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Archiving Feminist Truth in Trump's Wake of Lies

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Special Issue: Teaching in the Wake of Trump

This essay is about an assignment I co-created in 2014, had successfully implemented five times, and then last year (2021) modified into a new version that I called the post-Trump edition. The 2021 edition was very much created in the spirit articulated in the call for this special issue – “Teaching in the Wake of Trump.” Indeed, the first line of the assignment description, reads: “This assignment is to start the documentation process of the Trump presidency from a feminist and queer, trans, people of color (QTPOC) perspective.” In other words, the perspective of many of the people left in Trump's wake of destruction.

He Broke Everything

Trump inherited an unemployment rate of 4.7% and left President Biden and Vice President Harris one at 6.7% (Murray 2021). Trump broke democracy. Rather than a peaceful transition of power that we have all come to take for granted, he actively tried to orchestrate an insurrection and came dangerously close to succeeding. As of this writing, his last White House chief of staff, Mark Meadows, was charged with criminal contempt of Congress for refusing to cooperate with the January 6th commission. Meadows' documents seem to be confirming what we already knew: the administration clearly orchestrated the failed coup d'état (Broadwater and Feuer 2021). He broke the office of the presidency: he was unable to complete his term without being impeached; twice. Trump destroyed civil and legal rights of women/LGBTQ+ folks faster than attorneys could file lawsuits to stop him (Baker 2021). And of course, he let a global pandemic go totally unmanaged, and so militantly politicized that his supporters wear their right to die and infect others along the way with the same pride as their MAGA hats (Baker 2021). While 92%

of Democrats are presently vaccinated, only 56% of Republicans are and we are now on our third Covid variant (Galston 2021).

In addition to material pain and suffering left in his wake, there is also a truth vacuum; a vacuum that I maintain feminists must fill. While Trump was in power, he and his handlers so deeply controlled the narrative that they literally rebranded the meaning of reality. Recall early on when White House counsel Kellyanne Conway with no sense of irony, used the term “alternative facts” to explain away the Trump administration's lies about the inauguration crowd size. Not even a full week as president and it was already official that facts do not matter. It is not surprising then, according to *The Washington Post* Fact Checker team, by the end of his presidency he “accumulated 30,573 untruths ... averaging 21 erroneous claims a day” (Kessler, Rizzo, and Kelly 2021).

Feminists Must Clean Up the Wreckage

As a compassionate human being, it was truly painful to watch the administration as they took pleasure enacting their xenophobic, white supremacist, trans/misogynist, homophobic policies over their four years in power. As a woman, mother, and a Jew, there were many, many days that his attacks felt extremely personal. As a gender, women, and sexuality studies professor who considers herself a social historian, it was a unique sort of horror. I watched every day as he and his minions pulled one block down from reality and replaced it with their own fabricated reinterpretation. Elsewhere I have written and edited about how the Trump administration brought a whole new urgency to GWSS that many of us could have never imagined (Shayne 2020; Baker 2021). Given that I had already thought about this, a lot, I decided I needed to use

my institutional location and clout to try and undo some of the massive damage inflicted by the Trump administration.

I decided to reshape one of my signature assignments in an attempt to redirect the narrative and make truth matter again. I am not a biographer but rather a scholar of social movements. Part of the story that needs to continue be documented regarding this era is the resistance to Trump. Traditional historians will write the history books that hopefully categorize his lies, failures, impeachments, rape and sexual assault accusations (Mindock 2020,) lawsuits, tarnished attorneys (Durkee 2021), and his full wake of reprehensibility. This year however, I worked with my students and librarians to document Trump from an activist perspective.

The Archive and its Founders

In 2015 I co-created the Feminist Community Archive of Washington (FCA-WA) with some librarians and staff at my university: Dave Ellenwood, Denise Hattwig, and Kara Adams. Denise, Dave, one of the students who worked on an early iteration of the assignment, and I have written about the process elsewhere (Shayne et. al 2016). Every year since, students in my class "Histories and Movements of Gender and Sexuality" research local feminist and gender justice organization and we then house the interviews, transcripts, artifacts, photos, etc in this open-access archive. The archive is meant to keep track of the vibrant feminist and gender justice activism in Washington state. Until last year we focused entirely on the Seattle area because students met with all of the organizations in person. The assignment is a massive labor of love that involves much cross-campus collaboration. I work with my Community Based Learning and Research Office (CBLR) to identify organizations that are willing to work with my students. We keep a list, the CBLR office does the initial reaching out, explains the students' timelines, what the organization will gain from the relationship, and finds out who wants to work with us. I always go for some mix of trans rights, environmental justice, reproductive rights, immigrant advocates, sexual assault support, community support, feminist, campus group(s), preferably representing BIPOC communities.

I cannot do the assignment alone. Penelope Wood, the Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies librarian at UWB is always involved, in various ways, depending on the

organizations students are researching and the ways they need assistance. My main co-collaborator on this project is Denise Hattwig, Head of Digital Scholarship at UWB. We have worked on this together from the very beginning. She manages and curates the archive and works with the students on all things technical. This project and archive, simply put, would not exist without her.

Feminist Knowledge Production and Power

Learning about feminist knowledge production is a key component of this assignment. In other words, students learn about power in the academy. As Bonnie Thornton Dill and Marla H. Kohlman note, "the production of knowledge is an academic enterprise and has been controlled and contained within predominantly White, elite, and middle- to upperclass institutional structures" (2012, 163). In our course we understand feminism as an intersectional ideology that challenges women's and nonbinary folks' secondary status as manifest in the economy, politics, popular culture, the family, control over the body, and the like. Women's and non-binary folks' collective and individual autonomy are implicit goals in feminist struggles. Intersectional feminism challenges women's subordinate status as compounded by racism, classism, homophobia, cissexism, and other institutionalized ideologies of power. Thus, if you think about knowledge production from Thornton Dill and Kohlman's perspective, and feminism as we operationalize it in class, it is not surprising that an assignment focused on feminist knowledge production seeks to redistribute the power.

I teach my students that feminist knowledge production, in contrast to elite knowledge production which is the university's default, acknowledges power imbalances in all aspects of scholarship; especially those which result from gender power arrangements. We see power imbalances that result from questions that are asked or not asked in the course of research; subjects pursued or not pursued; curriculum and pedagogy in the classroom; who is presumed to hold credibility and who is not (Gutiérrez y Muhs et. al. 2012; Flores Niemann et. al. 2020)? Power between the researcher and "subject;" the "expert" and lay person. Many of these divisions have since been complicated due to the Trump administration undermining science and truth telling but that unfortunately is subject for another paper. Feminist researchers are additionally

concerned with unreciprocated extraction of intellectual resources when researchers benefit from the communities we research without compensating said communities for their time and efforts. And most relevant to our class, power in archives.

Students learn that while feminists are mindful of these layers of power and we attempt to ask our questions and design our methods in an attempt challenge these inequities, it is not possible to fully eradicate them. That is, we can undermine inequities and attempt to make things more balanced but power runs deep and it will take more than one well-conceived assignment to undo generations of colonial, heteropatriarchal research methods.

We discuss all of this in general terms, narrowing as much as relevant to their own research, and then to the finest of points when we get to who controls narratives and archives. Denise Hattwig explains concepts of metadata – that is, the seemingly small descriptions of the artifacts that end up in the archive, in order to shed light upon how much power students have as knowledge collectors, archivers, and documenters. An example I often give goes something like this. One group might be given a picture of the women they interviewed at a pro-choice march as one of the artifacts to be added to the archive. The students are then required to provide the metadata to describe the picture which will be searchable to the world. Depending on how the archivists see the women in the photo and their presence at the rally they could use a variety of terms. Some archivists might write “Feminazis at pro baby killing march.” Others, more likely the students in our class, “Female presenting people at protest.” “Examples of signs: ‘My body my choice;’ ‘U.S. out of my womb;’ ‘If you are opposed to abortion, don’t have one.’” That is, my students learn that archives are imbued with power and as the archivists they are the ones who hold the power.

Denise and I do not pretend that they should attempt to be neutral because they are not archiving apolitical projects and neutrality is not possible. Rather, we encourage them to add as much detailed description as possible. In the example I gave, the signs are the place to begin. A viewer may then conclude those holding them are “feminazis” because the viewer is anti-choice and does not believe women should be able to publicly demand control and autonomy over our bodies. Or, a viewer may see the pictures and descriptions and come to the conclusion that the women are

activists who were at a pro-choice rally demanding their precarious access to abortion not be further undermined.

The Project, Post Trump Edition

This administration left a wake of broken lives and what feels like broken glass under our bare feet. In 2021 Denise Hattwig, Penelope Wood, and I worked with my students to pick up those shards and repurpose them to tell a different story of the administration.

Under the best of circumstances, it is a very arduous project that I almost did not do, partly because of remote teaching and partly because Trump fostered burn out. But then, I had a realization – we needed to do a post-Trump edition. This would be the first time I was teaching the class post-Trump and I wanted to take the opportunity for us to start documenting the administration through the eyes of activists who organized against him. I truly felt it was my (our) responsibility as feminist social historians, researchers, and archivists.

This iteration of the assignment had three specific learning objectives with an additional activist goal, all of which are shared with the students on the assignment guidelines and first day of class:

1. Learn a history of a specific local organization;
2. Learn the significance of activist archives in committing potentially erased stories to the historical record;
3. Produce feminist knowledge while growing feminist archives;
4. From an activist perspective, the goal is to launch the feminist documentation process of the Trump era.

Last year students were paired with local Indivisible groups (the offshoots of the Pantsuit Nations), mutual aid groups that started because of COVID-19, as well as long standing ones like Food Not Bombs, the Washington Dream Coalition, the Washington State University’s Queer People of Color and Allies Queer Intersections Association, and three campus projects: the Collegiate Community Transitions student organization; the UWB/CC Campus Library Community Reads, and our Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies program which launched two weeks prior to the 2016 election. A team worked closely with Denise to organize the archive into subsections that hadn’t previously existed, create graphics, and other images that make

it more user friendly. One of those students (Jesse Blaire) is presently working with Denise, Penelope, and me on a different iteration of this project (Feminist Archive Exhibits, 2022). And a final group worked to curate the post-Trump special collection.

My students posed the following types of questions to the groups we had selected for them to research:

- Why did we need so many mutual aid organizations in Washington state? How did the Trump government's narrative that COVID-19 was a hoax lead communities to have to meet their own needs? How did Trump's hostility to states with democratic governors like Washington (Brunner, 2020) lead to more mutual aid organizations?
- How did the Trump administration shape the reading choices and conversations of our campus social justice book club?
- How did the Trump administration shape the strategies queer students of color collectives?
- How did the Trump administration lead undocumented youth to raise over five million dollars in COVID-19 relief for Washington state undocumented families (Chang 2020)?
- How did the Trump administration shape the direction of the new Gender, Women & Sexuality Studies program?

The team with perhaps the most public task, and the one most relevant to this special issue of HJSR, Teaching in the Wake of Trump, were the students responsible for creating the narrative explaining this special collection in the archive. In a typical year students submit their top three choices and I assign them to groups based on various factors. In this case I knew I needed at least one student I trusted and had a vested interest in completing this task with the activist commitment it warranted not just as another class assignment. I asked a student - Theao Quinn Klinicke - who was now enrolled in their second class with me if they were willing to work in this group. I knew Theao would be great because we had talked a lot about the Trump administration, our relief he lost the election, and the pain he inflicted on the world, including Theao's own community; Theao is trans/non-binary. And Theao is a serious student and wonderful writer. Two other students I did not know signed up for the group and we all met and discussed the project. I made sure they

understood the seriousness of the task – they were writing public history not just a homework assignment and were they sure this was the group they wanted to be in – and they did. So Theao, Olivia Strigen, and Annabelle Sussman worked together to write a wonderful statement framing the special collection.

The “Post Trump edition” of the Feminist Community Archive of Washington (FCA-WA) is needed to highlight the work of local organizations in response to Trump's many failures to serve the people, record a truthful account of history, and to honor those whose lives were lost or made much worse due to these failures. There are four major areas where these organizations combated his failures: immigration, education, mutual aid, and queer communities. When Trump was first elected there was a large group of privileged people who downplayed the very real threat he posed. They gaslit members of marginalized communities because they could not see how their privilege insulated them from the harmful policies enacted during the Trump administration. This edition of the FCA-WA holds the Trump administration accountable while also giving recognition to the organizations that altered their agenda or were created in response to the Trump administration's criminal negligence.

Just like metadata, the students who wrote this description had the power to frame the contents any way they chose. (Yes, I also had the power to not include it but that would communicate great distrust in the students and disregard their thoughtful work.) There are always students in the class who resent this assignment because it demands so much attention to detail or even hate me because they think I am a “man hater” – last year one even called me that in a homework assignment with his name on it – so identifying the correct students for this group was a serious task and I was quite pleased with the team's work.

Parting Thoughts

Using feminist research methods, speaking to these anti-Trump activists, posing our questions, helps us document the Trump administration as it really happened. An open-access, student filled, feminist archive is a small but powerful way to contribute to the documentation process and to reclaim the reality that he and his administration tarnished with their misogynist infused lies. My students

unearthed reality from this wreckage, one interview, one photo, one artifact, and one transcript at a time.

Trump and his enablers may have broken norms, economies, lives, bodies, and laws, but activists and educators responded with rage and creativity. While Trump and his handlers peddled in alternative facts, feminists marshal integrity, mobilize as researchers, and fill our archives with marginalized communities' truths. Documentation is resistance, and resistance is healing.

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