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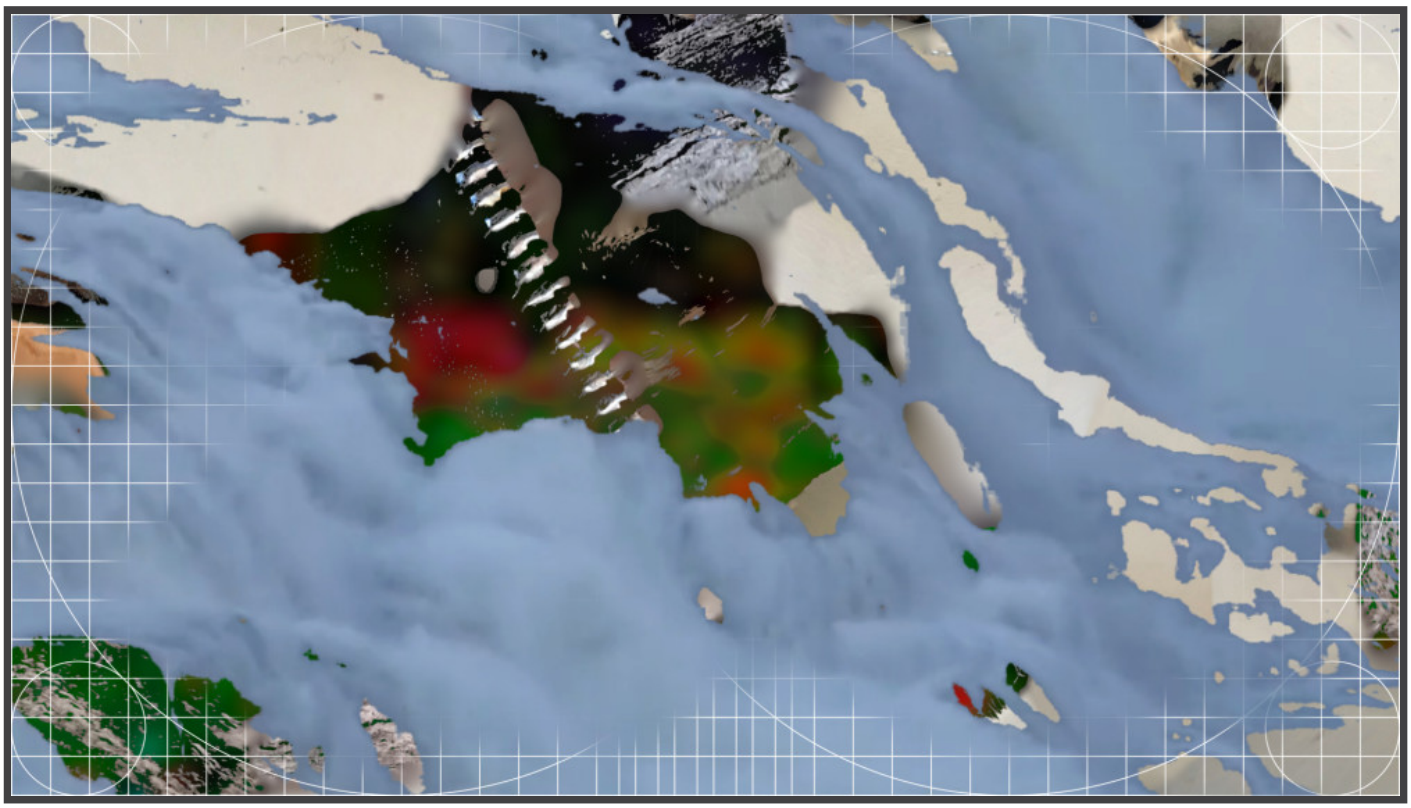
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Editing for a Decolonized Wikipedia

Reimagining the Black British Sonic Archive

Jess Rowley

The institutional archive as a vessel for historical Black British sonic histories is one of precarity, absence and loss. Its failures are the catalyst for communal gatherings and the expansion of alternative research activisms such as the DWN (Decolonising Wikipedia Network) [https://decolonisingwikipedianetwork.myblog.arts.ac.uk], collectively using Wikipedia to reframe and add to the database under the «lens of anti-racism and decoloniality.»



Two years ago, while surfing the John Johnson Collection: An Archive of Collected Ephemera, I stumbled across a rather obscure Canadian banjo playing duo, James and George Bohee. It was later revealed to me that they may have been the first Black artists to record commercially on a wax cylinder in Europe. The Library of Congress identifies the recording date of their banjo duet as approximately 1890. The two-minute sonic artifact has been lost to time, with no surviving scores or notations. This began my lengthy, ongoing and slightly delirious journey to reinterpret this missing record and re-introduce the performers within my research community. I mentioned James and George to many historians, ethnomusicologists and musicians but only a small handful had heard about them. This shocked me but was not, of course, a surprise. As a former cataloger I was all too familiar with the complexities of institutional collections and what their archives do and don't hold. When looking for digital traces of the duo I was irked by the ever-omnipresent 12-sentence-long Wikipedia biography that clung to the top of the Google homepage. In that very post I was introduced to a terminology I had not come across before: stub article. This, according to Wikipedia, «is an article deemed too short and incomplete to provide encyclopedic coverage of a subject.»[1]

I wanted to edit – if Wikipedia is an illusionary system of validation, I was desperate to validate them! To enhance these submerged histories of Black British artists would be an act of defiance. The main question was how and for whom.

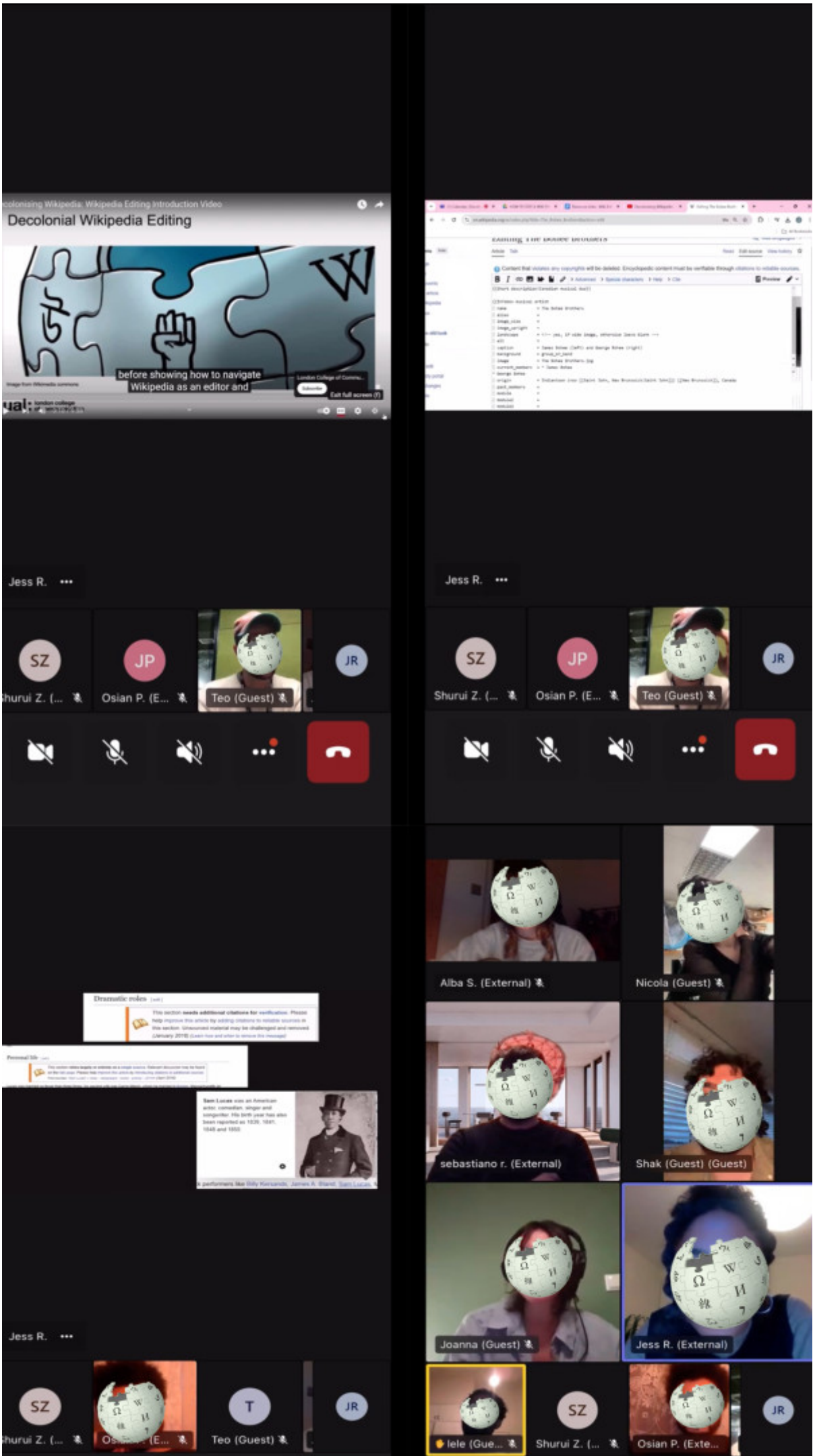


James and George Bohee. The London Archives (City of London Corporation), cat SC_GL_ENT_154d.

The ways in which my research manifests in the present moment takes place away from institutes of cultural production, re-centering informal research into the public sphere. I engage with this work, within community centers, web calls and as the individual behind a screen. It was important to find an energetic practice of researching outside of my own expertise away from the academic lens. The Decolonising Wikipedia Network presented itself to me as a system that would encourage a de-parasitic interaction with the encyclopedia. An encyclopedia that in 2016 had been ranked the fifth most popular website globally, its pages are read an average of 20 billion times every month. Frustrated with how short the Bohee's Wikipedia entry was, I contacted Lucy Panesar (who set up the DWN network) for advice on how to do something about this. It was formed in November 2020 by the London College of Communication changemakers. They self-define as a network that encourages «increasing the

visibility and credibility of under-represented and marginalised figures and topics connected to our subject disciplines on Wikipedia.»[2]

The DWN is an umbrella network that supports people in forming their own micro-communities under the organisation. Apart from my individual edits I felt a need to assemble a group that only focussed on Black histories. As a direct response to James and George Bohee's lack of ‹Wiki-traces› the Ghost Edit group was created. It is composed of individuals who are underrepresented within the Wikipedia community. A cohort of researchers, artists, architects, musicians who are united by a shared interest in Black British sound history and a diverse range of research methods. Our aims as a collective taking part in the DWN were A) the avoidance of hyper-focusing on preservation, instead concentrating on fixing misrepresentations. B) to encourage this act of editing as an extension of an already established practice. It is the what more than the how that holds significance within the Ghost Edit group. The sonic methodologies that emerge triumphant within the gathering space spawn and rebel against the fixed-ness of the encyclopedia as a construct.


Decolonial Wikipedia Editing
before showing how to navigate
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The Ghost Edit Group, 2024, Microsoft Teams Call.

Yes, Wikipedia might be available in 300 different languages, yet it might not come as a shock to the reader that English remains to be the dominant dialect on the «Wiki-portal.» This underscores the erasure and ongoing silencing of Indigenous languages and histories. The origins of the physical encyclopedia are undoubtedly rooted in Western, colonial bias. Sofia Akel dissects this within their investigations into decolonizing the British education system, writing «We must first understand what is meant by ‹colonial› education and its intrinsic link to academia. The way in which we come to know, understand and view the world – what academics term ‹epistemology› – is learned throughout our lifetimes from many influences, known as formal and informal agents of social control. These include the state, the law, religion, our families, our neighbourhoods and public opinion.»[3] We can ask ourselves, is an encyclopedia hosted on the internet any different from its early, very flawed counterparts? The utopian vision of a virtual encyclopedia has somewhat dissolved since its much anticipated arrival on January 15th, 2001 (ignoring earlier defunct versions such as Nupedia). Wikipedia's monopoly on universal knowledge within WEB 2.0 is vast but considered severely lacking, especially when it comes to the uploading of underrepresented histories and more obscure articles. This has been hypothesized to be due to two potential factors:

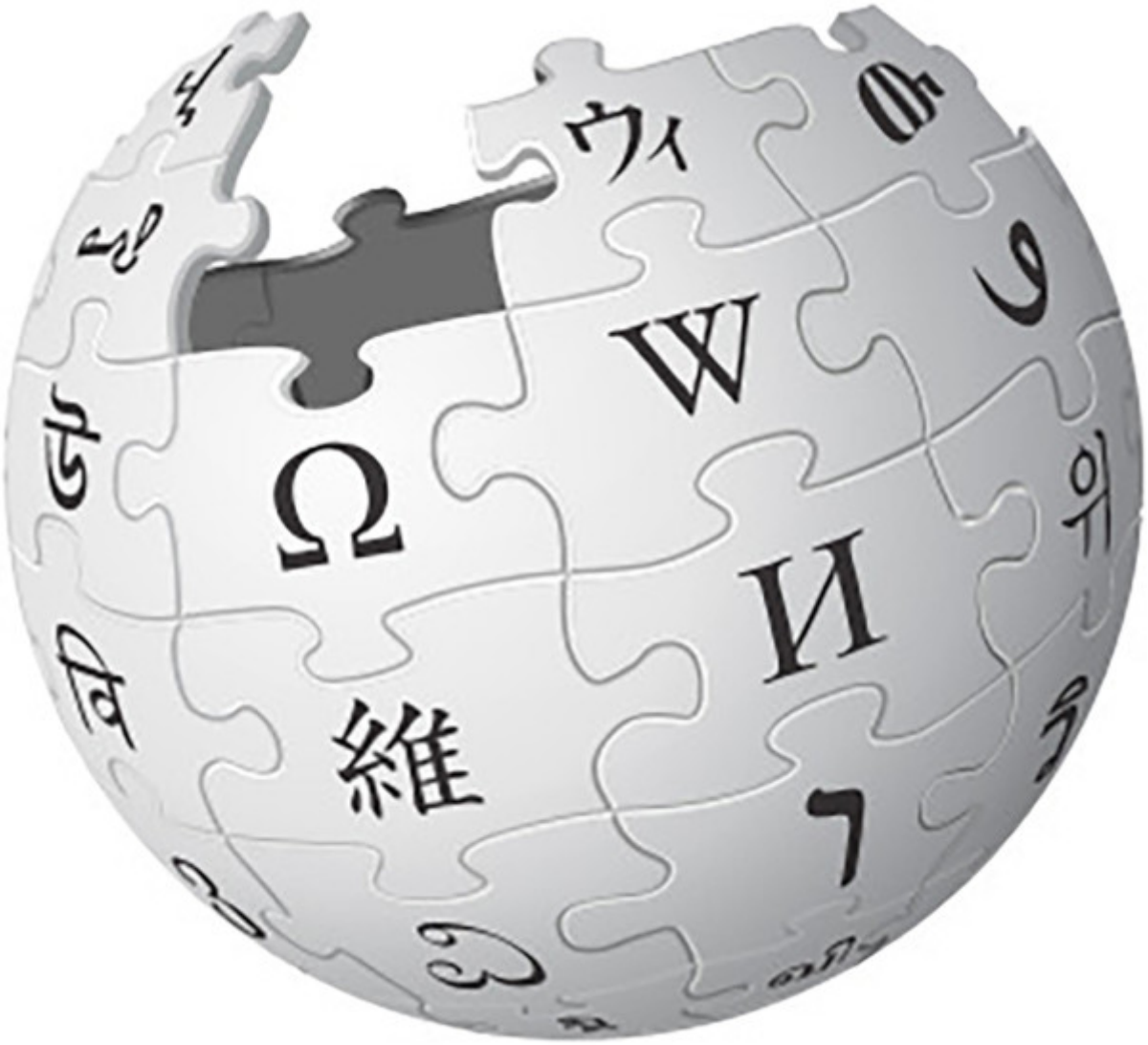
1) It's unreliability as a volunteer-run project

«Wiki-content» is uploaded by volunteers within a decentralized model. As a result, maintenance and updates of certain entries are not guaranteed, a risk Wikipedia has to take to preserve the flexible network structure. Outdated and factually incorrect articles are also prevalent due to this organizational framework.

2) The cultural and systemic biases of Wikipedia editors

Wikipedia's consensus reveals that 80% of editors identify as male, with English as the primary language for 52% of the Wikipedian community. Wikipedians, upon signing up to the mass network, agree to collaborate within the premise of neutrality. The aim is to share information without exerting influence. Who is being neutral here, the editor, the moderators, the programmers? A neutral point of view (NPOV) breeds tension between the desired politics/policies of Wikipedia and the realities of the site itself. NPOV is rooted in the Western epistemological view of knowledge, which has been critiqued within feminist and Indigenous praxis as disembodied knowledge that disregards the social and historical contexts from which the information is conceived. The encyclopedia, and consequently Wikipedia (in its current state), is a form of colonial technology. It first presents a curated collection of information as the definitive «all knowledge» on a topic, reinforcing the empirical knowledge structure as the only accepted mode of understanding. Historically, this process has played a key role in implementing a Eurocentric education system globally.

NPOV policy is the heartbeat of the Wikipedia project. It maintains the «self-regulation»[4] of Wikipedia. It is defined as «representing fairly, proportionately, and as far as possible without bias, all significant views that have been published by reliable sources [https://chr.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Wikipedia:Verifiability&action=edit&redlink=1] .»[5] To simplify, the policy encourages the application of ambiguity to reach consensus. This pluralism of views and multitude of interpretation for NPOV promotes a conflict loop, «Truth and ‹neutrality› become whatever users with power (typically administrators) intend it to mean and this is enforced not by intellectual consensus but by topic ‹squatting›.»[6] This encourages defensive page monitoring, harassment and uneven power dynamics between editing factions.



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WIKI GLOSSARY

Some terms and phraseologies are important to familiarize yourself with as a new member of the Wikipedia community. On the «Wikipedia:Glossary» page, the somewhat self-aware definitions critique the nature of its positionality. Wikipedia defines its own systemic bias as follows:

> «Systemic bias
>
> In Wikipedian terms, this refers to the preponderance of Wikipedia articles relating to subjects specific to English-speaking and/or Western countries, as opposed to those from the rest of the world. It may also refer to a bias for articles that may be of particular interest to those who have an affinity towards computers and the Internet, since they are more likely to edit Wikipedia.»[7]

I'd like to reiterate that this is Wikipedia's definition of its own internal systemic bias. There is a heavy focus here on accessibility and linguistic biases but no mention of how the organization plans to dismantle this.

Upload bias has the largest impact on what stories are nurtured and which ones starve. Info-curation is rendered obsolete when the narratives are absent altogether. Web reference interfaces such as Wikipedia have a power and legitimacy that can shift an idea or individual to relevance instantaneously. Performers such as Benjamin Holmes from the Fisk Jubilee singers are left without an article. Within the Ghost Edit group we came to realize that Benjamin had escaped enslavement, become the first estate administrator in Tennessee, was a teacher as well as the original member of the touring troupe that was the Jubilees. A page is definitely deserved. The Fisk article is an uncharacteristically well-developed one; nevertheless, many dead links exist within its paragraphs. Wikipedia presents Benjamin as a red link on the main page, with no accompanying write-up. This goes beyond erasure; it represents a burial, both within colonial records and digital spaces like Wikipedia. The encyclopedia serves as a virtual mirror of this colonial archive, reproducing the same information in a digital format rather than print, with minimal critique or reflection on the objectivity and limitations of the records themselves. In instances like this, doom-scrolling through search engines, finding mentions of a name, a signature style, or a venue are often the only source materials we can engage with when it comes to histories like Benjamin's. These disparate fragments are enough, however, to formulate a «Wiki-entry.»

A researcher taking part in the Ghost Edit session asked, «Why should we not make an alternative platform to host these Black sonic histories, rather than using Wikipedia?» I often come back to the 2012 article, «Are Encyclopedias Dead? Evaluating the Usefulness of a Traditional Reference Resource»: «No one can bind all knowledge between two covers …. Even open source Wikipedia cannot achieve it, as human civilizations continually invent, experience and discover phenomena open to multiple interpretations …the traditional encyclopedia can only capture what existed in the past, or preserve what compilers would like to collect from the recent present.»[8] From the perspective of researchers investigating Britain's BIPOC legacies, the preservation of established «‹facts›» without room for new contributions is untenable, particularly given the limited existing body of Black histories. The idea that we as the Ghost Edit group can correct or reinterpret our digital cultural heritage—is both liberating and remarkably feasible.

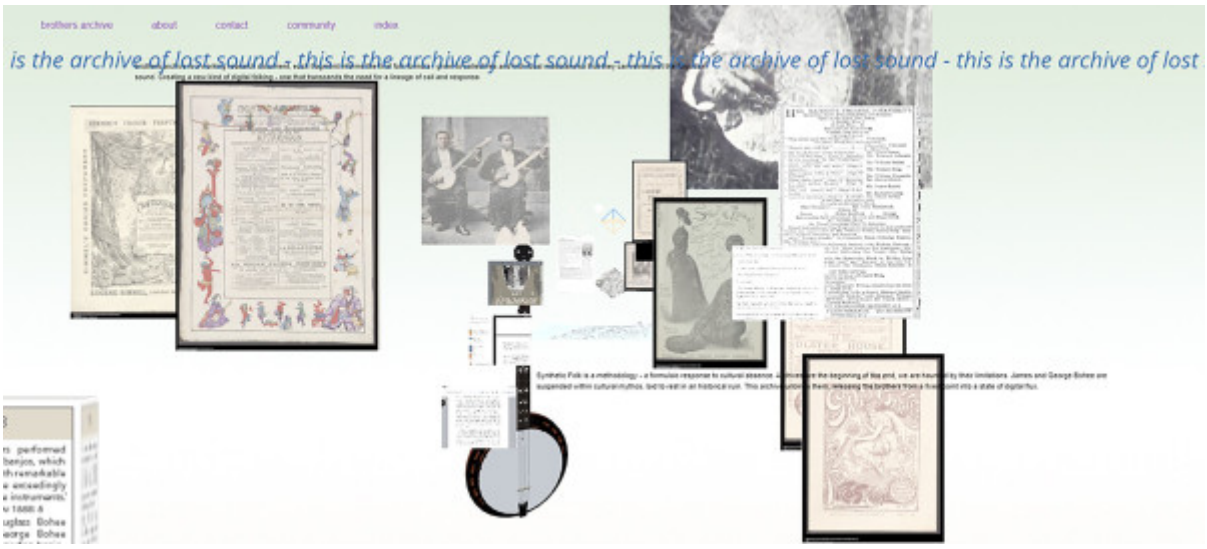
The DWN edit session is often host to a shared feeling of mourning, to see that the majority of entries for Black artists from the late 1800's were left as a ‹stub› waiting on editors with an interest in these long-forgotten individuals to expand their impact into Wikipedia's digital expanse or for Wikipedia to situate itself into the worlds of the editors themselves. Breaking apart these municipalities is work; to hack away at the structure we need more uploads and a variation of perspectives from the core moderators.

To adapt the DWN framework to sonic histories was straightforward, but getting past Wikipedia's strict upload rules proved difficult for the collective. Artists such as the Bohee Brothers have very little in terms of peer-reviewed papers or multimedia content in the public domain. To «wiki-fy» these histories can feel like a flattening of the rich complexity of Black life in that period, reshaping it to fit the constraints of the encyclopedic format. The alternative, however, would be an acceptance of half-written pages, birth dates that span multiple decades with no correction, a void where a portrait might have been and references that point to no more than two sources.

THERE IS NO WIKI-FUTURE

How complicit is Wikipedia in knowledge death, digital death and the collapse of curiosity? Wikipedia is a temporary tool for memory capture. Navigating swiping, scrolling and tapping on each blue wiki-link is a short-term act of remembrance for BIPOC people trying to find seeds of memories from moments in time.

Let us forget Wikipedia for a moment and de-center it from the material archived. Are there any new methodologies for the predicted decay of the digital encyclopedia, and what are the shards left over? The DWN recognizes that the power lies in preserving and passing on these histories beyond the confines of an encyclopedia—an opportunity to transcend digital death. Will our gathering spaces become encyclopedic again, embedding within ourselves living and lived wisdoms? For this to occur there is a need for solid ground to establish roots. Fair and equitable digital platforms are essential in this process. When we desire to learn, we often ask the search engine before those closest to us. This is why «Wiki-activism» is crucial for fostering agency when consuming digital content.



Jess Rowley and George Symonds, brothers.archive beta site, 2023.

PRESERVATION FOR ACTIVATION: After Wiki

Wikipedia is a living contradiction of itself, and it is unwise to suggest that the site should be a permanent placeholder for the records that we as a group upload. Wikipedia, in the present moment, reflects what is deemed publicly to be valued knowledge. The encyclopedia's concern with making digestible histories is, of course, not enough to give complete life to such under-documented accounts. Despite this, editing and uploading these slivers of data is a way of exercising collective and personal freedom.

There have been many critiques of Wikipedia in the years since its emergence. The DWN challenged Wikipedia's publishing model and the individualism of the research processes that uphold it. Most importantly it unpicks the colonial inheritances that haunt the internet—replicated in the copy and paste (rather than reform) essence of these encyclopedias and other web-based open learning infrastructures.

Wikipedia's future as a decolonized space is one of fluidity, with a readership that can see themselves reflected within the narratives it shares. Until then we can work into these sites'

more obscure, increasingly ephemeral Black histories and diasporic futurisms. It is a unique challenge but fulfilling for those who wish to be involved. Gathering together continues the work of many hopeful members of the DWN, a community that embraces practical and accessible methods for deconstructing outdated systems of knowledge.

[1] Wikipedia contributors, «Wikipedia:Stub,» Wikipedia, November 22, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Stub .

[2] The Decolonising Wikipedia Network, «About,» n.d, https://decolonisingwikipedianetwork.myblog.arts.ac.uk/ .

[3] Sofia Akel, «What Decolonising The Curriculum Really Means,» *EachOther* (August 14, 2020), https://eachother.org.uk/decolonising-the-curriculum-what-it-really-means/ .

[4] Sorin Adam Matei and Caius Dobrescu, «Wikipedia's ‹Neutral Point of View›: Settling Conflict through Ambiguity», *The Information Society* 27 (1) (January 2011): 40–51.

[5] Wikipedia contributors, «Wikipedia: Neutral Point of View,» Wikipedia, 2022, https://chr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Neutral_point_of_view.

[6] Sorin Adam Matei and Caius Dobrescu, «Wikipedia's ‹Neutral Point of View›: Settling Conflict through Ambiguity,» *The Information Society* 27 (1) (January 2011): 40–51.

[7] Wikipedia contributors, «Wikipedia:Glossary,» Wikipedia, November 17, 2024, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Glossary .

[8] Rachel Wexelbaum, «Are Encyclopedias Dead? Evaluating the Usefulness of a Traditional Reference Resource,» *Library Faculty Publications* 26 (2012).

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