernimont, ‘Whence Feminism? Assessing Feminist Interventions in Digital Literary Archives’, *DHQ: Digital Humanities Quarterly* 7:1 (2013), 1–23 (p. 4).

More positively, the long process of making digital surrogates available for Volumes IV and V of *FDA* by Queen's University Belfast and JSTOR was completed in spring 2021: a process in which complex questions of copyright proved the largest delaying factor.²³ In the longer term, the existence of an online electronic version offers new life in what McGann has termed an 'interactive and dialogical scene': readily accessible PDFs of the individual sections within the two *FDA* volumes have the potential to inform and transform modules and syllabi, and to generate new research topics and questions.²⁴ The introductory essays by a wide range of experts in their fields are hugely valuable teaching tools, and the excerpts and selections invite, in the dual mode which characterises the best of anthologies, both extensive reading across a dazzling array of previously unknown sources and intensive reading of individual authors and topics. In the shorter term, however, the searchability of the contents within the larger JSTOR database is still limited and the PDF table of contents for the volumes remains the primary search vehicle; we look forward to their fuller integration within the JSTOR platform so that future browsing can yield rich and surprising results for Irish feminist-related queries.

Connect – Disconnect – Reconnect

The establishment of 'feminist networked connections' is, as Claire Bracken has observed,²⁵ a key enabling trait of recent Irish feminist literary scholarship; her examples include the Munster Women Writers Project, WIMIC, and Women Writers in the New Ireland (WWINI) network (founded in 2007). As noted earlier, Irish feminist digital projects were keen to support, and build upon, each other's endeavours, but that network of connections has not been replicated with similar projects internationally, resulting in some remarkable missed opportunities for digital literary feminism. To give one example, the Orlando Project, available by paid subscription from Cambridge University Press and subtitled 'Women's Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present', is a valuable, large-scale online project which seeks to create 'a dynamic inquiry from any number of perspectives into centuries of women's writing'.²⁶ Its creators self-describe the project as 'a new kind of electronic

²³ See www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1fkgbdv and www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1fkgbfc (accessed 6 July 2022).

²⁴ McGann, 'Rethinking Romanticism', p. 745.

²⁵ Claire Bracken, 'The Feminist Contemporary: The Contradictions of Critique', in *The New Irish Studies*, ed. Paige Reynolds (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 144–60 (p. 155).

²⁶ For more information on the background to the Orlando Project, see www.artsrn.ualberta.ca/orlando/ (accessed 6 July 2022).

textbase for research and discovery', a choice of term which they explain as follows: 'Orlando's differences as literary history arise largely from its integration of readable text and electronic structure. That is why we call it a textbase rather than a database: it returns results in prose rather than in tabular form.'²⁷

The Orlando Project is further distinguished by its aim, through extensive formal markup and conceptual tagging, to enable 'the investigation of interrelationships'; a key ambition therefore is to supplement 'a traditional emphasis on the single writer with several possible views of a writer operating in relation with others, either contemporary or across generations'.²⁸ Tag searches are possible by 'lives', 'writings' and 'bibliography', and the specific tags are suggestive and inviting, including ethnicity, cultural formation, nationality, 'intimate relationships', pseudonym, given name and self-constructed name, etc. However, the results of searches remain highly reliant on the level of detail within specific entries: 'Anglo-Irish' used as a tag of ethnicity in authors' lives returns just one result; as a tag of cultural formation, it returns a more promising eighty-seven results. More concerningly for a project entitled 'Women's Writing in the British Isles', treatment of the vexed category of nationality proves less than satisfactory. The project description explains that 'Irish-born writers living before the establishment of the Irish Free State on 6 December 1921 are considered British; those living after independence are grouped with "other women writers" and those who bridge the process of political change appear in both groups.'²⁹ A simple search of 'Irish' within the tag of 'nationality' brings some tortured results wherein worthy categorisation obscures meaningful context: May Laffan, one reads, 'belonged to the Irish middle class. A Roman Catholic, she came from a religiously mixed household (highly unusual in deeply sectarian nineteenth-century Ireland)'. Charlotte Riddell was 'of the Irish or Anglo-Irish gentry by predominant heritage', and novelist and prosopographer Elizabeth Owens Blackburne Casey was 'Irish by birth and family, presumably white, and probably Protestant, which is to say a member of the Church of Ireland'. These samples are intended less to illustrate the perils of what is likely to have been overly hasty data entry, but more seriously to demonstrate the failure of many digital humanities projects to draw from,

²⁷ <https://orlando.cambridge.org/about/introduction> (accessed 6 July 2022). Full access to the project is possible only through subscription, administered by Cambridge University Press. See <http://orlando.cambridge.org/> (accessed 6 July 2022).

²⁸ Information drawn from <https://orlando.cambridge.org/about/introduction>.

²⁹ Quoted from 'Scholarly Introduction: Literary History with a Difference', <http://orlando.cambridge.org/about/introduction>.

or 'harvest', existing scholarship, especially given the efforts of scholars in *FDA* Volumes IV and V to provide authoritative and nuanced biographical profiles for these and many other figures.

Missed opportunities to deepen our understanding of the interrelationship of gender and literary project have been evident in many early digital humanities quantitative projects. One notable example from the perspective of Irish women's writings is Matthew Jockers's book, and related research project, *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History* (2013), which offers a detailed quantitative study of nineteenth-century literature. The corpus assembled by Jockers comprises 3,346 nineteenth-century novels (British, Irish, and American) or, as he estimates, between 5 and 10 per cent of those published during the nineteenth century. Early in the book, Jockers employs what he himself terms 'the simple counting and sorting of texts based on metadata' to bring about interesting research results regarding the geographical and chronological distribution of nineteenth-century American fiction and specifically Irish-American fiction.³⁰ His examination of Irish-American literary output in the context of eastern and western demographics, for example, shows that Irish Americans in the west wrote about being Irish in America far more frequently than their compatriots in the east – a finding that challenges earlier assumptions about the operation of ethnic markers within Irish-American literary production. In contrast, his research findings with respect to gender are limited indeed, and while some interesting quantitative results are provided, the absence of a contextual analysis is regrettable, especially so given the body of feminist analyses of nineteenth-century Irish and Irish-American culture which preceded Jockers's work. For example, his statistical evidence that published fiction by Irish-American women writers in the west rose rapidly in the early twentieth century, yields the following comment: 'It suggests either that the West offered something special for Irish American women or that there was something special about the Irish women who went west, or, still more likely, that it was some combination of both.'³¹ 'Something special' is, despite its vagueness, an improvement on earlier critical terms such as 'minor' which have served to occlude many excellent works by Irish women, but the chance offered by this large body of data to further our understanding of how regional, gender, and ethnic

³⁰ Matthew Jockers, *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013), p. 48.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 40–2.

factors combined to enable women's literary careers was a tantalising one, and as yet not realised.

Big Data and Digital Feminism

A closer inspection of the logic and assumptions operative within the work of Jockers and colleagues yields some critical insights for the future of big data and for digital feminism. One of the key arguments underpinning *Macroanalysis* can be summarised as follows: in order to gain a truly fair, unbiased understanding of the complete history of literature, it is imperative that we make use of all of the digital resources at our disposal – including the vast and increasing archives of digitised texts, and the tools being developed to explore them – in order to study the entirety of this history. The increasing availability of large-scale digital archives, coupled with the fact that human observation is necessarily biased, Jockers argues, render close reading 'totally inappropriate as a method of studying literary history'.³²

Jockers's provocative and much-challenged statement employs a logic of supplantation, in which not only is the individual text subordinate to the vast archive in terms of meaningfulness, but the very study of literature through individual works or authors is no longer tenable on any level. Notably, that claim is rather oddly couched in the language of propriety rather than of validity or, say, meaningfulness ('totally inappropriate'). A similar assumption as to the absolute polarisation between the individual text and the digital archive appears in the work of other high-profile digital humanists at the time, and reflects a larger desire to claim the perceivedly brand-new field of digital literary studies solely as the province of big data, the massive digital archive, and quantitative or 'distant reading' methodologies. A further instance may be seen in Franco Moretti's assertion that quantitative methods are 'repugnant' to literary critics because of 'the fear that they may suppress the uniqueness of texts'; insouciantly, Moretti confirms that 'indeed they do. But as I don't believe in the epistemological value of the unique, its suppression doesn't really bother me.'³³

Yet it is only through the process of actually reading those unique texts that it becomes possible to generate meaningful findings, such as the fact that the west offered 'something special' to Irish-American women. As

³² Ibid., p. 7.

³³ Franco Moretti, 'Narrative Markets, ca.1850', *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 20:2 (1997), 151–74 (p. 151).

Barbara Herrnstein Smith argues, ‘if the offense is that many worthy or interesting texts remain unread because of past biases, then what is wanted, surely, is to have those texts read, not just counted’.³⁴ The combination of close reading and careful counting of works is key to a feminist approach to the digital archive: not just the amassing of undifferentiated texts, but the careful consideration of which works are present, which are absent, and what factors determine each of these questions.

An argument which is often used to support focusing on large collections rather than individual texts – and one that on first reading might seem hospitable to the aims of feminist critics – is that this will compensate for the tendency of scholarship to elevate a small handful of texts at the expense of, as Matthew Wilkens puts it, ‘pretty much everything ever written’.³⁵ A sufficiently extensive archive, in Wilkens’s argument, represents a more universal human experience than the selective literary canons which we have inherited, and which almost certainly do exclude many texts that are worthy of interest. This view, however, also implies an unjustified confidence that the quantitative study of literature would result – by default – in findings that are fundamentally more meaningful than could be achieved by any way of examining texts in the way in which humans actually read them: that is, one at a time. danah boyd and Kate Crawford have described this concept as the ‘mythology’ of big data: the widespread assumption that ‘large data sets offer a higher form of intelligence and knowledge that can generate insights that were previously impossible, with the aura of truth, objectivity, and accuracy’.³⁶ Part of such a mythos is the presumption that the large data sets in question – in this case, massive literary archives – are both sufficiently complete and sufficiently representative of the history of recorded human thought that any gaps, omissions, or imbalances will be smoothed over by the sheer quantity of text available to scholars. Some of the most frequently employed literary archives have bought into and even exacerbated, if unwittingly, this perception in optimistically declaring their intent towards universality: Google Books declares that it is ‘not done – not until all of the books in the world can be found by everyone, everywhere, at any time they need

³⁴ Barbara Herrnstein Smith, ‘What Was “Close Reading”?: A Century of Method in Literary Studies’, *Minnesota Review* 87:1 (2016), 57–75 (p. 65).

³⁵ Matthew Wilkens, ‘Canons, Close Reading, and the Evolution of Method’, in *Debates in the Digital Humanities*, ed. Matthew Gold (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), open access at <https://dhdebates.gc.cuny.edu/read/untitled-88c11800-9446-469b-a3be-3fdb36bfd1e/section/6c7c-baa1-5ff8-4439-9ffb-aecbc6d5734> (accessed 6 July 2022).

³⁶ danah boyd and Kate Crawford, ‘Critical Questions for Big Data’, *Information, Communication & Society* 15:5 (2012), 662–79 (p. 663).

them',³⁷ while the Internet Archive simply states its goal to be 'Universal Access to All Knowledge'.³⁸

Increasingly, however, recent digital feminist scholarship has challenged the perception of the 'universality' of the world's digital archives – or perhaps more accurately, of that portion of recorded human experience which has so far been digitised. The authors of *Data Feminism* (2020) argue strongly for the importance of considering context in any type of work involving data analysis, noting a common preconception that data is a 'raw input', when in actual fact 'data enter into research projects already fully cooked – the result of a complex set of social, political, and historical circumstances'.³⁹ Such questions have long been asked about digital archives and their representation of cultural heritage from the perspectives of ethnic, gender, and linguistic minority groups; as early as 2007 Jean-Noël Jeanneney, former head of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, argued that the predominance of English-language texts in Google Books put speakers of other languages at a significant disadvantage, noting that early searches for a number of European authors including Victor Hugo, Cervantes, Dante, and Goethe resulted in just one non-English edition (strangely, a German translation of a work by Hugo).⁴⁰ The introduction to his book cites two articles from the 2001 UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, which state that 'while ensuring the free flow of ideas by word and image, care should be exercised that all cultures can express themselves and make themselves known', and that 'market forces alone cannot guarantee the preservation and promotion of cultural diversity, which is the key to sustainable human development'.⁴¹

It is quite difficult to find information on current levels of representation of different languages in the Google Books corpus, but Jeanneney's concern about linguistic bias in this giant collection holds continued relevance for other areas of scholarship. A 2021 study by Allen Riddell and Troy Bassett, which focused on works of fiction which were published in the British Isles in the late 1830s, troublingly concluded that novels written by men and novels published in a multi-volume format were significantly more likely to have a 'digital surrogate', i.e., to be present in a digital format

³⁷ <https://books.google.com/googlebooks/about/history.html#:~:text=After%20more%20than%20a%20decade,any%20time%20they%20need%20them> (accessed 6 July 2022).

³⁸ <https://archive.org/about/> (accessed 6 July 2022). ³⁹ D'Ignazio and Klein, *Data Feminism*.

⁴⁰ Jean-Noël Jeanneney, *Google and the Myth of Universal Knowledge* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 11–13.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. x.

in one of the major online archives.⁴² The specific advantage observed for multi-volume novels suggests that biases reflect both library acquisition practices of the nineteenth century and library digitisation practices of the twenty-first. The authors speculate that specific libraries may tend to specialise in works from male-dominated genres, but also note that ‘the British Library appears to have excluded multi-volume novels published in 1836 from bulk digitization efforts’.

Other important challenges to the perceived supremacy of big data have clear origins in feminist critique. Jen Jack Giesecking has argued that the mythos of big data has resulted in the further marginalisation of many communities including people of colour, people living in poverty, and colonised, disabled, and LGBTQ people; for many of these individuals, recording aspects of their lives may be unsafe or simply impossible, and so they are significantly under-represented in contemporary and historical records.⁴³ Digital humanities research has too often failed to recognise the imbalances at the heart of digital collections. As Katherine Bode argues in her groundbreaking study of serial fiction in nineteenth-century Australian newspapers, it is frequently the case in work which utilises mass-digitised collections that ‘the complex relationships between documentary record, digitization, data curation, and historical analysis [are] not fully articulated’, with these relationships and their effects in some cases ‘essentially denied in preference for a view of large-scale literary data and mass-digitized collections as transparent windows onto the past’.⁴⁴ Crucially, the queer feminist approach to critical studies outlined by Giesecking

⁴² Allen Riddell and Troy J. Bassett, ‘What Library Digitization Leaves Out: Predicting the Availability of Digital Surrogates of English Novels’, *Portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 21:4 (2021), 885–900. Project MUSE <https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2021.0045> (accessed 6 July 2022).

⁴³ Jen Jack Giesecking, ‘Size Matters to Lesbians, Too: Queer Feminist Interventions into the Scale of Big Data’, *Professional Geographer* 70:1 (2018), 150–6.

⁴⁴ Katherine Bode, ‘Introduction: Questions and Opportunities for Twenty-First-Century Literary History’, *A World of Fiction: Digital Collections and the Future of Literary History* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2018), pp. 1–14 (p. 3). Bode’s volume is available on JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvdtptjd.4 (accessed 6 July 2022). Her study of nineteenth-century Australian newspapers, drawing on the National Library of Australia’s Trove collection, examines a curated data set of 9,200 works of long-form fiction using a number of different digital humanities methods. Described by its author as ‘data-rich literary history’, this study represents a significant intervention not only in Australian and global literary studies, but also in digital humanities. As well as complicating previously held ideas about nineteenth-century Australian literary cultures, this work undertook a reassessment of existing approaches to large-scale digital literary research, and suggested the new critical framework of the ‘digital scholarly edition’ as a means of moving beyond the binary of close/distant reading.

'requires an acknowledgment of the absences in data as well as dimensions of power of who can form and define data'.⁴⁵

This issue of absence, of lack, of gaps in the record, is part of the founding impulse for the Irish feminist databases under discussion here, and was a key tenet of the wider critical discourse from which they emerged. In 1991, the same year that saw the publication of the first three volumes of the *Field Day Anthology*, and the stirrings of a response to its lack of attention to women writers, Patricia Coughlan's essay 'Bog Queens' launched an iconoclastic critical challenge to the perceived supremacy of the male speaker in Irish poetry, specifically that of John Montague and Seamus Heaney.⁴⁶ Coughlan's essay identified in their works a failure 'to perceive their own reliance upon and tacit approval of the absence of women as speaking subjects and of female disempowerment', arguing that 'where the fictionality of the poetic speaker is routinely concealed, a responsible criticism must seek to recover the moment of his construction (it almost always is "his")'.⁴⁷ *FDA* Volumes IV and V are an expression of a similar, contemporaneous impulse, a response to the need to interrogate the unquestioned assumptions at the heart of Irish literary criticism, and to clarify who is allowed to speak and whose voices are suppressed. In emerging from such a rupture in Irish literary scholarship, well before any idea of its developing into a digital resource, these volumes in some ways anticipate debates that would erupt within the digital humanities; and the tensions and conflicts in their evolutionary history would ultimately work to their benefit. Editor Gerardine Meaney writes that the final selection of works – determined by a team of more than sixty contributors – 'usually came down to balanced representation across genres and time periods'.⁴⁸ Rather than offering a comprehensive, totalising vision of a complete and finished history of women's writing in Ireland, *Field Day's* work – as 'sampler' – is reconstructive and contingent rather than constitutive.

Modern digital humanities archival scholarship now increasingly incorporates detailed discussions of the data sets under consideration (a practice usefully termed *data biography* by D'Ignazio and Klein⁴⁹), and the construction of the digital archive itself has, rightly, begun to attract

⁴⁵ Giesekeing, 'Size Matters to Lesbians, Too', p. 151.

⁴⁶ Patricia Coughlan, "'Bog Queens": The Representation of Women in the Poetry of John Montague and Seamus Heaney', in *Gender in Irish Writing*, ed. T. O'Brien Johnson and D. Cairns (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1991), pp. 88–111.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁴⁸ Deirdre Flynn and Gerardine Meaney, 'Research Pioneers 6: Gerardine Meaney', *Irish Women's Writing (1880–1920) Network*, 31 March 2020, <https://irishwomenswritingnetwork.com/research-pioneers-6-gerardine-meaney/> (accessed 6 July 2022).

⁴⁹ D'Ignazio and Klein, *Data Feminism*.

scholarly attention. For example, Stephen Gregg's *Old Books and Digital Publishing* (2020) gives a detailed history of the life cycle of Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO), and, as quoted in the second epigraph above, emphasises the dynamic and material history of 'digital resources, collections, and archives'.⁵⁰ For *Field Day*, the complex and at times controversial origins of the fourth and fifth volumes are inextricably bound with its positioning as a crucial intervention, a response to a lack; and much of the critique it has engendered to date illustrates the tenacity of plenitude and completion as cultural ideals.⁵¹ As the authors of *Data Feminism* argue – following on from Donna Haraway's crucial work on information and feminism in the 1990s – all knowledge is situated; the final volumes of *Field Day* are intrinsically so.⁵²

Conclusion

In an illuminating interview for the Irish Women's Writing (1880–1920) Network (IWWN), Gerardine Meaney describes the complex process of digitising texts during the preparation of the *Field Day Anthology*, and the editorial team's reasons for so doing, during a time in which the task of digitisation was neither common nor trivial.⁵³ Her oral history of *FDA* Volumes IV and V describes the physical effort involved in creating digital copies of texts for the project, using 'a scanner the size of a small car' in a basement room at University College Dublin. Meaney recalls that

[i]t used to overheat and stick: we took turns giving it a precisely aimed kick to get it going again. It was a long way from Kristevan theory and Angela Carter, but very satisfying. There were many other parts of the academic apparatus I would have merrily kicked back then, so it was an outlet.⁵⁴

Meaney's account reminds us that far from being a solely intellectual enterprise, the creation of a digital archive involves embodied labour, of

⁵⁰ Gregg, 'Conclusion', *Old Books and Digital Publishing*, pp. 100–2.

⁵¹ In her valuable essay on the process of digitising Volumes IV and V of *The Field Day Anthology*, Anne Jamison similarly argues that critical interpretations of *Field Day* are inevitably 'bound up with the original debates that surrounded the genesis and aftermath of both the first and second set of *Field Day* volumes and their significance for women's literary history in Ireland'. Jamison, 'Women's Literary History in Ireland: Digitizing *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*', *Women's History Review* 26:5 (2017), 751–65 (p. 752).

⁵² See, for example, Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1990).

⁵³ Flynn and Meaney, 'Research Pioneers 6: Gerardine Meaney'. ⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

a sort which has often been poorly paid and had low prestige, and which has frequently been relegated to women since the earliest days of computing history. An earlier example of the intellectual paradigm which governed computing during much of the twentieth century can be found in Vannevar Bush's article, 'As We May Think', which in 1945 somewhat presciently envisioned the possibilities inherent in computing.⁵⁵ This essay laid out a clear binary in the distribution of gender roles within the industry, in which the future users of the imagined computer-like device – scientists, engineers, photographers – are men, while the machine itself is maintained and served by women: rooms full of 'girls armed with simple key board punches'.⁵⁶ Bush's deeply gendered vision would prove close to historical reality.⁵⁷ For future practitioners, Meaney's narrative of the digital origins of *FDA* is an unusual and encouraging one, since it depicts the means of data production being seized by women scholars in order to push back against embedded structural inequalities. As feminist scholarship continues to embrace and engage with digital records, archives, and methodologies, it is worth remembering these origins.

One means to enable both Irish feminist studies and digital studies to move beyond a paradigm of 'mere presence' (or disillusioning absences) is to follow Wernimont's suggestion that the proliferation of recovery projects and their contents in feminist literary studies might more usefully be seen as 'representations of a particular moment in feminist engagements with technology' – the record of which should include a 'feminist preservation of process'.⁵⁸ Such a record for Irish literary studies, then, would include a consideration not just of the new research questions made possible but also of the tools tried and developed, the technical expertise acquired and shared, and the users imagined and realised through the digital encounter. And here, feminist-led questions regarding institutional power and authority remain of fundamental relevance. The facilitation of new forms of interaction between digital, creative, and critical practice, and of collaborations that enable participation by those previously marginalised or excluded from technological innovation, is crucial to this agenda and can, we hope, in turn lead to a more dynamic and sustainable future for the feminist digital archive.

⁵⁵ Vannevar Bush, 'As We May Think', *The Atlantic*, July 1945, www.theatlantic.com/doc/194507/bush (accessed 6 July 2022).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ For a detailed history of women's participation in – and exclusion from – the computing industry during the twentieth century, see Mar Hicks, *Programmed Inequality: How Britain Discarded Women Technologists and Lost Its Edge in Computing* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018).

⁵⁸ Wernimont, 'Whence Feminism?', p. 8.

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