17   The Myth of the Comprehensive Historical Archive

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Wikipedia is an undertaking of mythic proportions, as is addressing its deficits. The Black Lunch Table project is inspired by the myth, the potential possibility, and works to increase the conversation around resource equity, gender and racial bias, and knowledge gaps within and beyond Wikipedia.

From the outset, Wikipedia has espoused the ideals of free and open knowledge, catalyzing a mass authorship of cultural history worldwide. As the site on which narratives are drafted, contested, revised, and cited, Wikipedia attempts a hopeful and earnest approximation of a comprehensive and democratically authored history. This is of course an impossible goal. Realizing an archive that is both complete and democratic is a task of a mythic proportion. It would require establishing technological, educational, and cultural resource equity worldwide, and the deprioritizing of Eurocentric historical narratives and English-language Wikipedia. Nonetheless, Wikipedians are collectively invested in constructing an archive of infinite scope and complexity. We are enamored of this mythic, utopian vision.

Myths as metaphors for infinite tasks of unfathomable scope abound throughout culture. Perhaps the most well-known is that of Sisyphus eternally pushing a boulder uphill and of Penelope's endless weaving and unweaving her tapestry. The interminable tasks themselves are generally not the focus when we speak of them. Rather, they are metaphors for present or past situations and offer propositions for imagining the future. As with other myths, the quest for a comprehensive encyclopedia is itself significant, but the various discourses it catalyzes and contributes to are just as important. These discourses are Wikipedia-specific, but they relate to issues symptomatic of local and international sociopolitical conditions.

The Black Lunch Table Wikipedia project is inspired by the myth, the potential possibility. The work we do contributes to discourse around resource equity, gender and racial bias, and knowledge gaps within and beyond Wikipedia. Our work both directly and indirectly affects change around those issues. While we don't imagine our project will be able to solve all of its own goals, we do hope that our engagement with Wikipedia will affect how folks conceive of historical authorship more broadly and that they will come to share our belief that histories are neither static nor linear. Through educating the public about our project as it works to identify knowledge gaps on Wikipedia, we hope that everyone will feel they can and should contribute to historical authorship as we all have something at stake in how our histories are told.

Mythic Being: Who Is Black Lunch Table?

The Black Lunch Table (BLT) is an ongoing collaboration founded by artists Jina Valentine and Heather Hart that intends to fill holes in the documentation of contemporary art history. Our project is inspired by questions related to authorship: *Who writes the record? What is omitted from the record?* Those who have access to knowledge and its production determine what is included in the historical record. Authoring the dominant historical narrative means determining who is other and the terms by which they are treated as such. BLT is a critical gesture to disrupt that narrative. Our project mobilizes a democratic rewriting of contemporary art and cultural history, with the overall aim of filling gaps in and decentralizing authorship of the dominant historical record.

BLT began in 2005 at the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture in Maine. Organized around literal and metaphorical lunch tables, BLT takes the school lunchroom phenomenon as its starting point. It has existed in numerous forms since then and is presently comprised of a series of community roundtables, an online oral history archive, and Wikipedia project.

As we researched models for the BLT archive and noted those artists omitted from the larger art historical archives, we wondered what artists had also been omitted from the world's most widely referenced encyclopedia. We were surprised by how many there were. Our Wikipedia project redresses these omissions. The BLT Wikipedia project mobilizes a collective authoring of articles on the lives and works of Black artists. When

we began our Wikipedia project in 2014, important figures such as Fred Moten, Hamza Walker, Meschac Gaba, Peggy Cooper Cafritz, and Valerie Cassel Oliver were all without pages. Five years later, each has a page that began as a BLT target. We are inspired to continue this work as we note what artists, curators, and art historians remain underdocumented on Wikipedia.

Access to Knowledge and Its Production

We are descended of ancestors whose histories have been largely erased or altogether left undocumented. Of the little genealogical information that ties us to our African and indigenous heritages, inaccuracies abound, and the stories are incomplete. We have made efforts to fill these holes with the family lore, oral histories, and traditions we are bequeathed. We know that those who witnessed our ancestors' histories lacked fora to offer testimony of it. And that absent a voice to account for those stories, that testimony is forever lost. Meanwhile, as we witness the continued underdocumentation of Black and brown people, we wish to testify, to make record of it.

We both pursued graduate art degrees but were left with lingering questions about the art histories we'd been taught. We imagine these questions were not unique to our experiences: *Why are there so few Black Artists included in the canon of Western Art History? Is "Black Art History" a topic to be segregated out of the rest of contemporary art history, as a parallel and unequal timeline? Why? And where, as young, aspiring artists do we fit into this already unfolding discourse?*

BLT's original task list of notable Black artists with missing or incomplete articles was several hundred names long. As of this writing, this focus list for our edit-a-thons has grown to over thirteen hundred names and remains incomplete. This is not due to inattention to the task of authoring or editing these articles but rather that we are continuously discovering names, movements, and artworks that are otherwise significant but have been omitted from Wikipedia. And many of these artists are still living, creating, exhibiting, and producing material, requiring their articles to be continually updated.

The length of the list plainly illustrates the magnitude of our task—it is one of Sisyphean proportions. The task list is also a clear manifestation of systemic bias. As it enumerates historical omissions on Wikipedia, it points

to larger failings in the documentation of cultural production. What is missing on Wikipedia is most certainly missing from other popular archives.

The task list is an accounting of so much of what was missing from the histories we were taught. The task list, as an aggregation of missing articles, both illustrates a void in our collective history and demands for its resolution. We actively name that which we sought in order to determine our places within this history.

Potential Possibilities: Inclusion + Omission

In the twenty years since Wikipedia's founding, how it is accessed and who is able to access it along with the internet as its supportive interface have all changed dramatically. It is crucial to note these changes when considering how and where researchers, students, and various other netizens access information. It is useful to examine what information was available on Wikipedia in the early days. In 2007, there were two million articles total in 161 languages;[1] a dozen years later, there are approximately six million English-language articles and forty million articles in 293 non-English languages.[2]

Consider that in 1998 only 26 percent of Americans had regular access to the internet versus 2018 where 81percent of US households have broadband access to the internet and 76 percent of those households have smartphones.[3] In 1998 (before smartphones were widely available), access to information most often required consulting physical, printed media. In 2019, it's likely that information sought can be found through a quick Google search (on a smartphone), one that often includes a link to a Wikipedia article as the first result. As the amount of information documented on the platform grew exponentially over those years, so did users' expectation of finding the information they sought. There is a general perception that Wikipedia hosts a comprehensive collection of knowledge—that everything worth documentation exists in some form on the platform.

The vast majority of Google searches and, by a slim majority, the number of Wikipedia queries are conducted via smartphone. Because of *how* we search for information in 2019, first-page Google results wield enormous intellectual capital, social capital, and financial capital. In this era wherein *Googling* is often conflated with *researching*, offering easy access to answers and info, folks generally trust the first page of Google results. That first-page

real estate is most often populated by an infobox, a link to Wikipedia, a link to Amazon—links to the most (algorithmically) "relevant" result.[4]

In particular, internet users give the *Knowledge Panel* (that box that appears in the top of the Google search with basic information about a subject) our full faith. The Knowledge Panel sources data from several sites, including Wikipedia and Wikidata, and presents a tidy summation of the pertinent (basic) facts about a person, place, or thing. There's much debate and criticism over the value, potential inaccuracy, and bias in coverage related to the Knowledge Panel.[5] And tracing the varied and entangled systems of bias at play in Knowledge Panel production is complicated. Perhaps the most problematic issue is that the Knowledge Panel shows *the most important information* on a given subject. Nuanced information is depreciated by that which can be presented as unquestionable and uncomplicated and sans context.

Search subjects bolstered by Knowledge Panels attain greater visibility, credibility, and notability. Those Wikipedia subjects that have received sufficient authoring, citation, and development *and* an infobox will be most visible in a simple search. This structure reinforces existing knowledge and notability hierarchies. A subject with an infobox included in their Wikipedia article (and therefore a Knowledge Panel on Google) will accumulate additional validation, further establishing that subject as most important or *most relevant*. Stunningly, approximately two-thirds of Wikipedia articles lack an infobox. Our concern here is for the two-thirds of articles whose most essential information cannot be tidily summed up into an infobox, whose most essential information is difficult to cite due to systemic bias in media and academic focus, or whose article hasn't received the attention due because it falls outside the interest areas of most Wiki contributors.

What Does It Matter Who Is Speaking?

Considering *how* we access information and *who* accesses it is only part of the story.[6] The ratio of regular contributors to Wikipedia to the rate of access to articles is astounding. As of 2016, a mere 1 percent of Wikipedia users are also regular contributors, authoring more than half of the content. Another way to illustrate that is approximately thirteen hundred people regularly contribute to creating over three-quarters of the six hundred new articles posted to Wikipedia every day; and every day there are approximately 13.9 million

unique page views. Following that calculus, we can say: ±99 percent of folks access Wikipedia as read-only, expecting the platform to offer the information they seek. Most never question, *who is this 1 percent writing articles?*

As the French theorist Michel Foucault noted, "Everything is said in every age."[7] Theories relating to semiotics discuss how languages are formed out of necessity. New words are born to describe phenomena and culture specific to an era.[8] This idea also suggests that which is left unsaid can be seen to describe what was lacking in that culture. In other words, if there's no language to describe it, either it didn't exist or wasn't noteworthy. It's not inaccurate to apply this logic in considering what histories remain underdocumented on Wikipedia. Those topics or figures lacking sufficient documentation indeed transpired, existed, and certainly many were noteworthy. The gaps in coverage are the result of an era's systemic biases. Presently, those gaps evidence the values of a dominant Western culture and the determinations regarding what is historicized and what's omitted from the record.

The Future Is Self-Organized

As Wikipedians, we are invested in the mythic and utopian ideals of open source knowledge creation and open access to information. Our investment in this myth of democratic authorship is cautious and critically aware of the inherent flaws of crowdsourced content. Chief among those is that open source authorship results in glorifying some aspects of culture while ignoring others. Contributions to Wikipedia establish the difference between the legendary and the stuff of lore. That which is included in the larger record becomes part of the canon: cited sources, verified content, and notability are proof that a thing should be widely known, duly documented, and canonized.

Wikipedia relies on crowdsourced research, writing, editing, license-free photo contribution, coding, and community organization. This idealistic approach is intended to eliminate prioritization of subjects backed by capital and to avoid the influence of funders or special interests, any language that supports persuasive ideologies or viewpoints,[9] and the monetization of contributions (e.g., paid editing). As such, Wikipedia articles afford a reprieve from the incessant barrage of consumerist language intended to peddle wares, values, and experiences.

This approach intends to promote the formation of a lateral organization and a self-governed community, encouraging a diversity of interests to be reflected on the platform. As we edit what we are interested in or find affinity with, that diversity should be reflected on Wikipedia. And it is, relatively speaking. But this strategy assumes that for each knowledge area (language, country, issue) there are people with equal resources (time, knowledge, authority) to write, edit, code, organize, and teach/share ideas and work flows. It also assumes equal access to technology, research materials, and free time, globally.

While the language common to an era reflects its values and that which is unarticulated remains unaccounted for, we must also consider that which is seen as *notable* is also determined through the circulation of ideas and meaning making by consensus.[10] The influence of capital is visible in paid search engine prioritization as it quite literally creates links between queries and subjects with institutions and their interests. In terms of Wikipedia, the effects of capital on notability are somewhat more complex, but they result in the same propping up of well-documented subjects and the diminution of lesser known subjects. Notability standards on Wikipedia encourage article creation about those subjects that are most critical to human knowledge. However, they are based on the assumption that all culturally or historically significant subjects have been documented *and* published by credible sources.

Why We Wiki

BLT's engagement with Wikipedia includes contributing to the ongoing discourse around notability. Many otherwise significant Black artists are omitted from dominant art historical narratives and receive insufficient attention from the cultural media, making it difficult or impossible to prove they're notable enough for inclusion on Wikipedia. Although we agree that establishing a verifiable standard for an encyclopedic entry is necessary, such policies as "Wikipedia notability standards" fail to adequately take into account systemic and implicit biases that exist in art exhibition, art criticism, and art historical writing. Wikipedia risks mimicking the same system it was built to disrupt.

When we first began our Wikipedia project, the notability standards for visual artists were so high that they excluded the majority of artists

considered notable by contemporary arts and cultural institutions. An artist must have had at least two major museum exhibitions and received multiple reviews in credible journals. This standard was created through a flawed peer-review system drafted by Wikipedians who may not have had any familiarity with the art world or its measures. These notability standards as they are defined could not take into account the potential for systemic bias that precludes many significant artists from achieving that specific formulation of professional achievement.

In order to find those artists elided by the systemic bias inherent in such notability guidelines, BLT considers the following:

- the lingering effects of slavery, segregation, redlining, and busing as they relate to current issues around resource and knowledge equity: *Who gets to be an artist? Who has access to cultural resources in their communities?*
- the demographic of under/graduate arts programs, gallery rosters, major museum group exhibitions, and major museum solo exhibitions in the United States
- museum boards memberships and their influence in determining exhibition seasons; the demographic of curators at major museums in the United States; the collectorship of artworks and how this intersects with board composition
- both the demographic and aesthetic biases of art critics, art historians, academicians, scholars: *Whose work is seen, discussed, canonized?*
- the demographic and knowledge base of Wikipedia admins who establish notability standards for artists and other specialized professions; while peer-reviewed articles are recommended for article citation, does Wiki governance include such industry-specific peership models?
- the dearth of citable sources and historical and critical writing about Black artists

From these deficits we grow our task list. The majority of us do not meet the notability standards Wikipedia has set. Nevertheless, we start new articles. Some are flagged for deletion, many remain. We must be bold.

In the past few years, notability standards for visual artists have become less restrictive, yet the potential for systemic bias to influence notability remains. There are many Black artists whose mentorship and effect on later generations of Black artists is difficult or impossible to cite, not for a lack

of artistic production on the artists' part, but for a general lack of published secondary source material about their lives and work and insufficient exhibition records. Additionally, the editorship—which includes Wikipedia administrators, arbitration and governance committees, safe-space committees, and diversity-related committees—is predominantly composed of middle class, college-educated white men who can afford to volunteer their time and efforts. We tend to author, edit, and advocate for subjects with which we find affinity. So again, we ask, *who is this 1 percent?* The myth of a democratically and globally authored encyclopedia is of course beautifully compelling, but we remain far from achieving this goal.

Who Is the 1 Percent? The Demographics of Wikipedia Editors

While Wikipedia is an open source platform where anyone can have a voice in writing and editing historical records, a Wikimedia Foundation survey showed that about 91 percent of Wikipedia editors are male and 77 percent are white.[11] The statistic of race however has not been an official study of the Foundation. When we investigated the origins of this statistic, we were told by multiple editors that it was an unofficial *visual assessment*. The problematics of assessing another's racial identification based on visual appearance aside, this statistic only accounts for the demographics at select social gatherings and workshops. We imagine it includes an international population, and that the non-white 33 percent is predominantly not of the African Diaspora. So we imagine, based on our own assessment, that Wikipedia editors that identify as Black fall well below 15 percent.

The methodology and resultant metrics for the gender survey were far more rigorous. Despite the various critiques related to accuracy, that survey at least provided sound evidence of a substantial gender gap among editors. The gender gap article on Wikipedia further examines its successes and shortcomings, including accounting for editors who opted out of participating. More recent articles include discussion of the fact that this data is eight years old and should be afforded a time line for updating.

Our critique of these surveys and the implementation of the findings is that they fail to examine diversity-related issues as intersectional. And moreso, addressing gender disparity with a critical study and analysis and race disparity with undocumented visual assessment (the methodology and metrics of which are nowhere to be found online) prioritizes one issue over

the other. This naturally sets up a space for gender inclusion that overshadows the work of race and ethnic diversity.[12]

Considering diversity-related issues through the lens of intersectionality also enables the Foundation (and editors, including Wikipedia project managers) to address related concerns in the more nuanced and critical manner they are due. For example, resource and knowledge equity intersects with race and gender parity and ought to be studied and addressed as interrelated. Studies on the distribution of cultural resources and access to technology by geographic region[13] could offer context or insights into the gender and race gaps in specific communities and provide clues for how to address them.

Wikipedia does need more editors of color and women editors and more quality articles on notable Black artists to reflect a more true and inclusive history. Our project intends to decentralize Wikipedia editing about Black visual artists, bringing the movement to communities and sites that would normally not host an editing event. Participants have a hand in directly authoring stories for future generations and in impacting systems that may not have been built for them.

We are actively cultivating a more diverse editorship, in addition to encouraging editors in the majority demographic to focus on marginalized or omitted subject matter. BLT creates spaces that encourage people of color and women to join the Wikipedia movement by hosting events focused on improving or creating pages for Black visual artists while also encouraging white male editors to focus on gaps in coverage on Wikipedia.

Infinite Possibilities for Engagement

We describe the BLT project as *nomadic,* as one that seeks to meet the people where they are, both physically and metaphorically. We travel to spaces in order to connect with people who would normally not have the initiative or confidence to approach Wikipedia editing on their own and to introduce focus of marginalized communities on Wikipedia to more experienced editors.

We are presently working to decentralize our engagements away from larger institutions by exploring strategies for hosting with smaller cultural and community institutions. Our intention is to bring our events to spaces that are community-run and perhaps underserved. In order to democratize

the authoring of cultural history, we need to address access to and the unequal distribution of cultural resources. To democratize the authoring of cultural history, we need to bring our project to the people.

By taking our project out to the potential editors we are able to witness the moment when historians, laymen, and academics alike realize that Wikipedia is a useful, vetted, reliable resource and that editing is empowering, gratifying, and fun. To do this, our project creates space for editors that is focused on one-on-one attention to lessen the sense of intimidation felt by those new to the platform.

Meeting the people where they are demystifies the process of contributing to Wikipedia and helps to illustrate the many possibilities for engagement on the platform. Above all else, we hope that our efforts serve to increase the ethnic diversity among the editorship and provide affirmation that these new editor's voices are not only welcome but critically necessary.

Our project has raised awareness about the importance of this work, particularly as it pertains to the often unrecorded history of Black visual artists. We are constantly receiving emails, Facebook messages, and so forth from cultural workers who have noticed that this info or that person is missing or needs editing on Wikipedia. Most often they are interested in learning how to fix the error or omission themselves and are seeking guidance.

Because the levels of completeness and quality among the articles on our task list vary so widely, there are in fact endless possibilities for new editors to engage: we encourage grammarians and punctuation police, source-material researchers, biography updaters, fact citers, and photo contributors to find their place.

In the past year, our WikiCommons Photo Initiative (a pop-up photo booth) has become a highlight of our work. The primary objective of the photo initiative is to quite literally increase the visibility of Black visual artists on Wikimedia. The process is simple: we invite a local Black photographer to host a pop-up portrait studio at our edit-a-thon; we invite local artists on our Wikipedia list to have their photo taken; the photographer releases all portraits to WikiCommons for use (eventual use, if the artist still lacks a page; or immediate if they have one) on the artists' Wikipedia article. Thus far we have uploaded nine hundred photos to the Commons, dozens of which have been incorporated into artists' Wikipedia articles.

The photo initiative is an opportunity for everyone to contribute in a small but incredibly impactful way. Those articles with photos and

infoboxes appear in Google searches with a prominent Knowledge Panel, which informs folks about the basic facts related to the subject *and* presents them as noteworthy and included in the ever-growing record of human knowledge.

Art + the Archival Impulse

Why is it important that BLT is an artist project? What does it mean that we are asking artists to write our own art history? We are challenging the status quo. BLT is engaged in radical archiving and institutional critique. We are pushing the structures of cultural, historical, and social institutions to change. Our Wikipedia project intends to rewrite the record and make right the systemic biases that have led to historical omissions.

Self-aware in our involvement as Wikipedians, we question whether Wikipedia is indeed a "movement" or simply another institution. Its utopian mission of Sisyphean proportions requires would-be Wikipedians to believe that their investments are for a just and worthy cause: *together we can create a free and comprehensive record of all human knowledge*. BLT is inspired in our engagement with this possibility, with the myth. We acknowledge that our investment in this mythic goal is more of a salve than a solution. As artists, we don't imagine we are saving the world.

"'What does it matter who is speaking,' someone said." Artists are already speaking. We are perhaps the best positioned to empower those without a soapbox or the confidence to speak, to add their voice and their historical perspective to the record.

Artworks like BLT intend to shift the lens by which folks view the world, challenge institutions to do better to reflect the interests of the publics they purport to represent, invite the uninvited to the table, and redraw the lines within linear narratives, elucidating their complexity and amplifying the multivocality extant in a peoples' history. Artists imagine new structures for the organization of archives and new points at which to access them. We find value where others find none. We imagine our work is a product of the times we live in; the communities we build together; and the ideas, resources, and knowledge we inherit, impart to others, and leave as our legacies.

We imagine our biographies, our articles, are valuable in context and connection to others. Those connections illustrate a complex cartography

of conversations, aesthetics, and ideas; the brilliance of individuals at each point is revealed as their stories are recounted. We imagine the story of human knowledge as one that is infinitely complex, multivocal, and interconnected. Attempting to illustrate even an approximate likeness of it requires tracing as many connections as possible and engaging as many voices as possible. We imagine the scope of our project, and the project of Wikipedia, is infinite. We are enamored of the infinite potentialities present in this endeavor.

Notes

1. Wikipedia, s.v. "Wikipedia," accessed April 25, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org /wiki/Wikipedia#Launch_and_early_growth.

2. Wikipedia, s.v. "Wikipedia: Size comparisons," accessed April 25, 2019, https://en .wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Size_comparisons.

3. It's unfortunately outside the scope of this essay to dive into how these statistics vary among socioeconomic, race, and education-level classifications. Kurt Bauman, "More Than Two-Thirds Access Internet on Mobile Devices," US Census Bureau, August 8, 2018, https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2018/08/internet-access.html.

4. In-depth discussion of algorithmic bias is unfortunately beyond the scope of this article. But check out Algorithmic Justice League (https://www.ajlunited.org) for resources on the subject.

5. Caitlin Dewey, "You Probably Haven't Even Noticed Google's Sketchy Quest to Control the World's Knowledge," *The Washington Post*, May 11, 2016, https://www .washingtonpost.com/news/the-intersect/wp/2016/05/11/you-probably-havent -even-noticed-googles-sketchy-quest-to-control-the-worlds-knowledge/.

6. The quote "What does it matter who is speaking?," attributed to Samuel Beckett, can be found in Michel Foucault, "What Is an Author?" in *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*, ed. Paul Rainbow (New York: Penguin, 1991), 101.

7. While language expresses that which is communicable and relevant in each era, it also identifies that which is omitted and inarticulable. In Foucault's concise formulation, "everything is said in every age." The factors conditioning an age—giving every era its style, its trends, and its values—direct the formation of the language used in that era. That which is socio-temporally relevant in each age is visible and productive of the language describing it. As a result, what remains unsaid illustrates the negative spaces within a culture.

8. "Updates to the OED," Oxford English Dictionary, accessed August 9, 2019, https://public.oed.com/updates/.

9. Such language is flagged as in this article for example: Wikipedia, s.v. "Theaster Gates," accessed November 1, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theaster_Gates.

10. "*The spectacle is capital accumulated to the point that it becomes images*." The Situationist Internationale (SI) was a group of artists whose films, texts, and interventions in everyday life intended to change the world by making the public aware of and empowered to change the conditions of their realities. The theory of the "spectacle" is central to their work and basically asks people to question popular ideologies, imagery, political systems, and aesthetics. Guy Debord, in *Society of the Spectacle*, trans. K. Knabb (London, UK: Rebel Press, 2005), states that capitalist mechanisms want the public to believe that *all that is good appears and all that appears is good*. We should question what monies promote which ideologies and challenge popular beliefs.

11. Wikipedia, s.v. "Wikipedia: Wikipedians/Demographics," accessed March 15, 2018. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Wikipedians/Demographics.

12. The article on systemic bias among Wikipedia editors only gives passing reference to racial bias: Wikipedia, s.v. "Wikipedia: Systemic_bias," accessed November 1, 2019, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Systemic_bias#The_average_Wiki pedian.

13. "Chicago Heat Maps," The Field Foundation of Illinois, August 1, 2017, https://fieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Field-Foundation-Heat-Maps-THazel-Edits.pdf.