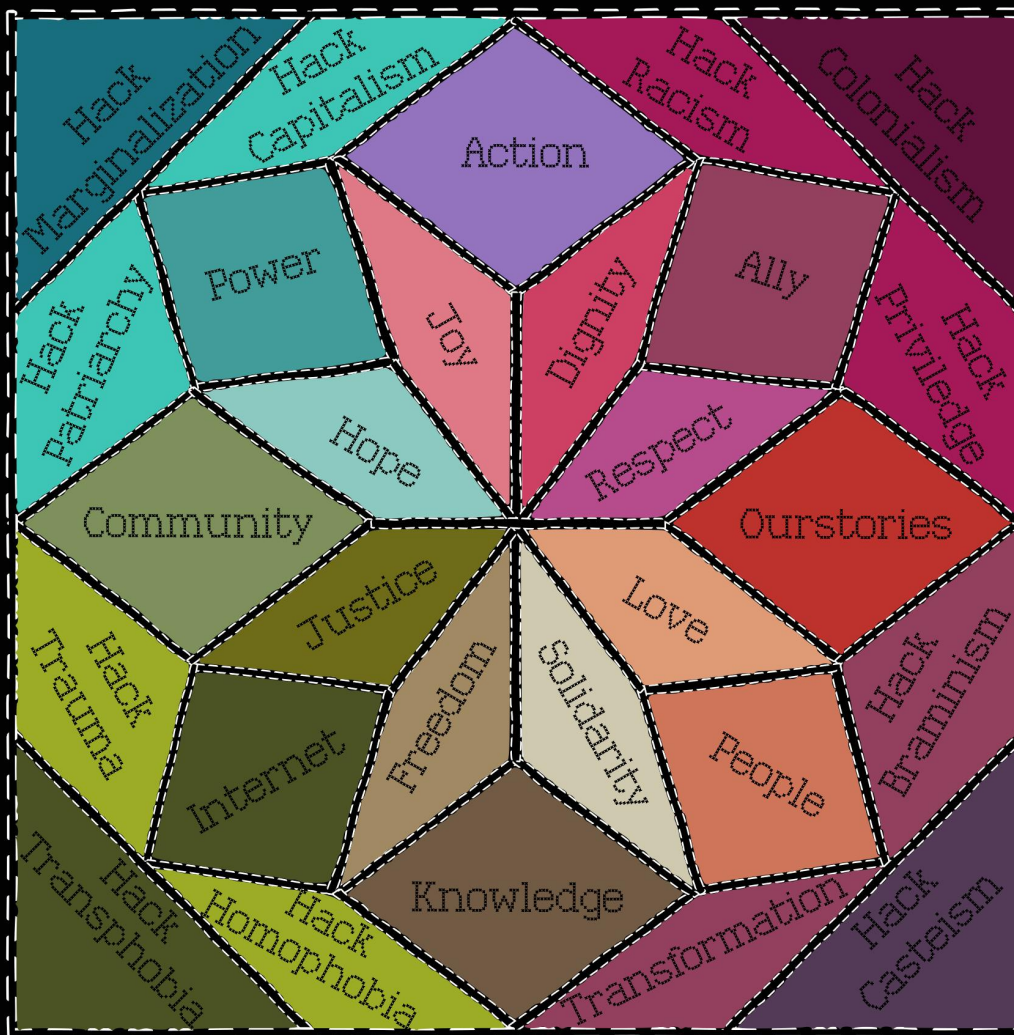


# OUR STORIES



# OUR KNOWLEDGES

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of the Kumeyaay Nation in Southern California, United States.*

*November, 2018*

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## RESOURCES SERIES

# "OUR STORIES OUR KNOWLEDGES"

### PART I DECOLONIZING OUR STORIES AND KNOWLEDGES

### PART II TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICES FOR BUILDING COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGES

### PART III ADDING OUR KNOWLEDGE TO WIKIPEDIA

### PART IV HOW TO ALLY AND BE A GOOD GUEST

# PART I - DECOLONIZING OUR STORIES AND KNOWLEDGES

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# OURSTORIES



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT TO KUMEYAAY LAND

Eyay... eyay... eyay  
long... long... ago

Tule boats plied the waters of the kelp beds. Fishermen cast nets in the bay. Grey Whales plied the waters as they do now, moving seasonally to their southern calving waters. Oak and pine woodlands dominated the landscape. You would have seen villages of Kumeyaay utilizing the resources of the land and sea in a relationship built on the accumulated knowledge of generations. Their relationship with the life around them created an abundance that supported many thousands of people throughout the region.

From the lands of the present day University of San Diego could be seen dozens of villages, each possessing Sh'mulls or Clans who harvested and protected the lands of their birthright. The concept of nature, separate and apart from humankind, was unheard of. Instead, the people of this land practised a belief structure rooted in the concepts of balance with the forces of the spiritual, and harmony with the cycles of the cosmos. From the University of San Diego campus, the rising of E'muu, the three Mountain Sheep, at the winter solstice, must have been wonderful coming up above the mountains to the east. From E'muu, who Europeans named "Orion's Belt", come stories, songs and ceremonies that are but one small way the skies, the land and the sea are integrated into the concepts of identity for Kumeyaay people. Many other constellations, songs and stories make up the traditional knowledge base of the Kumeyaay. From such a beautiful location, songs of praise and gratitude must have carried into the sky long before new ways intruded into the landscape.

The University of San Diego campus sits on a strategic location. Warriors, fighting to preserve their identity and way of life, must have gathered on this very land to prepare for battle or watch the comings and goings of invaders. No doubt there lay hidden caches of funerary urns within these lands cradling remains of people whose lives carried meanings both familiar and exotic to modern sensibilities.

People from many cultures and locations around the world now walk upon this ground. They are seekers of knowledge, looking toward those credentialed for topics perceived to be useful to the modern world. But as you walk about the campus remember to open your mind to other sources of knowledge. Learn from the land, the plants, the cosmos and the songs. Feel the presence of those who loved, fought, lived and died on the very land beneath your feet. Learn to respect balance in life, harmony in worldview and gratitude for the creation that will be home for your time here.

## ABOUT THESE RESOURCES

In August 2018, we traveled to the traditional territory of the Kumeyaay Nation in Southern California, United States to spend four days writing together.

We held close Michael Connolly Miskwish's acknowledgement to Kumeyaay land as we walked and worked on the campus of the University of San Diego.

We came together as ten people from a few different communities, organizations, each traveling from the lands of different indigenous communities in Bosnia, Catalonia, India, and the United States:

- Az Causevic and Belma Steta from the Bosnian Herzegovinian LGBTIQA organization, [Okvir](#)
- Maari Zwick-Maitreyi and Sanghapali Aruna from the [Dalit](#) feminist organizations [Equality Labs](#) and [Project Mukti](#) respectively
- Michael Connolly Miskwish ([Kumeyaay Community College](#)) and Persephone Lewis ([University of San Diego](#)) from the Native American communities of the Kumeyaay and Shoshone
- Jake Orlowitz from the [Wikimedia](#) movement
- Siko Bouterse and Anasuya Sengupta from [Whose Knowledge?](#)

In addition, Laia Ros facilitated the [Book Sprint methodology](#) which helped us bring our embodied knowledge to the page.

We met to create a set of resources to support marginalized communities in centering their knowledges online. These include:

- *Decolonizing Our Stories and Knowledges*, giving context about ourselves, communities, and work, and discussing some of the structures of power we're dismantling
- *Transformative Practices for Building Community Knowledges*, a set of practices and tools for marginalized communities
- *Adding Our Knowledge to Wikipedia*, sharing what we've done and learned from work on the online encyclopedia
- *How to Ally and Be a Good Guest*, with tips and suggestions for allies

The group was convened by Whose Knowledge?, with funding from the [Shuttleworth Foundation](#), and hosted by the office of the tribal liaison at University of San Diego.

In this collection, we are sharing some of our personal and community stories and knowledges. We do not write to represent the breadth and depth of our communities; our individual voices can never do them full justice. We write to introduce you to our communities, ourstories, and some of the ways in which we are building and sharing our communities' knowledges, including online. As our friend Hvale says, this will always be a work-in-process.

It's rare for most of us to find this much time, space and energy to reflect and document our experiences and learning, and we've learned a lot from wrestling with the process together. Writing for many of us as members of marginalized communities is a complex act of uncertainty, pain, and then power. We hope you'll find meaning and use in these resources, as we did while creating them together!



# WHO ARE WE?



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# KUMEYAAY AND SHOSHONE

WHO ARE WE?

WHY DO WE DO THIS WORK?

HOW AND WHERE DO WE WORK?



My name is **Persephone Hooper Lewis**, and I am a citizen of the Yomba Band of Shoshone Indians. My traditional territory lies in central Nevada. I was raised in rural areas of the state in both Shoshone and Paiute lands. I moved to Southern California in 1994 and have been a guest on the land of the Kumeyaay Nation since this time. I understand that I have been very fortunate to earn my education, raise my children, and build a life on this beautiful land. I choose to pay my rent by supporting the sovereignty and self-determination efforts of the Kumeyaay Nation.

My career in Native American education began in a local tribal education department in 2001. The community was different than my own but it was also familiar. I felt connected and found hope and inspiration in working with the students. I knew I wanted a career in education and stayed focused on this dream as I pursued my Bachelor's Degree. While attending school, I remained engaged in tribal education efforts and watched as more reservations developed their own departments and programs. I sought ways to bridge the resources of the university with the needs of Kumeyaay communities. This perspective continues to guide the work I do today at the University of San Diego (USD).

My position at USD as a Tribal Liaison and teacher positions me in a way that heightens my access to university resources. I actively work with administrators and staff while building relationships with faculty — they are the ones that control the classroom. The structure of the position allows access to both Native students and those enrolled in my courses. Through these entrance points, I am able to increase my access to resources such as labor, money, space, minds, and knowledge. Most recently, I have expanded my focus from relationship building and sharing resources to raising the visibility of Kumeyaay people.

The expansion of education efforts is resulting in a generation of empowered Kumeyaay people who are pushing for their history, culture, language, and epistemology to be incorporated into curriculums, public venues, print media, and in online spaces. The partnership between people from Kumeyaay Community College and the University of San

Diego is a result of this wish. Having my students write Wikipedia articles about Kumeyaay people, institutions, and events offers a way for the Kumeyaay to be more visible online. This solution is imperfect and the hope is to have Kumeyaay people edit the pages themselves. The Book Sprint project and my work with Whose Knowledge? follows the path I hope will end in this goal.

My name is **Michael Connolly Miskwish**. I am a member of the Campo Kumeyaay Nation. I have worked in the fields of resource economics, science, engineering and history for over 30 years. In the process of designing regulatory programs for Native American communities, I encountered many obstacles to the true exercise of political and economic sovereignty that I had taken for granted was an inherent part of the governing structure of all Native communities in the United States. These obstacles had many points of origin going back hundreds of years into religious sanctions made for explorers to conquer and dominate the world.



Identifying the origins of the obstacles and developing the tools to remove or mitigate their effects became a substantial part of my efforts as an indigenous person and an educator. I've worked on Kumeyaay history, cosmology and environmental management. I've also worked extensively on addressing the constraints on economic sovereignty on the native Reservations. While most of my work has been inward toward the Kumeyaay community, I have also looked to ways we can correct the marginalization that has occurred in the dominant society. Wikipedia offers a huge resource in that it gives us direct access to the dominant population without the filter of entrenched subjective dogma. While Wikipedia offers its own challenges, they are much more discrete, identifiable, and potentially addressable.

# OKVIR

## WHAT IS OKVIR?

The violence based in gender identity and sexual orientation is a burning issue of our LGBTIQ community in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It stems from patriarchal, (post)colonialist, (post)war, ethno-nationalist ways of oppression. It demands from us a collective, strategic and systematic struggle for our basic human rights as rights for all. This includes our rights to free education, clean water, air, health care, pensions, streets, cultural spaces, and freedom of movement with equality and dignity.

The founders of Association Okvir are 6 activists from different cities of Bosnia and Herzegovina. We formed Okvir in June 2011, in Sarajevo. We decided to establish our organization because the LGBTIQ community did not have a safe space in which to express freely without any fear of discrimination, exclusion or erasure. In parallel, we needed to increase the visibility of LGBTIQ community in public spaces. We also wanted to continue the efforts of pioneers of queer activism, and the very first organization for promotion of human rights of queer persons: Organization Q. Okvir focuses on the visibility of LGBTIQ lives, culture and community in Bosnia and Herzegovina through a form of activism that connects education, art, psychology and technology.

We use creative tools of multimedia, arts, technology, education and psychology to build inclusive and intersectional platforms, and to build our community. Our ethics and politics are rooted in the principles of feminist and queer activism. We empower ourselves by building community-based resources, and creating resilience and support networks/systems/mechanisms amongst ourselves. These include: peer-to-peer counseling, online multimedia platforms, and crisis management tools. We also educate ourselves on trauma and post-trauma rehabilitation, healing and reflection on the past. In parallel, we incorporate safety and security strategies on a daily basis, including through self-defense trainings, online security, and communications strategies. We work with women and LGBTIQ activists, LGBTIQ artists, LGBTIQ students, LGBTIQ workers, LGBTIQ immigrants and the diaspora, engaged in queer art, culture and politics of memory, gender and sexuality in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

## WHO ARE WE?



My name is **Az Causevic**, and I was born in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The first event that defined my life was the moment and country where I was born and the name I was given. My name never seems to fit, and I keep on looking for it. Just as I search for my body and my gender. I was born in 1986 in Brcko which is at the very crossroads between Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Croatia. At the time of my birth, all these countries were part of the Socialist Federative Republic of Yugoslavia. My grandparents (both Muslim) from my father's side survived WWII by fleeing Montenegro to Bosnia and Herzegovina. The place of my birth, Brcko, is also a place which later became known for its concentration camps and ethnic cleansing of Muslims in 1992 during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Brcko was like many other places across my country that witnessed war crimes and killings of all people (of all three ethnic groups — Muslims, Serbs and Croats). My life was dissected in two periods: before and after the war. It has taken me many years to learn that time and space surpass this life. My grandparents' experience of war repeated with my parents when the war in Bosnia started. And then war happened to me. Except that I am queer. And it has taken me many years, patience, love and compassion to learn my way to (un)find myself, (un)find meaning, love and belonging. For that I am ever grateful to my love, Belma.

Belma and I founded Association Okvir in 2011. Both of us have devoted 7 years of our lives to building and empowering the queer community through culture, arts, education and peer support. We believe that each and every person has the right to self-determination and a life of dignity, free of violence and oppression.

My name is **Belma Steta** and I come from Bosnia and Herzegovina. I grew up in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia where I took pride from one common national identity. By the beginning of the war in 1990's, I witnessed the various transformations of people around me — including some of those closest to me — when they began to conform to one of the three national/ethnic identities. I was 13 when the war started; a very intense period. Those teenage years of formative identity brought enough confusion in itself, yet I was also in the position where my only familiar identity — that of being a Yugoslavian — was being taken away from me. This period marks the lack of my sense of belonging to any collective or a group, resulting in my feeling isolated and alienated from the majority of society.



As I was growing up, I was learning and understanding that identities are a fluid category that can be (de)constructed, which brings me a feeling of freedom. On the other hand, having understood this, I encountered loneliness as I met only a small number of persons who were questioning their identities. Though I have been part of many different grassroots communities, I haven't met many persons who carry the same depth and width of feeling, thinking and reflection, as well as the desire to deconstruct imposed norms. In 2010 I met Az, with whom I found mutual understanding and love. We started Association Okvir the next year out of the need to empower and connect queer individuals and build our queer community.

# DALIT

## WHO ARE WE?



I am **Sanghapali Aruna** from India. Born into a Dalit family and raised in a Dalit basti (ghetto), I experienced various forms of discrimination since my childhood. Casteism, poverty, isolation, and criminalization to name a few. The one privilege that I always feel I had, and thanks to my parents for that decision, was that I went to a good school run by the State. The other privilege that I had, was that my father was already influenced by the Ambedkarite ideology and gave utmost importance to education and equity.

If my school helped me to be educated, my experiences with caste oppression, gender oppression, poverty, and several conversations that I had with my parents and community members, made me knowledgeable and compelled me to challenge the established narratives. When I looked back at what I was taught and not taught in school, I felt that we were forced to read and process much about 'savarna' ("upper caste") pride and the associated patronizing behaviours. I realized that much of the indigenous history and our culture has been deliberately erased and appropriated.

I am **Maari Zwick-Maitreyi**. I belong to a Dalit, immigrant, indentured family from India and Malaysia. I am an activist, scientist, and community organizer. I believe in the power of oppressed people to tell their history with autonomy. Trained as a scientist, I believe in the potential for dialectics to build community resistance against oppression, given they are first laid on foundations that account for historical disparities. I am a co-author of 'Caste in the United States, 2018'. As Research Director at Equality Labs, I work to create participatory knowledge projects that can counter oppressor-caste and white supremacist modes of historiography.





## WHY DO WE DO THIS WORK?

The result of our realization of our missed history leads us to a process of unlearning everything that we have learned so far and it also helps us to organize with our other community members. Dalit History Month was one of those imaginations of rebuilding our own history. It involved searching for the martyrs, leaders from the past, recognizing them, acknowledging and celebrating their strong presence in the past, and rebuilding their stories to motivate future generations. We also believe that social media is a powerful tool in the hands of Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasis, allowing them to organize for resistance and to share with the rest of the world their histories.

## HOW AND WHERE DO WE WORK?

We work both on the ground and in the diaspora, and both online and offline.

# WHOSE KNOWLEDGE?

## WHO ARE WE?



I'm **Anasuya Sengupta**. I grew up in India, and moved to the United States in 2007, when for the first time I experienced what it was to be a “woman of colour” in a white country. Back home in India, I fought against the oppressions of patriarchy and fundamentalisms, especially when I fell in love with someone who was born into a different religion. I am also *savarna*, a so-called “upper caste” woman who has battled against an unjust caste system much of my life. I am both colonizer and colonized, simultaneously. And this perpetual dance of discomfort is my call to action. I know what it feels like to grow up in a middle-class home in an arid and remote part of South India, and read books whose protagonists did not look like me. I know what it feels like to walk into a room in San Francisco and fight to design online spaces that do look like me. But I also know what it feels like to thoughtlessly celebrate festivals that are based on myths and stories that vilify entire communities of the Indian sub-continent. And with this politics, I've worked to amplify voices ‘from the margins’ across virtual and physical worlds, while unpacking issues of power, privilege, and access, including my own.

I'm **Siko Bouterse**. I'm a white settler on Ohlone land in California, and my father is from the Netherlands. I am both the oppressor and oppressed, depending on which room I walk into. Growing up in a family of artists, translators, hippies, and outlaws spread across three continents, I often felt a disconnection with place and understood that history was not for me — what I read was mostly the stories of rich white men, not me, certainly not my Afro-Brazilian sister. Over time I learned how many other stories were missing, and how much power, privilege and choice I have as a white American woman to either reinforce these structures of oppression, or to support and center marginalized leaders in making change. I became an online community organizer after living in Egypt because I saw potential in the internet to connect us and better share all our stories across languages and cultures. My feminism really kicked in as I walked into white male tech spaces and realized that once again this potential wasn't being realized online either.



We met each other at the Wikimedia Foundation in 2012, where we shared a mutual interest in reimagining Wikipedia and the other online spaces we inhabit to more fully reflect and represent ourselves, our families and friends, our networks — in other words, we wanted to truly see on Wikipedia and the internet the full spectrum of humanity.

Together with **Adele Vrana** — our Afro-Brazilian friend who moved to the United States eight years ago — we began Whose Knowledge? in 2016. Whose Knowledge? is a global multi-lingual campaign to center the knowledge of marginalised communities online, and make the internet have the textures and richness and diversity of the physical worlds we live in.

As we do this work, our team has become a community, expanding to include volunteers, including allies like Jake Orlowitz from the Wikimedia movement.



I'm **Jake Orlowitz**. After a breakdown post-college, jobless and losing my mental health, I found myself again while in Colorado, starting to edit Wikipedia from the car I had been living out of. I moved back home with my parents and discovered Wikipedia as an intellectual refuge. As a white American man, I fit in pretty well there, and within four years I had established myself as a member of a vibrant, driven, and smart community. I found friends and received grant funding and mentorship. I got a full-time job running a Wikipedia program I started as a volunteer. I met my wife through Wikipedia. I am deeply indebted to the volunteers,

community, early founders and pioneers, hardcore administrators, tool builders, and organizations that advance Wikipedia's mission. So why do I criticize something I love? Because I am a part of it, and in trying to make it better, more whole, more true to its aspirations, I use my privilege to look from the inside to the outside and back again.

Understanding how Wikipedia works deeply enough to critique it is a radical act of care for the community I rebuilt my own personal confidence in. While some old-timers may see this as an act of betrayal, it is more fully one of solidarity - with the editors who continue to struggle against bad patterns of exclusion, and those many more who have yet to become, or who have tried but not succeeded in becoming part of this community. I would like to see others benefit in the ways that I benefitted.

## WHY DO WE DO THIS WORK?

We live to understand ourselves and be seen fully by others. And yet, when our embodied experiences are not communicated through the “artifacts” of books, newspapers, TV shows, internet websites... we lose some of ourselves in the untelling and the unknowing. We call it the hidden crisis of “unknowing” — that we do not adequately know each other, our histories and knowledges, well enough in a rich, diverse, multilingual, multicultural world.

Google [estimated in 2010 that there are about 130 million books in at least 480 languages](#). In a world of 7 billion people speaking nearly [7000 languages and dialects](#), we estimate that only about 7% of those languages are captured in published material; a smaller fraction of the world’s knowledge is converted into digital knowledge; and a still smaller fraction of that is available on the internet. Most of our world’s knowledges are oral and embodied, and we know so little about each other right now.

The internet itself offers us possibilities to share these histories and knowledges in rich, multi-media ways — to amplify different voices, and make visible different bodies. Yet the internet of today is deeply skewed towards a monocultural view of the world, primarily that of white straight men from the global North — Europe and North America. 75% of the online population today — using and experiencing the internet — is from the global South, from Africa, Asia and the Pacific Islands, Latin America and the Caribbean. Nearly 45% of those online are women. And on Wikipedia — a good proxy for online public knowledge — [20% of the world \(primarily white male editors from North America and Europe\) edits 80% of Wikipedia currently, and 1 in 10 of the editors is self-identified female](#).

As Adele [says](#), “I need and deserve to see others like me in the world’s online encyclopedia.”

As Whose Knowledge? we seek to center and honour the leadership and scholarship of marginalized communities, and to re-imagine and re-design the internet to be for and from us all. We believe that the more we see each other and know each fully, the more joyful and meaningful the world will be for *all* of us, not only *some* of us. Re-imagining the internet is our way of re-imagining our world.

## HOW AND WHERE DO WE WORK?

Centering marginalized communities, leadership, and knowledge is at the heart of our practice, as is allyship. We can’t lead in putting Dalit, Native American, or LGBTQI knowledge online, for example. But what we can do is show up to support people from these communities, who know their own priorities and histories best, and who choose to do this work of sharing their embodied knowledge online. And we can also build connections with others who can do the same, by convening spaces in which we can together re-imagine and re-design practices of producing and amplifying our knowledges. We have had the great privilege of getting to know many amazing communities working on knowledge production in different countries and contexts, and we know that ultimately we’re stronger together. So

convening conversations like Decolonizing the Internet and writing sessions like the Book Sprint where the words you're reading were written, connecting ideas and partners around oral archives, and bringing in Wikipedian allies to support projects like Dalit History Month, are some of the ways that we work.

We see our work as a multi-burner stove, in which many pots are simmering or cooking a full meal. Acknowledging the multiple kinds and forms of knowledge that exist, and how limited the internet currently is in who and what it represents of those knowledges, is key to who we are and where we're going.



# DECOLONIZING OUR STORIES AND KNOWLEDGES



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# WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO

## "KNOWLEDGE" TO OUR KNOWLEDGES

We, the contributors to this work, come from very different parts of the world. The Kumeyaay, the Dalit, and the queer-Bosnian communities have been deeply affected by settler colonialism, Brahmanism, war, and heteronormative structures of power. We are varied in the ways we think and reflect about knowledge, history and marginalization.

At the core of the work we do is the creation, visibilization, and dissemination of our people's knowledges. Even as we are very different from each other, our understandings of knowledge resonate together, as marginalized peoples. We know both what our knowledges are, and what they are not.

Our knowledge is not meant to wield power. We have not, and we do not, use knowledge to colonize, militarize, or occupy others. We do not use what we know to undermine the collective identity of distinct populations. We do not use our knowledges to couch the ugly truths of violence we have inflicted on others in the past. Our knowledges are not abstract exercises in theory. They are not hobbies. They are not luxuries.

Our knowledges are often life-giving. They help us to literally survive in the environments that we live in. We pass it down to our young ones, allow them to know how to be working, productive people. They help us deal with our loss. We use them to keep our peoples and our heritage alive under systems and structures that perpetually try to extinguish us. Our knowledges are the embodiment of our individual and collective stories of resistance.

Our knowledges are urgent. They are practical. They are creative, colourful and collective. They are plural. That is why for us, "knowledge" is never singular. Our knowledges are transformative. They are hope.

## "HISTORY" TO OURSTORIES

Across time and space, our knowledges, lands, bodies, genders, sexualities, cultures and memories have been capitalized, appropriated and commodified by micro and macrosystems of power, regulating the very lives we live. What is claimed as "history" — in our everyday language and in institutions of power — is actually a mono-cultural, Western, "upper" Caste, white, male, straight and binary version of human experience. The tellers of history are those who have always had the powers to speak.

Embodied in the terms "decolonization" and "queering", therefore, is our effort to challenge "history" and "knowledge" as most people know them. We are therefore making a distinction between the word "history" as claimed through structures of power and privilege, and "ourstory", which is the multiple, rich, plural experiences of our communities who have continually struggled to be seen, heard, and acknowledged.

In our work together, we have used the term "decolonizing" to describe the unpacking and dismantling of structures and sites of power, whether in life, in books or on the internet.

Decolonization has been used differently in different contexts, and we honour all of these perspectives — we share some of them, and may not have experienced others. Our Dalit friend and badass anti-Caste worker, Thenmozhi Soundararajan, and Bahujan historian, Braj Ranjan Mani, have likened the structures of caste, and in general, power that includes misogyny, racism, casteism, LGBT-phobia, war, imperialism, and capitalism, as a "multi-headed hydra". In essence, we believe that decolonizing is not only about freedom for a nation, the way it is most often used. In fact, for some of us, the concept of nation invokes pride ("the Kumeyaay nation") or the ("Bahujan nation") and for some of us, it invokes pain (the "ethno-nationalism" at the core of the Bosnian war).

For us then, decolonizing and queering leads to different aspects of freedom and well-being for individuals and communities that have been continually stigmatised, abused, or exploited in the past and through the present. In particular, as [Dr. B.R Ambedkar](#), the towering Dalit civil rights leader, puts it, it is about "freedom of the mind" — and that freedom can only come about as we have the power to describe ourstories and our knowledges with honour and dignity.

Ourstories are rooted in reclaiming some of the most critical aspects of what we have lost: including ways to describe and inhabit our bodies, our lands, shared spaces, our languages, our resources, and our own leadership. Above all else, in reclaiming and recognizing our sense of community.

# QUEERING

## FEMINIST AND LGBTIQ+ COMMUNITY ORGANIZING IN FORMER YUGOSLAVIA

The largest mass women's movement in our region of Yugoslavia and Eastern Europe was the Antifascist Front of Women, established in 1942. The Front contributed to a great extent to the fight against fascism. It was a key player to establish gender equality and the freedom and emancipation of Yugoslav society as a whole. After the Second World War, the Front was dissolved by the ruling Yugoslav Communist party, and women were sent back to their homes instead of inhabiting public spaces as they had during the war. However, women's feminist organizing continued through various other [gatherings, conferences, and meetings](#).

In some of the countries of Yugoslavia, feminist groups supported their [lesbian members in community organizing](#). And in Slovenia, lesbian and gay community organizing sprang from punk subculture and arts in the early 1980's. Homosexuality had been criminalized in Yugoslavia until 1977. Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, and Vojvodina decriminalized homosexuality, while the rest of Serbia, Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina continued treating homosexuality under criminal law. Decriminalization in these countries only happened after the breakup of Yugoslavia and the wars of 1990s.

## FEMINIST AND LGBTIQ+ RESISTANCE TO WAR

The wars of the 1990s in former Yugoslavia resulted in new anti-war initiatives and organizations which led anti-war campaigns and worked with deserters, women and children who were victims of war. Women's and feminist groups such as Women in Black in Serbia led anti-war activities, aimed at stopping the war and ethno-national divisions. The participation of LGBTIQ+ persons in anti-militarist activities and organizations in Serbia and Croatia was highly visible, but also had its own challenges. The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina brought an influx of international women activists who began collaborating with local women who had self-organized to support women and children victims of war. In 2002, Bosnia and Herzegovina gained its first LGBTIQ+ organization, called Organization Q, for the promotion and protection of queer people in the region. Today, many feminist organizations and initiatives for reconciliation with the past are run and led by LGBTIQ+ persons. However, the position of LGBTIQ+ activists within these organizations and movements remains challenging.

## ETHNONATIONALISM AND THE RISE OF HETEROMASCULINE NATIONS

Following the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1990s, and in particular the Serbian aggression against Bosnia and Herzegovina, there was an influx of international community regulatory bodies such as the UN, OHR, OSCE who brought their own “peace-building and ethnic-reconciliation” plans. At the same time, there was a rise of ethno-nationalist elites in Bosnia and Herzegovina who reaffirmed segregated ethnic identities as the main parameter for rebuilding the nation-state.

Victimhood played an important role during and after the war. Heroic narratives of masculinity, and creation myths about the origins of different groups, were used to justify the tripartite separation of Muslim, Serbian, and Croatian ethnic communities in what was once was a unified Yugoslav nation. The ethnonational ruling parties continued to sustain a “state of crisis” to reaffirm their power structure and accumulate profit of land, knowledge, work, identity and human life. They have been, throughout the past three decades, robbing the people of the common good, privatizing public spaces, schools, factories, streets, and culture in a form of state-operated and internationally-sponsored terror and appropriation. Further, the nationalist tripartite system, along with religious leaders, continues to revise history and commodify the traumatic experiences of survivors. This power structure assigns religious and ethnic markers in commemorative services, and manipulates the traumatic history to sustain the system’s profit and power under the mask of a “transition” from socialism to neoliberalism and democracy. This re-victimizes the bodies of those killed in the war.

## SEXUALITY, GENDER, SECURITY AND NATION BUILDING

Throughout the aggression and post-war period, ethno-nationalist politics and practices have embedded and enforced stereotypical and rigid gender and sexuality roles. This has further marginalized and enforced norms upon women, minority groups, and LGBTIQ persons institutionally, economically, and socially. Gendered bodies, images and representations of these persons have been greatly instrumentalized in the process of rebuilding the nation and solidifying its borders. Women’s bodies are portrayed as either to be protected or to be conquered.

This has significantly affected women and minority communities, as well as the LGBTIQ community, bodies, and lives in terms of our security, empowerment, visibility, and public activity from the 1990s to today. These dominant politics and practices lay a strong foundation for racism, LGBTIQ-phobia, and misogyny.

## QUEER ACTIVISM IN BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

Among their many other activities, in 2007 Organization Q began the [Queer Sarajevo Festival](#), the first public event for sharing the personal stories of lesbian, gay, transgender, intersex and queer persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It included everyday accounts of love, friendship, social justice struggle, discrimination, freedom, pride, and victory. Queer Sarajevo Festival was the first public event that gained attention from the media, political leaders and general public of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The organizers received death threats during activities leading up to the Festival. They and their supporters, media partners and journalists, received death threats in the weeks before the opening, and there was a targeted media campaign inciting hatred and promoting violence against LGBTIQ persons and organizers. On opening night, the festival was closed to the wider public, due to escalation of violence by religious extremists and [hooligans](#) against the festival participants. The organization continued to work for the next year and then dissolved, and the overall LGBTIQ community was pushed back several steps into silence and closets.

In 2011, we founded Association Okvir (*Okvir — “framing and reframing”*), a community-based queer-feminist organization for the promotion and protection of human rights, culture, and identities of LGBTIQ persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Association Okvir operates through education, psychology, art and culture in public and online spaces. When we started our work, we realized that war and post-war trauma significantly influenced both our work and previous attempts to bring about social justice. Gender, sexuality, and war remain an intersecting point of trauma for both first and second generation war survivors, including LGBTIQ persons. Dominant public discourses regarding war in Bosnia and Herzegovina remain highly gendered in stereotypical ways, producing and representing specifically normed historical accounts of the 1990’s experience of the general population, excluding queer accounts of war survival.

Being marginalized and already closeted, the LGBTIQ community is a container for the errors and symptoms of dysfunctional newly formed states. The community suffers from high levels of internalized misogyny, LGBTIQ-phobia, mental health issues, and other mechanisms of self-violence. This is in addition to gender and sexuality-based violence, social exclusion, and domestic violence resulting from not being able to openly express their LGBTIQ identities to friends and family. We are not able to live lives with basic dignity, human rights and freedom from judgment.

At this moment we have transitioned to working on the Queer Archive.

## STORIES OF RESISTANCE

Our work on the [Queer Archive](#), which we started in 2016, gathers and makes visible testimonies about queer organizing in Slovenia and later in Croatia and Serbia from the LGBTIQ community in former Yugoslavia. Personal stories of LGBTIQ persons from Bosnia and Herzegovina recount life and survival during and after the war in Bosnia and

Herzegovina. These stories portray relationships, connection, mutual solidarity, friendship and love formed during wartime, beyond nations and borders. There are also [testimonials](#) from feminist activists involved with wider social justice movements and working with LGBTIQa refugees of the 1990s, recounting personal and political engagement, and their efforts to transform the norms of gender, territory, ethnicity, and sexuality. These stories document the lived possibilities and realities of building love and authentic connection in a sociopolitical context of general destruction and violence, as well as within today's ongoing divisions.

## WHY WE DO WHAT WE DO

As queer persons coming from Bosnia and Herzegovina, we have a strong tendency to reject any imposed identity or category. This is due to a legacy of war and systemic violence which resulted in trauma and loss from nation-building between three ethnic sides. Queer feminist knowledge production using arts and archives is an act of resistance in the context of post-colonial, post-socialist, post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina.

During the war, nations were built on a narrative of us vs. them. Nations and bodies of people were mobilized against each other on the basis of differences which had been manipulated to serve as a tool of war. We had to invent a strong sense of community to survive. We had to understand our detachment to make sense of the realities. Our community surpasses identity and territorial markers and instead is laid on foundations of diversity, inclusion, and plurality.

At first, we used a strategy of fighting against a common enemy, in this case, state-led ethnonationalist practices. Later, we turned to ourselves and to each other to empower, heal, and build wider communal capacities for resistance and life, enhancing our creative abilities to deal with loss. It is impossible to do this work without friends, lovers, and chosen families whom we have found through feminist, artist, and queer communities that go beyond the geopolitical context of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the wider region. We have made connections on the basis of our passion, politics, and love of life.

Living as queer persons, it is hard to find a sense and meaning of belonging. We live in the spaces between belonging and not-belonging. Having survived the war only to be faced with the wounds, oppression, and exclusion of ourselves as queer persons, requires a complex, multi-layered process of healing, witnessing, and reflecting to help us articulate loss while we search for belonging. The spaces we live in are destructive, dense and thick with closets and secrets and state-induced trauma and manipulation that goes beyond war crimes and war survival. These spaces also contain our experiences of poverty, gender-based violence, PTSD, addiction and substance abuse. They are spaces of exclusion where our right to free education, clean water and air, health care and pensions, are taken away. Common goods are taken away from common people.



Our core belief is that each and every person has the right to self-determination and a life of dignity, free of violence and oppression. We believe that the potential of every person should be nurtured and supported to develop, regardless of identity. We believe reclaiming public and personal spaces leads to transformation of our experiences of anger and pain and the development of our sense of identity. This ultimately leads us to a sense of belonging, grounding, and healing.

# UNSETTLING

## KUMEYAAY HISTORY

The Kumeyaay Nation was originally a collection of self-governing Clans called Sh'mull who would periodically come together as a nation when required to provide for a common defense or address a social crisis such as drought or disease. The Kumeyaay inhabited the present-day areas of San Diego and Imperial Counties in the United States and the Northern Baja region of Mexico.

In the 15th century, a series of Papal Bulls were issued by the Catholic Church codifying the authority of Christian Europeans to conquer, subdue, and dominate people of the rest of the world. This process of domination brutalized and devastated the people of the invaded territories. For people in the Americas, the European conquest and domination brought the added impact of dreaded European diseases for which the people had not developed even a limited resistance.

The Catholic Church, and later Protestant denominations, excused this domination, claiming it served a higher purpose of bringing “lesser” peoples of the world into the blessings of Christianity. In the process, however, indigenous methodologies of environmental management, agriculture, commerce, social structure, and spirituality were undermined or destroyed. In their place, economic systems developed that placed colonized economies at the lowest levels, as resource suppliers to the colonizers. Citizens were educated only enough to fulfill their role in facilitating extractive processes. Minerals and raw materials were supplied to the colonizers, who then created finished products, often sold back to the colonized.

## THE KUMEYAAY RESISTANCE TO OPPRESSIVE SYSTEMS

Kumeyaay resistance to these imposed systems of oppression has been a recurring theme of our history since 1769, when Spanish soldiers and priests arrived to found San Diego as an outpost of the Spanish Empire. Major shifts in the types of oppression and the responses of Kumeyaay occurred in 1821 with the successful revolt of the Mexicans against Spain and the establishment of the Mexican Republic. In 1833, the Mexican Republic ended the Mission system through secularization and began establishing Ranchos (large land grant estates). Next was the arrival of the Americans in the Mexican-American War which ended in 1848

with the incorporation of Mexican land claims into the United States. Finally, American policy toward Native Americans went through several permutations of partially successful efforts to assimilate Native Americans through destruction of language, culture, religion, and traditional knowledge. Ultimately, Native Americans were able to make some strides in reclaiming sovereignty over their native lands.

The Kumeyaay were one of the peoples most resistant to Spanish colonialism in the 18th and 19th centuries. After the destruction of the Mission at San Diego in 1775, the Spanish realized the strength of this resistance, and stayed relatively close to the coast and their logistical support. Even in the areas under Spanish control, most Kumeyaay were able to maintain their autonomy, provided they agreed to Catholic baptism and professed loyalty to the Spanish government. Over 85-90% of the Kumeyaay territory remained under Kumeyaay control throughout the Spanish period. Eventually, the Kumeyaay outlasted the Missions and the relationship transitioned to the newly established Republic of Mexico in 1821. Kumeyaay maintained a strong power base of independent communities while many worked within and became part of the local Mexican economy. In 1833, the Mexicans ended the Mission system and carved up large areas of California as Ranchos as a part of the Secularization Act. Many Kumeyaay lands were chartered without consideration for the native peoples. This provoked extensive uprisings across Kumeyaay territory and was marked by a series of attacks on the Ranchos that resulted in the Ranchos being abandoned or untenable by the 1840s. Attacks eventually reached the San Diego community with the very real potential of San Diego itself being abandoned. Before that happened, however, the United States invaded during the Mexican-American War (1846-1848).

Following the war, California began a series of efforts to marginalize and exterminate native peoples, especially in potentially mineral rich areas or areas of valuable natural resources. The power of the southern California natives and the lack of large gold strikes helped to prevent the wholesale slaughter that occurred in many communities of the north. However, the social and cultural destruction of Kumeyaay was extensive, and was eventually institutionalized in the creation of Indian schools and boarding schools which sought to assimilate Indian people by destroying language, culture, religion and traditional knowledge.

As this process reached its zenith in the 1890s and 1910s, California began to rewrite the history of the State to promote immigration from the eastern U.S. Stories of the Spanish and Mexican periods had been glamorized in popular fiction. State promoters sought to capitalize on this sentiment and began to invest millions of dollars to rebuild the long gone missions and other evidence of Spanish presence in California. Kumeyaay place names were replaced by Spanish names, roads were renamed, new cities were given Spanish names. History was rewritten to portray the native peoples as passive receptacles for Spanish enlightenment through the Missions.

Kumeyaay resistance was downplayed or written out of this history. Kumeyaay victories were ignored, and the American genocide vanished from historical narratives. This revised history became more and more entrenched over the next decades, as the commercial interests of the State reaped the fruit of the fantasy. Historians further reinforced the narrative by cherry-picking historical texts to confirm their pre-existing bias. Even the text books of California State were wholly immersed in the false narrative by the 1950s.

After the rise of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, a re-evaluation of some of the accepted curriculums began. The failings in adequately discussing the Native American narrative were exposed. The momentum of a hundred years of false narrative, however, has only slightly slowed. Even today, many Californians are unaware of the true stories of Native American histories. These false narratives are built into national monuments, parks, museums, place names, as well as curriculums.

In the past, indigenous peoples often depended on the efforts of non-indigenous researchers and ethnographers to try and capture an indigenous perspective. This was always an imperfect and incomplete solution. Now there is a growing body of indigenous people — including the Kumeyaay — who are reclaiming and asserting indigenous perspectives themselves.

## KUMEYAAY PHILOSOPHIES

### WHAT IS OURSTORY AS WE UNDERSTAND IT?

From an indigenous perspective, history is more than the accumulation of facts and dates from the past. History is not linear. Rather, it encompasses a worldview that places the actions and activities of the past in a continuum of contemporary lifeways.

For example, the Kumeyaay know that their ancestors are with them, act through them, and are incorporated in their actions toward their descendants. Some indigenous communities believe that their people touch seven generations in a lifetime — their own, and three generations back through the past, and into the future.

### WHAT IS KNOWLEDGE?

For the Kumeyaay, learning starts with the gifts of the Creator. Songs and lessons from the Creator were the first elements of knowledge that were passed on to humans. This initial knowledge provided the framework for life and prescribed the methodologies for interacting with the world at large. The Kumeyaay, as humans, have a responsibility regarding knowledge. From the Creator first, then through the acquired knowledge passed on from generations before, they add their learning to the accumulation and present it as a sacred gift to those who follow. The relevance of knowledge is not as important for the Kumeyaay as it is in Western culture. Lessons may be learned that have no foreseeable practical usage for a particular individual, yet the potential for benefit for others requires that they serve as carriers bridging the generations if need be. Knowledge is more than facts, knowledge is the understanding of context and utility.

### WHAT IS ANCESTRAL KNOWLEDGE?

Some folks fiercely debate the primacy of ancestral knowledge. For indigenous communities such as the Kumeyaay, ancestral knowledge is empirical — it is knowledge that has been

created through methods that are related to what the West calls the “scientific method”. For example, indigenous people have extensive knowledge of plants and their uses. This knowledge is the result of thousands of years of “experiments” involving the formation of a hypothesis, careful observation, data analysis, and subsequent methodological refinement. For those of us whose understanding of the world is grounded in ancestral knowledge, there is no debate.

### WHAT IS LIFE?

For the Kumeyaay, life is more than a thing you do. Life is an expression of the interconnect between the biological process of the body, the interactions with the world around us and the acknowledgment of the cycles of the world; the Sun, Moon, stars, seasons, birth, death. Life is a balance between finding joy in our lives and accepting tragedy that often inserts itself. Balance is represented as the masculine and feminine forces in the world.

### HOW DO WE UNDERSTAND TEMPORALITY (TIME AND SPACE)?

Am I here now? Am I in the future of my ancestor? Am I in the past of my descendants? Can all of these be true?

Living in the context of a temporal reality not based on a strict requirement of “here and now” provides a spiritual connection with the past and future for the Kumeyaay that helps to guide contemporary actions.

### WHAT IS OUR WORLDVIEW?

There is no word for nature in the Kumeyaay language. Nature means all except humans. The concept of humans as a separate element apart from the world around them is an alien concept in traditional Kumeyaay worldview. Humans had their own role in the world but the right of humans to dominate the world was an introduced concept. In the traditional viewpoint, the body and spirit are both unique to the individual yet connected and part of the whole of existence. The sense of place provides the grounding of identity which both protects and provides.

## RESISTANCE AND RECLAMATION TODAY

Stan Rodriguez, a Kumeyaay scholar, reminds us that the Kumeyaay people have been in the San Diego region since time immemorial. This contrasts with the relatively short story of colonization and settler colonialism. The Kumeyaay story is one that the Kumeyaay are themselves shaping now: a story of adaptation, survival, and resistance.

### RECLAIMING LAND AND SPACE

Lands in the colonized territories had names that, in many cases, existed thousands of years before the arrival of the colonizers. Tied into these place names were stories that help to

define the uniqueness of an individual people. To remove that identity and diminish the connection to the land, colonizers would often rename places, referring to their own homelands or citizens. Reclaiming ancestral names can be extremely difficult for indigenous people if the colonizers have established a permanent presence. The use of lands for traditional activities, such as ceremonies, gathering traditional foods or items for traditional crafts, is made difficult because these activities are all subject to the colonial presence and the restructuring of relational norms through constructs such as property law, trespass, and exclusion.

The efforts to revitalize the Kumeyaay language are bringing back the original names of locations of significance. Students in Kumeyaay language classes, videos focused on the Kumeyaay experience, and online resources, now use the historical names created by the Kumeyaay people thousands of years ago rather than the colonizer's replacement. Cultural classes and education departments incorporate activities into their programs that teach a younger generation how to build structures, make traditional clothings, and play the traditional hand game. Through these activities, younger people learn how to properly harvest plant materials and gain a better understanding of their ancestor's connection to the land.

#### RECLAIMING KNOWLEDGE — COUNTERING DOMINANT \ COLONIZER NARRATIVES

The colonizers wrote histories in order to benefit themselves and to consolidate their power in colonized territories. The fresh perspectives of indigenous researchers revisiting the narratives of history are often one of the first steps in reclaiming indigenous knowledge. Colonizer narratives often dismiss or deride indigenous knowledge, making it difficult to gain recognition in contemporary forums. More and more, through demonstration and documentation, dominant societies are beginning to understand the value and relevance of traditional knowledge in terms of sustainability, health and environmental protection.

Kumeyaay scholars and historians are countering the dominant narratives that plague textbooks and popular understanding. By speaking to elders to learn oral histories, and by conducting archival research, Kumeyaay people are writing and telling their history from their perspective. This work to counter the dominant and accepted narrative includes writing books and articles, offering presentations at mainstream institutions (libraries, museums, historical societies), and creating displays for museums and state parks. It also includes bringing our knowledge onto Wikipedia!

#### RECLAIMING LEADERSHIP

In the past, indigenous people often relied upon and depended on the efforts of researchers and ethnographers to try and capture an indigenous perspective. This was always an imperfect and incomplete solution, often leading to misunderstandings and false information being portrayed as reliable.

Now, there is a growing body of indigenous people who are taking the reclamation of the indigenous perspective to the next level. For the Kumeyaay, a number of tribal members are earning undergraduate and graduate levels degrees. This education provides the skills and



the access to resources that are needed to claim our right to fully assert indigenous perspectives.

#### THE KUMEYAAY AND BEYOND

The work happening on the ground in Kumeyaay communities is representative of work happening in indigenous communities across the United States. Nation building efforts in the areas of education, infrastructure, resource management, economic development, language and cultural revitalization have been on-going since the first Europeans invaded our shores. We now see clearly the ways we can fight the structures of oppression that have affected us but in no way have destroyed us. We are the result of our ancestors' prayers and we do the work to decolonize our minds and hearts by honoring their intentions.

# DEBRAHMANIZING

## HISTORY OF DALITS AND OTHER CASTE-OPPRESSED PEOPLE

The system of Caste is one that has oppressed several communities of peoples across South Asia for millennia. This includes people who were outcasted and deemed untouchables, called “Dalits” (broken, but resilient), “Adivasis” (indigenous peoples of South Asia), and “Shudras” (other lowered Caste people). Together Caste-oppressed people are termed “Bahujan”, meaning, the majority of the people.

Caste as a system of social hierarchy in South Asia has been one of the oldest, most codified and most practiced forms of oppression in the world. While the word “caste” is European-derived, in particular, from the Portuguese who first used the term in the 17th century to approximate how they saw South Asian society structured at that time, we believe that the usage of Brahmanism is a more accurate way of contextualizing this organization.

Around 1500 B.C.E, the migrant peoples of the northern part of the subcontinent, living in what is now, northern India, Nepal, and Pakistan, began the formation of the religious tradition of Brahmanism. Varnashrama dharma, the division of people into four Caste-groups, was core to this tradition. The practice categorized human beings into a graded hierarchy of social inequality determined by birth and fixed throughout their lives. Within this stratification, one group, the Brahmans, who occupy the topmost level in the caste pyramid, have sanctioned supremacy over human beings pegged into other lower levels in descending order of perceived spiritual purity and essential human value.

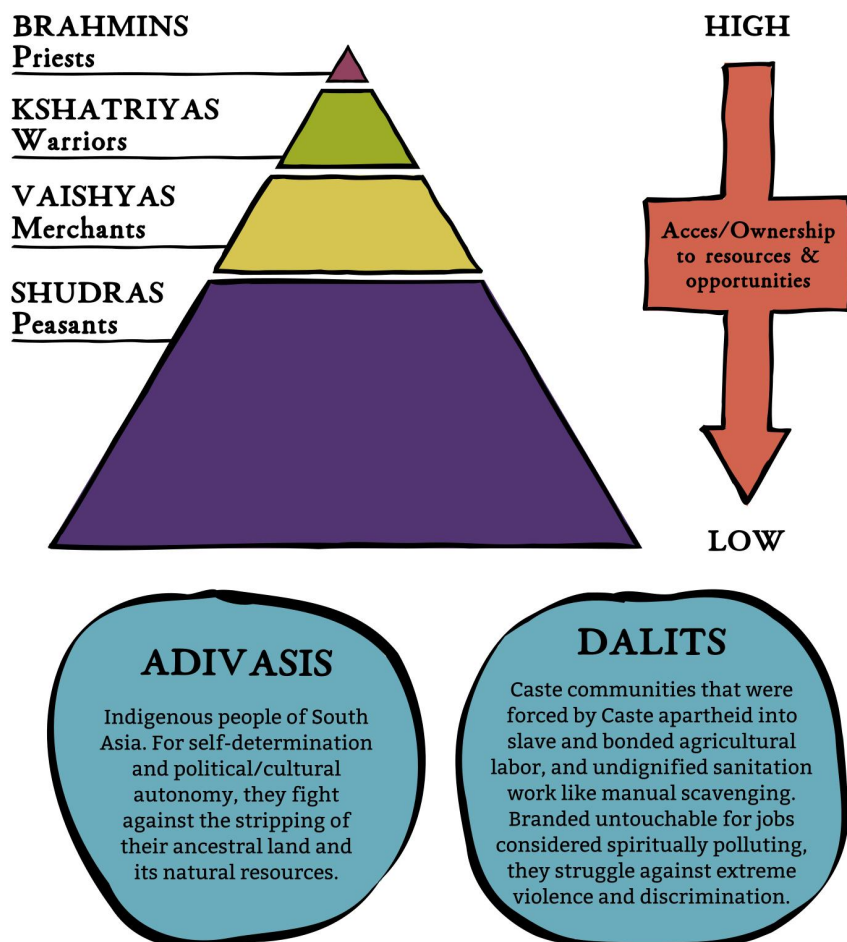
Brahmanism predetermines social possibilities, including a person’s access to the divine, to a profession, education, love, marriage, socio-economic wellbeing, access to land, and public resources. All this is based on the Caste-group you are assigned at birth. These prescriptions set up a perpetually hierarchical society within which the Brahmins are born to be divine, read, write, interpret scriptures and teach, Kshatriyas are born to rule, Vaishyas are born to trade and Shudras are given in servitude to the divine, the rulers, and the traders.

Indigenous people like Adivasis and other ethnic groups like Dalits have historically mounted some of the most powerful resistances to Brahmanism, and have also been those most oppressed. Dalits, in particular, were treated with severe disdain. Untouchability, segregation, ritual humiliation, slavery, colonization, and severe physical and emotional violence were inflicted upon Dalit people. Adivasis were often stripped of their land and their

way of life was looked upon as heretical and “lowly”. A mass of Shudra people were also forcibly bonded into servitude of the “upper” castes. Despite much resistance through time, this whole system of social organization has persisted through millennia into modernity with shocking potency.

Today, we use Brahmanism as more than a description of the topmost class, with all their power and privilege. Brahmanism is, rather, a reference to the decayed spirit of graded inequality that permeates through our communities, “othering” fellow human beings, and restricting community spirit and community well-being to caste kinship and caste well-being. Brahmanism is used to point to the fact that a society built on caste is one that is built on a bedrock of injustice. While the term invokes the culpability of Brahmins who are understood to be the creators of this structure, it is also undeniable that non-Brahmins too are Brahmanical in their thoughts and actions.

We use Brahmanism in place of the term “Hinduism” because Hinduism is actually a contemporary term constructed in the 1800s. What we understand to be Hinduism today is the result of an orchestrated process of appropriation of the religions and cultures of several distinct indigenous tribes, outcaste peoples, and rebellion faiths. This was done to usurp post-British land and electoral power, especially against Muslims in the spirit of Islamophobia. This colonization of the South-Asian subcontinent started well before white colonialism, and continues into today well after the last Brits packed up and left South Asia.



## STRUCTURES OF OPPRESSION

What we see today in many parts of South Asia is the continuation of this form of oppression on our peoples. For example, in modern India, Dalits constitute an average of 16% of the population but have ownership of less than 7.5% of operated land, represent less than 0.1% of Indian media and less than 5% of the Indian judiciary. Dalit communities bear the burden of incredible levels of violence. In general, a crime is committed against a Dalit every 18 minutes. According to National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB), 13 Dalits are murdered every week. 5 Dalits' homes or possessions are burnt every week, 6 Dalits are kidnapped or abducted every week, more than **6 Dalit women are raped every day** and 11 Dalits are beaten every day.

The entire system in India has been Brahmanized as the majority of the power structures are under Brahman control, within the legislature, the executive, the judiciary and the media which form the four pillars of the democracy in India. As Professor Kancha Ilaiah states, "the marginalized have been the producers all their life", the underlying base on which the whole system has been standing.

### UNTOUCHABILITY, SLAVERY AND ECONOMIC OPPRESSION

Untouchables, or Dalits, are considered both spiritually impure and having the ability to pollute others through touch. India's land and economy have been under the overwhelming control of the upper caste for centuries, resulting in economic exploitation. Dalits are forced into unpaid and bonded labor, slavery, and degrading occupations such as dead animal disposers and scavengers. India tops the list of countries practicing forms of modern slavery and Dalits are among the most vulnerable to these exploitations.

### SEGREGATION AND EXCLUSION

#### OUT OF PROPORTION PERCENTAGE OF POPULATION

|          | IN PRISON | INDIA |
|----------|-----------|-------|
| Muslims  | 20%       | 13.4% |
| Dalits   | 21%       | 16.6% |
| Adivasis | 11%       | 8.6%  |
| TOTAL    | 53%       | 38.6% |

Source: Prison Statistics of India 2013; Census

Dalits are still forced to live apart, outside the villages and cities, near the dumping yards, in urban slums, and on dead, infertile land. We continue to also be denied access to places to worship, water, land, and public resources.

### CRIMINALIZATION

Brahmanical scriptures wrote into sacred law the criminalization of the lowered Castes, and punishment was prescribed not according to the severity of the "crim" but to one's place in the Caste structure. Dalits were subjected to harsh punishments and death in many cases, if they tried to break these laws. Today, indigenous people and

religious minorities are still treated as criminals just for existing and make up a disproportionate amount of the prison population in India. Any actions taken towards the creation of upward social mobility can bring about retaliation. Dalits are often captured and

jailed when the true culprits of a crime are not found, and experience high levels of police brutality and death from police torture.

## COLORISM

The anti-blackness and anti-indigenous Caste mentality have translated into an obsession for fair-skin among South Asians. Darker-skinned peoples, who are often Caste-oppressed people, are denied opportunities and discriminated against, even by their peers, friends, and colleagues.

## RELIGIOUS OPPRESSION

Dalits and “low Castes” are still often denied entry into temples and restricted from reading or reciting the divine scripture. This is evidenced by the values preached in these of Brahmanical texts which include verses: *“Now if he [a Shudra] listens intentionally to [a recitation of] the Veda, his ears shall be filled with [molten] tin or lac. If he recites [Vedic texts], his tongue shall be cut out. If he remembers them, his body shall be split in twain.”* — (Gautama Dharma Sutra, 4 Chapter XX, Sutras 4–6)

As a result, many Caste-oppressed people have left the Hindu religion and instead chosen faiths like Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, or their own animistic indigenous faiths. One of the major reasons for widespread hostility and violence against Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Sikhs and other non-Brahmanical faith minorities in India is the affiliation between “low” Caste people and these religions. Unwilling to face another decline in Brahmanism as a result of conversion, the state continues to enforce harsh and unconstitutional anti-conversion penalties including imprisonment on those who convert out of Hinduism.

## SEXUALITY AND GENDER OPPRESSION

Caste and patriarchy are inextricably intertwined. Brahmanical texts assert cis-gender Brahmanical patriarchy and have set up a foundation for the degradation, debasing and criminalization of cis women, trans people, queer, and gender-queer bodies and lives. *“A Shudra, a village pig, a cock, a dog, a menstruating woman, and a eunuch (transgender) must not look at the Brahmanas while they eat.”* (Manusmriti Chapter 3, verse 239).

One’s Caste purity is seen as only as good as the sexual purity of the women in the family, and Caste purity is destroyed by miscegenation between castes. As a result, upper-Caste women are guarded and confined to their homes, while Caste “impure” women are treated as free sexual objects.

## RESISTANCE

Some of the earliest documented resistance to Brahmanism is found in the history of Buddhism and Jainism. Both Buddhism and Jainism rejected the Brahmanical categorization of people and accepted people of all castes into their communities and even afforded to positions of leadership to women and the “lowermost” castes including Dalits. The Medieval period after Buddhism saw a growth of the Mukti (Liberation) movements. These movements arose from the same spirit as the shamanistic faiths of Buddhism and Jainism — to try to reject Brahmanism. Key to all of these movements is the fact that they were people’s movements from the bottom up. Post-medieval resistance, several people like the Phule couple, Jyotirao and Savitribai, have kept the flame alive by protesting, creating inclusive spaces, advocating and seeking new spirituality.

But it is useful to begin to understand modern Dalit identity and anti-Caste movements in South Asia from the time of Dr. B.R.Ambedkar, who was one of the most prominent 20th century anti-Caste leaders and a Dalit himself. He organized subcontinent-wide Dalit pushback against the practices of untouchability, segregation, deprivation, and slavery of Dalit peoples. Key to his work was his call for a reversion to the faith and values of Buddhism. His advocacy resulted in mass conversions of Dalits in the 1950s to Buddhism on the order of hundreds of thousands.

The work of people like Ambedkar and others like him have also led to a progressive democratic constitution outlawing untouchability and providing a robust system of affirmative action throughout places such as India, and to some level in Pakistan and Bangladesh as well. The outcome of these programs, known as Reservations or Quota Programs, was the introduction of literacy and real educational possibilities for Dalits. From these opportunities, beginning in the 1980s, many educated Dalits have begun the mass re-telling of history. We are starting to fill gaps in the history of the subcontinent by adding Dalit perspectives, and shifting in very radical ways the framework of history itself.

### DEBRAHMANIZING KNOWLEDGE

By keeping the marginalized away from knowledge sites and knowledge production, the upper Caste has maintained power and control. We are working to break the hegemony of knowledge by identifying major knowledge production sites both offline and online and reclaiming those spaces. Getting Dalit people into universities is only the beginning. We must also motivate folks to read and not succumb to pre-existing or established narratives, and to be critical of what is shown as our history. We must build a rationale, write collectively, and create our own publishing houses to challenge these flawed narratives.

### DEBRAHMANIZING ART AND CULTURE

Film makers from the margins like Pa. Ranjith, Nagraj Manjule, and Prem Rajhave made mainstream films that not only counter the established cultural hegemonies in the society as a whole but also challenge the hegemonic aesthetics of filmmaking. These film makers are not just reclaiming these spaces but also claiming ownership of the stories of their lives.

Others are reclaiming the indigenous art forms that have been appropriated by Brahmins and other dominant castes within India. A recent Dalit History Month exhibition, “[Colors of Rebellion: Art against Caste Apartheid](#)”, featured paintings of many Dalit artists including Malvika Raj, who paints scenes from Buddha’s life instead of the more accepted Hindu narratives. She explains that the teachings of the Buddha are more empowering and hence “Buddha stays in my heart.”

#### DEBRAHMANIZING ONLINE SPACES

One of the spaces we work on, as part of Dalit History Month (inspired by Black History Month), is Wikipedia. Wikipedia is one of the most widely viewed websites in the world, and has both limited and distorted information about our story. Even as we sit and write this, there are many organizers and scholars from our community whose Wikipedia articles are being rejected on the basis of lacking neutrality and notability. Our resistance there is ongoing.

The social media campaign #DalitHistory is another part of Dalit History Month, which celebrates the resistance and resilience of our ancestors. This campaign identifies, acknowledges and celebrates our leaders, culture, and community on sites such as Facebook and Twitter. In the last half a decade, we have also seen a wave of social media campaigns such as #Dalitwomenfight, #DalitHistory, #JusticeForRohith, #DalitsNotCows, and #MuslimsNotCows, amplified on Twitter by users like @DalitDiva, @DalitWomenFight, @DalitHistoryNow, @AmbedkarCaravan and @everydaycasteism. YouTube channels such as Dalit Camera, news portals such as [twocircles.net](#) and Khabar Lahariya, and blogs including Adivasi resurgence, Velivada, and Round Table India, are also helping to debrahmanize the internet.



## FURTHER RESOURCES

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