



Digital Humanities and Gender History

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“Cushmania”

Reconstructing Queerness and Celebrity of a Nineteenth-Century Actress

by [Dr. Katrin Horn](#) and [Selina Foltinek](#)

(“[Digital Humanities and Gender History](#),” Feb 5, 2021)

Cushmania: Reconstructing Queerness and Celebrity of a Nineteenth-Century Actress

Archival Gossip

A Scholarly Take on Nineteenth Century Tattletales

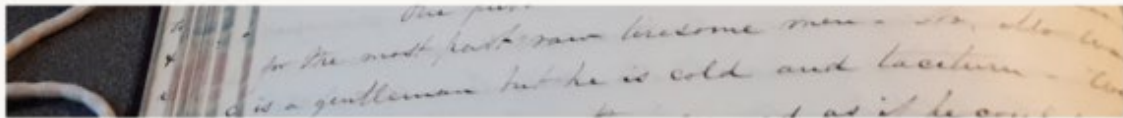
ITEMS

EXHIBITS

BLOG

NEATLINE TIME

MAP



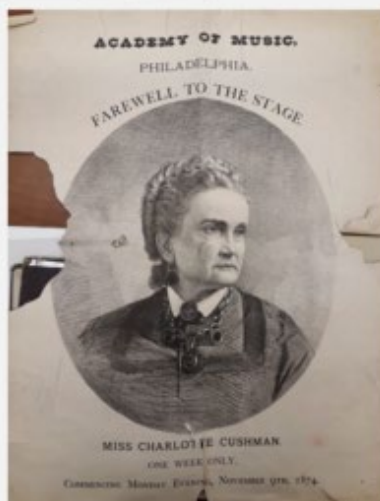
Cushmania

Charlotte Cushman



Description

A collection of archival material (letters, diaries, magazine clippings) collected from the Library of Congress, New York Public Library, and Philadelphia Historical Society that showcase the life of Charlotte Cushman, leading actress of the nineteenth century



CHARLOTTE CUSHMAN:

HER LETTERS AND MEMORIES
OF HER LIFE.

EDITED BY HER FRIEND,

EMMA STEBBINS.

"The world is her entire realm, and it is within her grasp, after three times, with no hope, with no fear. Patheticity and her she refuses with a hero's calm. They are not for her who pause on her dramatic robes, and pass through emotional lines in emotional poses." — *Illustration*

UNIV. OF
CALIFORNIA

BOSTON:
HOUGHTON, OSGOOD AND COMPANY.
1878.

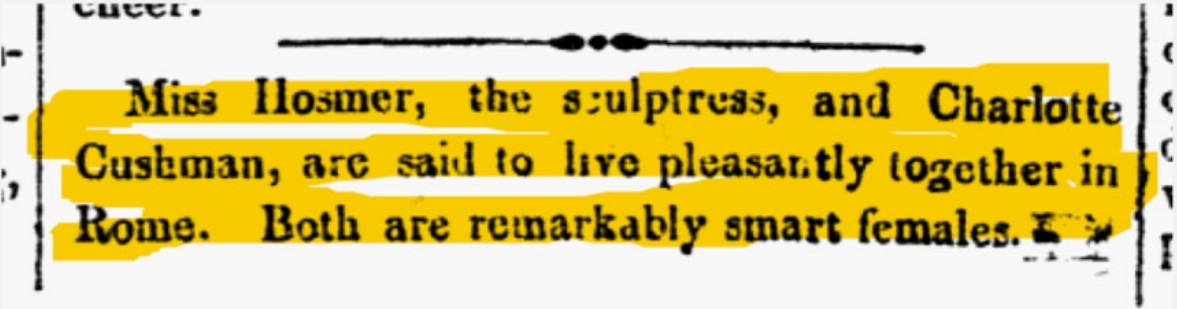


Selina [Foltinek](#) & Dr. Katrin Horn – [Universität Bayreuth](#) – [archivalgossip.com](#)

Introduction: Who We Are and What We Are Doing

Thank you to the organizers for having us today and thank you to everyone for your interest in “Cushmania: Reconstructing Queerness and Celebrity of a Nineteenth-Century Actress.”

A Queer Celebrity



Miss Hosmer, the sculptress, and Charlotte Cushman, are said to live pleasantly together in Rome. Both are remarkably smart females.

Farmer's Cabinet, February 2, 1859 (2), [Readex](#): America's Historical Newspapers

Almost exactly **162 years** ago to this day, the US American public learned that Miss Hosmer and Miss Cushman lived happily together in Rome. Now you are forgiven if you don't recognize either of these names. I guarantee you, however, had you lived back then, you would have known Charlotte Cushman. Cushman was one of the most famous, most talked about women of her time—which you probably can guess from this little snippet, the same way that you already get a hint of her queerness.

Today, we (Selina and me, who shoulder this project together) would like to present parts of our ongoing research project entitled “Economy and Epistemology of Gossip in Nineteenth-Century US-American Culture,” for which we have built the website [archivalgossip.com](#)—which includes, among others, the collection [Cushmania](#). *Cushmania* is an online database documenting the public reception and private life writing of actress Charlotte Cushman (1816-1876) via material collated from various US-American libraries and archives.

Archival Document: Types/Examples



([Library of Congress](#), [Charlotte Cushman Papers](#))

Cushmania to us is several things:

- it's a work in progress
- it is the central database for **our research data**—letters, diary entries, newspaper articles, book excerpts, images—for which a 'traditional' desktop folder structure proved simply impossible
- it's a key visualization tool to make sense of temporary, spatial, and personal networks and developments
- and it is our offer to a public interested in the aspects (and people) of nineteenth century history not always showcased by archival institutions: Cushman was, after all, a woman, an actress, an expatriate, and queer.

To give you an idea of how *Cushmania* and the reconstruction of celebrity and queerness fits into our larger project on gossip, I will begin by talking about some of our core research questions. This part will contextualize the project within the fields of American Studies and Gender History.

In the second part of the presentation, Selina introduces our website and database to give you an idea of how we fit into Digital Humanities. And then, I'll take over shortly to sum up and lead into the Q&A.

The Project: Content and Research Interests

Gossip

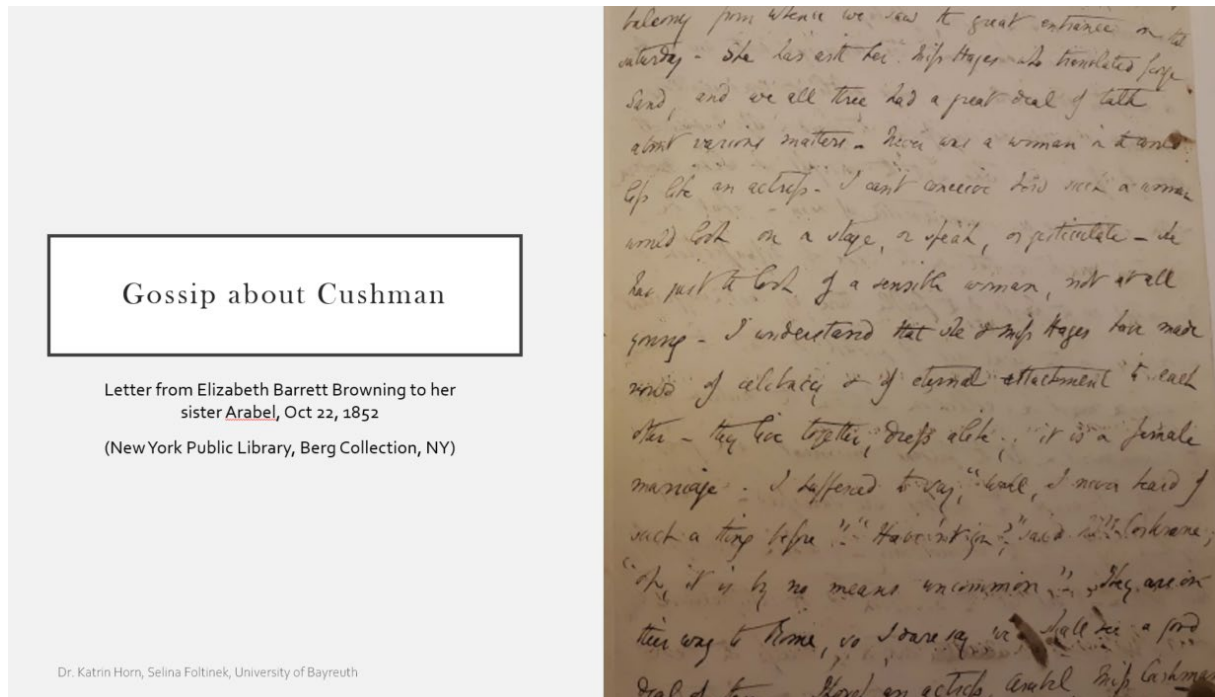
- “**‘feminine’ economy**, in contrast to the masculine dominion over commerce, employment, and trade” (Macdonald 189)
- “an **alternative discourse** to that of public life” (Spacks)
- “an informational **black market**” (Kapferer 9)
- “gossip as a **subcategory of narrative**; gossip is intimate, usually collective narrative.” (Adkins 216)
- “maintain[s] the **unity, morals** and values of social groups” (Gluckman 308)
- “a discourse of the margins and of the **marginalized**” (Bastin 25)
- “subject of gossip, personal and political, is secondary to the process of **creating bonds and boundaries**” (White 76)
- “Gossip is informal, private communication between an individual and a small, selected audience concerning the conduct of absent persons or events. Gossip thrives when the **facts are uncertain**, neither publicly known nor easily discovered.” (Merry 275)

Our project overall investigates the uses and value of **gossip** in late nineteenth century US American literature and culture. As “a discourse that negates and conflates the dialectics of inside and outside in its movement between the private and the public realms” (Bastin 24), an “alternative discourse to that of public life” (Spacks 46) and an “informational black market” (Kapferer 9), we claim that a focus on gossip offers new insights into changing understandings of privacy (e.g. the right to privacy), and public sphere (and the role of celebrities/high society). In all the material we rely on—from novels, to gossip magazines, to diaries and letters—we focus on women. We do this, because a) their often precarious public standing makes for particularly intriguing gossip scenarios, and b) we want to show how women’s public role has historically been undervalued.

Cushman quickly emerged as the perfect case study for thinking through women’s participation in the public sphere and the role of gossip (as both source of information and object of study in its own right). Despite public and private attacks on her gender expression in private and during stage performances (in breeches roles), Cushman managed to not only dominate the Anglophone theatrical scene for several decades, but also to position herself as a model American citizen and admired female artist. As such: there is a wealth of public writing about her. Thankfully, there is also a wealth of private correspondence today only accessible,

because Cushman and her circle of friends and acquaintances were ‘historically important’ (as many of you will know: archival material on marginalized people, such as women and LGBTQI people, is often rare).

Archival Research to DH



([Letter from Elizabeth Barrett Browning to her sister Arabel, Oct 22, 1852](#))

This “traditional” archival research is then also the reason for why we “went digital” and ultimately why we are here: as already indicated: gossip relies on networks. Hence, we needed to take into consideration Cushman’s own writing, but also the letters addressed to her, and often also letters and diary entries **about her**. To this end, we’ve collected manuscripts from over ten US American archives. In addition to this “private side,” we also wanted to understand, what was publically written about the actress (and her relationships): hence, we’ve additionally collected a large number of biographies and articles.

Archival Document: Types/Examples

articles, letters, diary entries, transcript of a diary entries, biographies



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[\(Library of Congress, Charlotte Cushman Papers\)](#)

Currently, we work with about 20GB of primary material from various sources and in **various formats**. To be able to actually work with that we wanted to find a solution that would allow us to store, sort, annotate, and visualize our data. A database seemed to do the trick. The database solution that eventually allowed us to include scholarly metadata and upload our data without recourse to Google, for example (which our funding institution would not have allowed) was Omeka. In the words of N. Katharine Hayles we therefore started from a “assimilative strategy” (that’d be “extend[ing] existing scholarship into the digital realm) (50).

Initially, we were mostly interested in the database as a “tool” for our “traditional research.” Now, the project has evolved quite a bit, and our digital tools have actually begun to shape the research—and we think about extending the digital aspect of our work even further. But before we get to those “lofty goals,” Selina will first explain what *Cushmania* actually is and does.

The Project: CMS, Database, and Research Tool

With our digital collection, we seek to exhibit the biographical discourses surrounding Cushman during her lifetime, including her own writing, newspaper articles, diaries and letters by friends and acquaintances, as well as contemporary (auto)biographies. Our website addresses both ‘professional users’ such as researchers who are interested in our digital objects,

metadata, or archival research as well as non-professional users who search for more information about Charlotte Cushman, other 19th century actors like Macready or [Edwin Booth](#), female sculptors like [Harriet Hosmer](#) or [Emma Stebbins](#), famous editors like [James Thomas Fields](#), etc.

Our journey started in April 2019 and as of now we mainly work with three different tools or ‘digital spaces’: On our [Wordpress website](#) we introduce ourselves, publish [blog posts](#) about issues related to archival research and digital humanities, provide a [list of archives](#), [Annotation and User Guidelines](#), etc.

**WordPress: Project, Team, Blog, Sources,
Annotation and User Guidelines**

<https://www.archivalgossip.com/>

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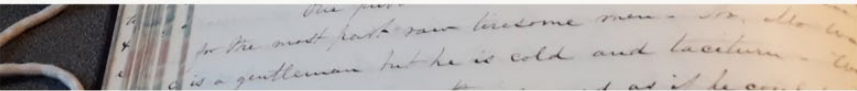
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From the WordPress website, users can access [Omeka](#), our main tool for managing our archival documents (it is a web publishing platform which we use as our Content Management System). In Omeka, we store “digital surrogates of originally analog artefacts” (Schmidt 125) on [item pages](#).

Omeka: CMS

Archival Gossip
A Scholarly Take on Nineteenth Century Tattletales

ITEMS EXHIBITS BLOG NEARLINE TIME MAP




This digital collection showcases archival material relating to the economic and epistemological uses of gossip in US American literature and culture in the nineteenth century. We began by highlighting material by and about actress Charlotte Cushman, collected from various archives in the US, to trace the role and relevance of gossip - both private and mediated - to her reputation and legacy. Based on our research questions, we assigned the items to different exhibits such as press coverage or social capital.

As this collection continues to grow, we hope to add collections relating to foreign gossip correspondents for US American magazines like Anne Hampton Brewster and Grace Greenwood. We also plan to provide insight into some particularly insightful examples for the ways gossip travels through archives.

For updates on the larger research project, see our [blog](#). For a full list of secondary sources, please see our [bibliography](#).

Recently Added Items


"Miss Cushman's Romeo", The Era, June 21, 1846



This article is a detailed review of Charlotte Cushman's performance as Romeo. The critic expresses his dislike for the performance and deems it far from satisfactory. Cushman is criticized for failing to embody the youth and character of Romeo entirely. The article declares that it is impossible to...

Featured Collection

Cushmania



A collection of archival material (letters, diaries, magazine clippings) collected from the Library of Congress. New

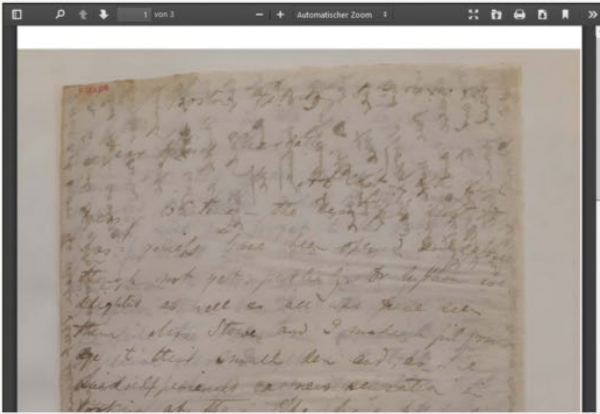
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Item Page Example

Letter from Annie Fields to Charlotte Cushman, Feb 5, 1868[?]



Dublin Core

Title
Letter from Annie Fields to Charlotte Cushman, Feb 5, 1868[?]

Description
Annie Fields discusses article publications and art business in this letter. Fields emphasizes that the public should be grateful to Cushman. She calls the public an "obedient sheep" that can be influenced easily by public figures. Annie Fields sends love to Emma Stebbins knowing about Cushman and Stebbins being together in person.

Credit
Library of Congress, Charlotte Cushman Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

Creator
Fields, Annie, 1834-1915

Source
LoC, CCP 11

Date
1868-02-05

Type
Reference

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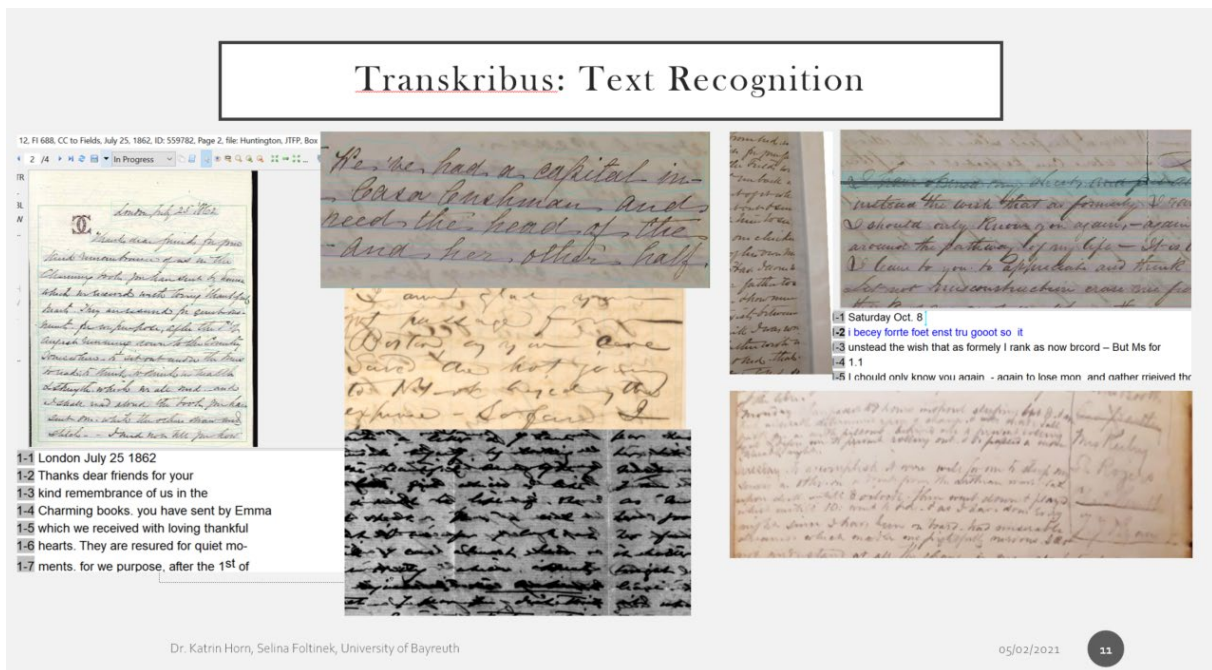
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[\(Letter from Annie Fields to Charlotte Cushman, Feb 5, 1868\[?\]\)](#)

Metadata is collected according to the Dublin Core Standard. Additionally, we defined metadata specific to item types (e.g. letters, diary entries, articles). For instance, we can differentiate location of sender and location of recipient for letters. The field for annotations facilitates including comments on the primary material that were added by archivists or researchers,

distinguishing different handwritings and historical agents for the archival documents. Since some original document might be taken from the archive of the [Library of Congress](#) but we derive transcripts from the [special collections](#) of [Colorado College Tutt Library](#) or the [Seward Family Digital Archive](#). Users can download metadata as csv-files to reuse the data to feed other DH tools such as [Palladio](#).



We use [Transkribus](#) to transcribe letters and further handwritten accounts from the 19th and 20th century to include full text transcriptions for the item pages. Initially, we transcribed documents without any technical support. In April 2020, we then trained our own model based on our transcriptions of more than 180 pages. This model is constantly improved and modified. Transkribus is an excellent tool that helps with line-by-line and automatic transcriptions. Currently, the CER (Character Error Rate) for our 19th-century model is slightly above 9%. The CER for our 20th century model is slightly above 4%. Why is the CER for the documents from 19th century so much higher? As you can see on the slide, we are working with many different styles of handwriting. In the left column, you can see Charlotte Cushman's handwriting (with a particularly clear type of handwriting in this case; she often wrote letters when she was in distress, tired, or ill or). In the middle section, handwritings by [Kate Field](#) (a journalist and friend of Cushman), [Wayman Crow](#) (the father of one of Cushman's love interests), and a microfilm of a letter by sculptor [Harriet Hosmer](#) are displayed. The right column includes a letter on which tape was used to make the letters stick to the paper page. Other documents are damaged, or hard to read (even [Emma Stebbins](#), Cushman's life-long partner, had trouble reading Cushman's life writing documents while preparing a Cushman memoir), some of Cushman's diary entries were written in pencil.

Our initial goals were to find tools to help us

- to collect and **organize** our archival material (so far: 326 letters, 544 items)
- to **create** and curate digital objects → i.e. build online exhibits according to research questions
- to **transcribe** and annotate handwritten archival documents
- to **tell** a story (focus on gossip-related material): we work on what Susan Brown calls that the weaving together of narrative and database (62-63)
- the Omeka site allows for different types of visualization (relationships, exhibits, item pages, timelines, maps), which then again helps us with organizing and making sense

Speaking of visualization, I will show the following three slides to illustrate this part:

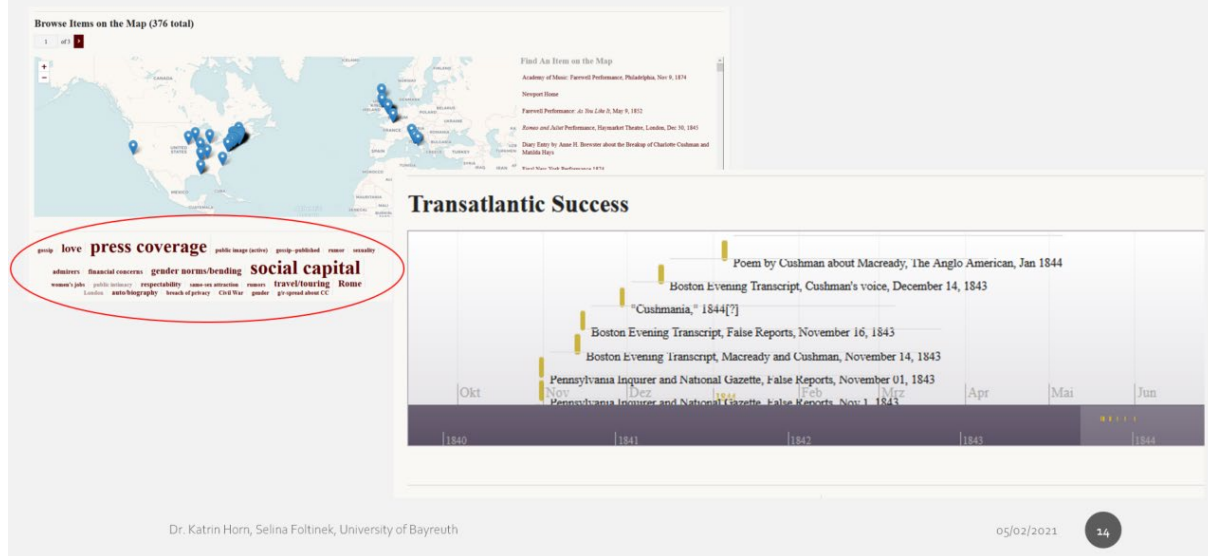
The screenshot displays an Omeka exhibit titled "Visualizations I". It features several interactive components:

- 1857: Breakup with Hays:** A text-based exhibit with a portrait of a woman. It discusses the relationship between Matilda Hays and Charlotte Cushman in the 1850s and their breakup in 1857. It includes a link to a blog post and a list of keywords: financial concerns, gender norms/bending, gossip, gossip-published, love, press coverage, public image (active), public intimacy, respectability, rumors, same-sex attraction, social capital.
- Cushman's Networks:** A text-based exhibit with a background image of a document. It explores the social circles and networks that Charlotte Cushman built and/or actively shaped. It includes a list of keywords: admirers, financial concerns, gossip, love, press coverage, public image (active), same-sex attraction, sensuality, social capital.
- Cushman's Circle:** A gallery of portraits of people associated with Cushman, including William Charles Mervin, Grace Greenwood, Frances Power Cobbe, Edith Booth, Kate Field, Anne Field, James T. Fields, and Frances "Fanny" Seward.
- Career as Actress:** A timeline visualization showing Cushman's career milestones, such as her debut in London in 1839 and her arrival in New York in 1840.
- Map:** A map of the United States with blue pins indicating Cushman's locations, such as New York and Boston.

The exhibit is credited to Dr. Katrin Horn and Selina Foltinek, University of Bayreuth. The date 05/02/2021 and a page number 13 are visible in the bottom right corner.

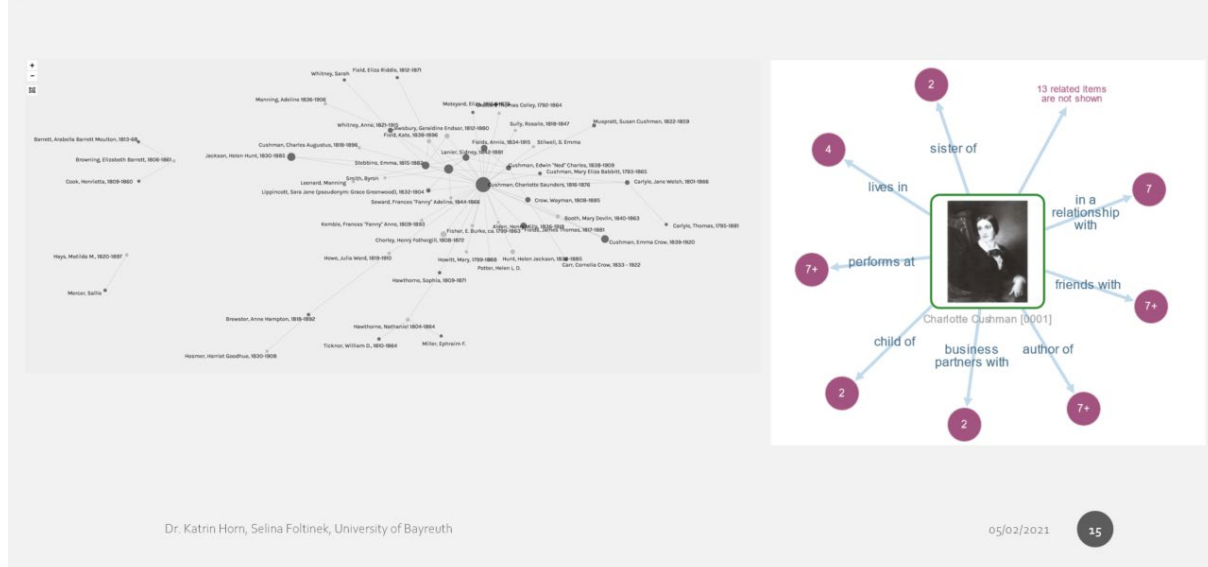
We are building [exhibits](#) to assign items to different research questions: here you can see two examples, these exhibits than have subcategories or topic-specific pages. For instance, [Cushman's circles](#) that displays all historical agents that were somehow networking with Cushman. Another exhibit, [Transatlantic Success in the 1840s](#), shows further visualizations, such as timelines and maps that add to the gallery of items displayed below.

Visualizations II



[Mapping](#) the origins of archival documents shows us where a letter was written or an article was published (and hence we would get an idea of where Cushman was talked about or where she was writing from). We are providing [timelines](#) for specific exhibits and research questions to give chronological overviews and help the users and us orientate. Tags help both users and us to navigate and search for specific topic-related items; the tags do also relate certain items with one another whose connections may not be visible in a list of documents.

Visualizations III



The [AvantRelationship plugin](#) lets us define relationship types: Each Item is defined as Reference (documents), Person, Event (that is the item type in Dublin Core). We can define relationships between items such as a letter “is addressed to” or “Is critical of.” This plugin

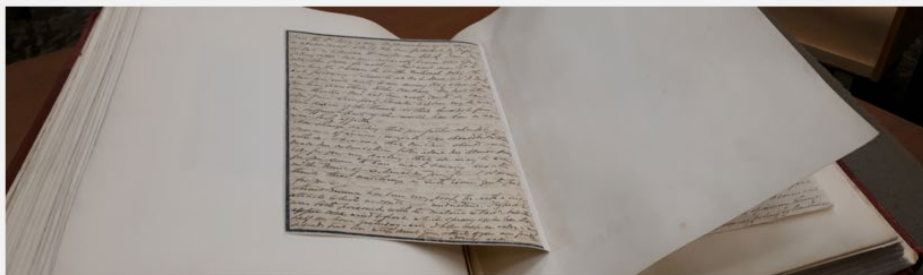
actually forced us “to make explicit many assumptions often left implicit in our work” in the humanities (Drucker 85). We use our collected metadata to feed other DH tools such as [Palladio](#) to provoke new insights, ask new questions, keep track of the material we have available. In the Palladio graph above, the bigger the nodes the more letters (in this particular case) were sent to or received by the respective person. Palladio thus provides an overview of all historical agents BUT and this leads me to future aspirations or ideas with DH potential

- we are not doing network analysis, no nuances of nodes and edges as proportionate to tightness, duration of relationship
- what our visualizations lack is giving an overview of large quantities of data to show **how** different networks of people are linked (e.g. male editors and protolesbian communities)
- no machine-based text analysis yet
- no in-text mark-up yet: our current stage of digitizing is not yet completed; we are only using simple html tags for deleted or italicized words, page breaks, etc., Omeka tags (that are not tied to specific paragraphs, sentences, etc. but to items) which help us read closely, a method that is also called scalable reading because it combines distant and close reading

Conclusion: Reconstructing Queerness and Celebrity of a Nineteenth-Century Actress

Archival Research

“The challenge . . . becomes one of how to read and work with these fragments, given that, as researchers, ‘we are generally dismayed by the gaps that fragments expose, and try to fill them’.” (Dever 100)



To add to Selina's thoughts on what has and hasn't worked for us on a technological level, I would like to shortly connect all of this back to the project at large. With regard to **archival research**, Maryanne Dever has claimed that "[t]he challenge . . . becomes one of how to read and work with these fragments, given that, as researchers, 'we are generally dismayed by the gaps that fragments expose, and try to fill them'" (Dever 100).

In working with and around fragments and the gaps between them our database is certainly more forgiving than any argument or narrative we would usually present as a result of scholarly research. Also, in trying to make sense of just how famous Charlotte Cushman was, the database's ability to combine various media (from posters, to comics, to reviews, articles, and biographies) has been invaluable. We are also enjoying the opportunity of adding female and LGBTQI lives and voices to the discussion of historically important moments (in Cushman's case: Civil War, expatriate community abroad, institutionalization of theater, etc). There are, however, also ongoing struggles that result from our reliance on digital tools—namely when it comes to queerness rather than celebrity. The discrepancy between these two defining aspects of Cushman's life—the public and the private, the idealized and the deviant—is what drew me to her originally. But it's also that which causes the most friction.

DH scholars such as Bonnie Ruberg have criticized the binary logic of digital environments: male/female or married/single (Ruberg et al. 109-110). How could our database, for example, reflect the historical nuances and developments of relationship status: By today's standard, Cushman could be considered "married" to Emma Stebbins—legally, however, there was not such status available to her. Similarly, the use of the "relationship plugin" triggered some extensive discussions about the differences between relationships, affairs, flirtations, etc. How *do* we define a relationship we only know partially and through biased accounts so that a simple plugin can make sense of it? These are, for us ongoing questions.

On the other hand, queerness has a certain affinity to our format of presenting what we know about Cushman, insofar as her private life (just like her public success) was networked to a high degree. Cushman and the women in her circle therefore resist what Susan Brown calls an "isolated biography." And lastly, with our specific interest in the intimate knowledge of gossip, we'd consider the data collected in *Cushmania* an effort that reflects "the queer potential of archiving itself as a practice that challenges concise, monolithic, and often hegemonic interpretations of knowledge" (Ruberg et al. 111). Our goal is to illuminate how Cushman, her social network, and the wider public shaped and perceived her reputation in ways which reconciled the open secret of her sexuality with her international celebrity. We are, in other works, interested in how knowledge travels and is concealed, how networks—of knowledge, of

intimacy, of care, of profit—have shaped and been shaped by Cushman’s queerness and celebrity. For all these questions, *Cushmania* is instrumental.

Thank you for your attention!

@archivalgossip
@SFoltinek

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