WikiHope: Teaching Feminist Historiography through the (Re)Writing of Queer Narratives from Kentucky on Wikipedia

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Abstract: In this teaching discussion, we explain how we have used our Wikipedia Edit-a-thon—an act of critical feminist historiography—to teach hope as action in correcting archival exclusions in digital spaces. In particular, we illustrate how partnering with a local, nonprofit LGBTQIA+ organization, the Faulkner Morgan Archive (FMA), enabled us to expand the presence of queer Kentuckians on Wikipedia, specifically, and in the cultural imagination writ large. We discuss how our event provided students with insights as to how to unsettle scholarly gatekeeping and expand public dialogue around the lived experiences of marginalized people. While not every edit our students have made remains, the process of editing has undoubtedly made an impact on our learners, our small liberal arts campus, and the culture of the platform. Moreover, we assert that this process allows our students to engage with both the historical material and Wikipedia as "archival queers," thus changing the historical narrative from negative to positive and removing the stigma of centuries of shame for a hopeful future of pride.

In the cultural imagination, there are no queer people in Kentucky. As a commonwealth, we are more famous for our citizens' contributions to the movements against LGBTQIA+ rights (e.g., Mitch McConnell and Kim Davis[1])) than for them. While there are undoubtedly anti-LGBTQIA+ sentiments among some, most notably those with disproportionate amounts of legislative power, Kentucky is home to vibrant queer communities with long, rich histories. The fact that these histories are unknown is the result of structural forces aiming to silence these communities and characterize queerness as recent and coastal. Queer folx, however, have been working for decades to preserve the memories of their ancestors who have called Kentucky home. In particular, the Faulkner Morgan Archive (FMA) has been accumulating papers, oral histories, and other ephemera to remind the public that there have always been and will always be

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[1] Kim Davis is the former county clerk for Rowan County, Kentucky who is well known for having denied marriage licenses to queer couples after the Obergefell v. Hodges decision in 2015.

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LGBTQIA+ folx in our commonwealth.

Archives like the FMA are an important form of cultural memory, but their engagement is local and has limited ability to combat the national perception that Kentucky is simply hostile to queer people.[2] One tactic to challenge this myth is through disseminating these narratives in a public forum, like Wikipedia. As professors at a small liberal arts college, we saw an opportunity to establish a partnership between the FMA and our annual Transylvania Liberal Arts+Feminism Wikipedia Edit-a-thon (Transy LAF) in March 2024 in order to bring these stories to Wikipedia. In this teaching discussion, we explain how this collaboration between an historical archive and our undergraduate students made visible the narratives that have been purposefully excluded from history and how these efforts garnered hope for all involved.

Beginning in 2017, the two of us—a rhetorician and an art historian—used Art+Feminism's framework to establish Transy LAF, an event that brings together students, faculty, staff, and community members to collaboratively address Wikipedia's gender gaps.[3] It is well documented that Wikipedia's editors are primarily cishet white men; because of this bias, content on Wikipedia over-represents the (stereotypical) interests of this demographic at the expense of folx from marginalized communities (Berson et al.). To combat these prejudices, a group of scholar/artist/activists founded Art+Feminism in 2014, creating open-access resources and guidelines to initiate Wikipedia edit-a-thons around the globe. Using their toolkit, we have expanded our focus beyond art and to include folx from other marginalized identities. Therefore, we have eagerly partnered with the FMA and use our Wikipedia activism to preserve and share Kentucky's LGBTQIA+ history.

The work of Transy LAF is critical historiography. Our work follows in the tradition of feminist historians, like Joan Scott, who highlighted how considering women and gender more broadly would expand historical records while also transforming disciplinary practices and "[forcing] a critical reexamination of the premises and standards of existing scholarly work" (1054). Through collaboratively editing Wikipedia pages, we endeavor to make visible topics that are systemically written out of the historical record and to have our students experience and critically question the process of documenting history.

Wikipedia—which at present functions as the preeminent, nonprofit, open-source digital encyclopedia—is an archive. According to the Society of American Archivists, an archive is "the documentary evidence of past events [; t]hey are the facts we use to interpret and understand history." Whereas historians

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2   Because Kentucky's most well-known politicians are staunch conservatives who have used their roles to limit and roll back the rights of marginalized folx writ large, and due to the myriad articles, books, and other works of media that have cast Appalachia—a region for which Kentucky is often a synecdoche—as regressive, bigoted, and undeserving, the commonwealth has become mythologized as homogeneous and hostile to change. This perception is primarily maintained by outsiders; Kentuckians recognize our heterogeneity and the various and significant contributions of our people both within and beyond our borders.

3   This event is open to the entire campus and the Lexington community. We require students in the relevant classes we're teaching (e.g., Women in Art, Digital Rhetoric) during the semester Transy LAF occurs to participate; other faculty might require their students to participate or offer extra credit to students who do. Often, students bring friends with them. As such, we have a broad array of students from different classes with an array of experiences and expertise.

like Roy Rosenzweig, Robert S. Wolff, and Robert L. Nelson and Heidi L. M. Jacobs argue that Wikipedia is a historical text, we maintain that the way information is presented, sourced, and chronicled on Wikipedia renders it also an archive. Because Wikipedia is a compendium of various primary source documents—including news reports, websites, press releases, photographs, and blogs, alongside peer-reviewed academic work— the site serves the dual purpose of preserving and writing the historical record. In this way, writing for Wikipedia allows our students to practice being both archivists and historians.

Because Wikipedia is digital and public facing, the histories contained within are accessible by a broad audience, one that is far greater than the FMA's scope. Writing the histories of queer Kentuckians into Wikipedia allows for their biographies to be learned by a general public, and it connects that public to the archival history of the LGBTQIA+ community in Kentucky. As Josh Porter, Assistant Executive Director of the FMA, noted in an interview with us, "once this information is out there . . . it opens up the opportunity for more research." He offered the example of queer Kentucky painter Edward Melcarth's Wikipedia page, which our students created this year. Melcarth was a world-renowned artist who taught at institutions including Columbia University, the University of Louisville, the Parsons School of Design, and the University of Washington. His art has been exhibited in diverse venues over the last fifty years. And yet, he had no Wikipedia page until March 2024. Porter continued: "when you Google [Melcarth,] now there's a Wikipedia page that tells you everything about him. People are more likely to . . . want to learn more," which might even lead them to the FMA website since archival materials are linked on Wikipedia.

While Wikipedia editing increases the visibility of some figures in this way, significant barriers to publication remain. Because over the years we have experienced several challenges to our pages over the concept of "notability"[4] (Wikipedia:Notability), we train students to look for as many sources as possible to support their work and demonstrate the value of the contributions of their subjects. In so doing, we encourage students to defy archival guidelines in order to correct historical omissions through research.

As such, our students undertake a process of discovery in preparing their Wikipedia pages, which is a common topic in their reflections.[5] One student found it especially challenging to find information to add to existing pages on artist Stephen Varble and designer Charles Lisanby. They write:

> One thing that surprised me about this project was the amount that I had to really dig for information deeper than surface level . . . about Varble and Lisanby. I think that I have been so accustomed to having sources like Wikipedia at my disposal that compile all of this kind of knowledge for me,

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4   Per the Wikipedia Notability guidelines, "No subject is automatically or inherently notable merely because it exists: the evidence must show the topic has gained significant independent coverage or recognition, and that this was not a mere short-term interest, nor a result of promotional activity or indiscriminate publicity, nor is the topic unsuitable for any other reason. Sources of evidence include recognized peer-reviewed publications, credible and authoritative books, reputable media sources, and other reliable sources generally." Because the types of sources that are required for notability have historically omitted the lives and experiences of marginalized folx, including members of the LGBTQIA+ communities, this guideline ultimately reinforces their erasure from the platform.

5   We each assign our students to write a reflection after participating in Transy LAF as a part of their course work.

I didn't realize how difficult it was to curate it by hand. I was also shocked how little information there was about these influential artists.

Partnering with the FMA meant that students had ready access to numerous sources to build their pages, which, in turn, allowed them to significantly expand these biographies.

Our students have also learned how historiography highlights or minimizes parts of an individual's identity. For example, our students collectively worked on the page for Kentucky artist Henry Faulkner (for whom the FMA is named). While Faulkner previously had a Wikipedia article, there was almost no recognition of his queerness. Students used FMA materials to correct this omission. This revision of the page led one student to reflect on "how histories are written and whose histories are told," saying:

> Before this assignment, I thought that if someone's relationships were not discussed, this was because they were not anything worth noting and then I moved on. But learning that Faulkner did have relationships and that people went out of their way to hide these relationships because they were queer, changes that. . . . People who collected Faulkner's work yet also were queerphobic objectified Faulkner's work because it was pretty, but chose to ignore the oftentimes queer undertones of these pieces.

The students thus saw how historical records obscure details that do not align with hegemonic narratives and learned strategies to combat this erasure. Part of our students' enterprise as archivists and historians during Transy LAF is to re-narrativize the biographies of marginalized folx away from certain dominant myths.

In this year's edit-a-thon, our goal was to challenge two significant myths about queerness in the South, more generally, and Kentucky, specifically. First is the belief that there are simply "no queer people" in the South. As the founder of The Invisible Histories Project, Joshua Burford, has noted: "The narrative is that there isn't queer Southern history, or if we have one at all, it's super young, which is a very nice way for people to dismiss us completely. As if somehow, we haven't been part of the conversation from the beginning" (qtd. in Mcclantoc 68). The second myth is that all Southern queer folx must escape the region. Keshia Mcclantoc attributes this to "metronormativity," the idea that to live a legitimate life as a queer person, one must move to coastal urban spaces (Halberstam, Herring, Thomsen).

Through our edit-a-thon, we are able to challenge both of these myths. Our students' reflections indicate that our efforts allowed them to see queerness in Kentucky as historical. As one student writes, "There was something revelatory about working with the physical evidence of powerful queer Kentuckians. Queer people have always existed in Kentucky, and narrowing the focus of the edit-a-thon to draw attention to these individuals resulted in a rewarding experience." Because we worked with the FMA to (re)write these Wikipedia pages, students were able to see and demonstrate to others the rich queer history of Ken-

tucky.

Our students felt strongly that our work also challenged the metronormative, coastal, and Northern-centric narratives that have marginalized their own experiences. As one trans student wrote, "I was able to help uplift my community and support one of my trans sisters. This was profoundly emotional for me, and made me think about narratives that center queer suffering in America and particularly the South. Queer people are everywhere in America, but narratives in the South often focus only on the hardships the LGBTQ+ community faces." They specifically noted how people outside of the South presume "the queer experience anywhere outside of a big city is just one of suffering and repression." Getting to learn and share a different narrative made this student proud to be a queer Kentuckian.

For our students, engaging with the FMA and (re)writing queer Kentucky history was not a disembodied endeavor. Rather, the participating students went beyond simply exploring a queer archive to embodying the identity of "archival queers" (Morris). As Morris and Rawson note, being archival queers occurs "when we acknowledge the stakes in recognizing, engaging, accumulating, and speaking these traces, these holdings, these embodiments of queer pasts for self and communities, for transformation" (79). Through activating the queer histories within the FMA materials, students "resist the archive as a purely intellectual space and . . . seek out affective relations with the past" (Morris and Rawson 80).

Our students' reflections demonstrated deep personal connections they found with the individuals whose histories they were writing. As one student who wrote about contemporary painter Wylie Caudill explained:

> When LGBTQ+ Kentuckians see people like themselves represented, it can foster a sense of pride and belonging within those identities. This rings true on a personal level. . . . I found that Wylie and I had a lot in common in terms of our upbringings. We are both from rural areas in Kentucky, and we were both raised in the church. I also feel like we both have developed our LGBTQ identities during college. Seeing someone with such a similar background and writing about his successes has validated some of my aspirations and hopes for the future.

Seeing themselves reflected very specifically in the lives of the people whose stories they were telling demonstrates that students experienced the "intentional quest for affirmative identity formation" that Morris and Rawson say allows archival queers "to read queer triumphant history as a positive genealogy of queer identity when the realities of lived queerness may not seem so successful or glamorous" (80). This reading of the archive was not an exclusive experience of LGBTQIA+-identifying students; most students recounted feeling a personal, affective connection to the histories they were writing based on their shared relationship to Kentucky. This meant that all students were approaching the research and writing process as archival queers regardless of personal identity.

Transy LAF not only changed how students related to archival histories, but it altered their relationship with queer temporality more generally. Our project is similar to the pedagogical projects advanced by Pamela VanHaitsma, in that we are "prompt[ing] student participation in public discourse that attends to the past while advancing claims about LGBTQ lives in the present and future" (257). By looking to the past from the present with an affective lens, these students began to imagine themselves and other queer folx in the future.

Moreover, our project engages in the process of retroactivism; according to Jean Bessette, building on Lucas Hilderbrand: "retroactivism is the generative function of shaping and drawing from the past for present identity formation and future politics" (11). Our efforts produce a doubling of the work Bessette says is involved in retroactivism, as initially the FMA and subsequently our students "impugn, deconstruct, and scavenge existing historical accounts and libraries, and compose new histories and archives out of the detritus to shape identification and political leverage" (11). Both the archive and the Wikipedia articles produced from it make the history of queer Kentuckians visible in new ways, in direct opposition to the political forces that would prefer to assert it has never existed.

In this way, our project engages with José Esteban Muñoz's concept of queer futurity. Muñoz considers "the future [as] queerness's domain" (1), noting that "queerness [is] a temporal arrangement in which the past is a field of possibility in which subjects can act in the present in service of a new futurity" (16). The past and the present for queer folx in Kentucky has been marked by numerous attempts at obfuscation and suppression, but the work of the FMA and Transy LAF changes this for the future. In our collaboration, we are writing/righting the historical record so that the future is not about erasure but about the sharing of these histories so they are openly available to future generations of Kentuckians.

Queer archives like the FMA make visible the longevity and resilience of Kentucky's queer communities, and from those histories we can see paths through the present and into the future. By learning the stories of those who lived openly, often in the face of systemic oppression, students find connection, identification, and most importantly, hope. They recognize their mutual entanglements with other Kentuckians, and in so doing experience shared humanity. As Morris and Rawson note: "To be part of a vast movement is comforting, even when that movement shares experiences of profound injustices and oppression, because there is a shared strength and pride in facing and overcoming injustice" (80).

Our activation of this archive through Wikipedia editing furthers that sense of collaboration and augments the hope therein. That students are writing for a public beyond our commonwealth— and engaging affectively together with each other and the queer folx of the past to dispel myths about Southern queerness—they begin to see their power and agency against queer marginalization. They understand that structures and histories are malleable and can just as easily tell a positive story as a negative one about what it means to be queer in Kentucky. This shift in framework is radically hopeful; it promotes the future that Muñoz and others assert is possible. As Porter told us, in terms of Kentucky queer history, the FMA "[does]

n't want [the public] to think of Kim Davis. We want them to think of Sweet Evening Breeze. . . . when people think of Kentucky and queerness, we're trying to get them to think positively rather than negatively." As such, changing the historical narrative from negative to positive removes the stigma of centuries of shame and allows for a hopeful future of celebration and pride.

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