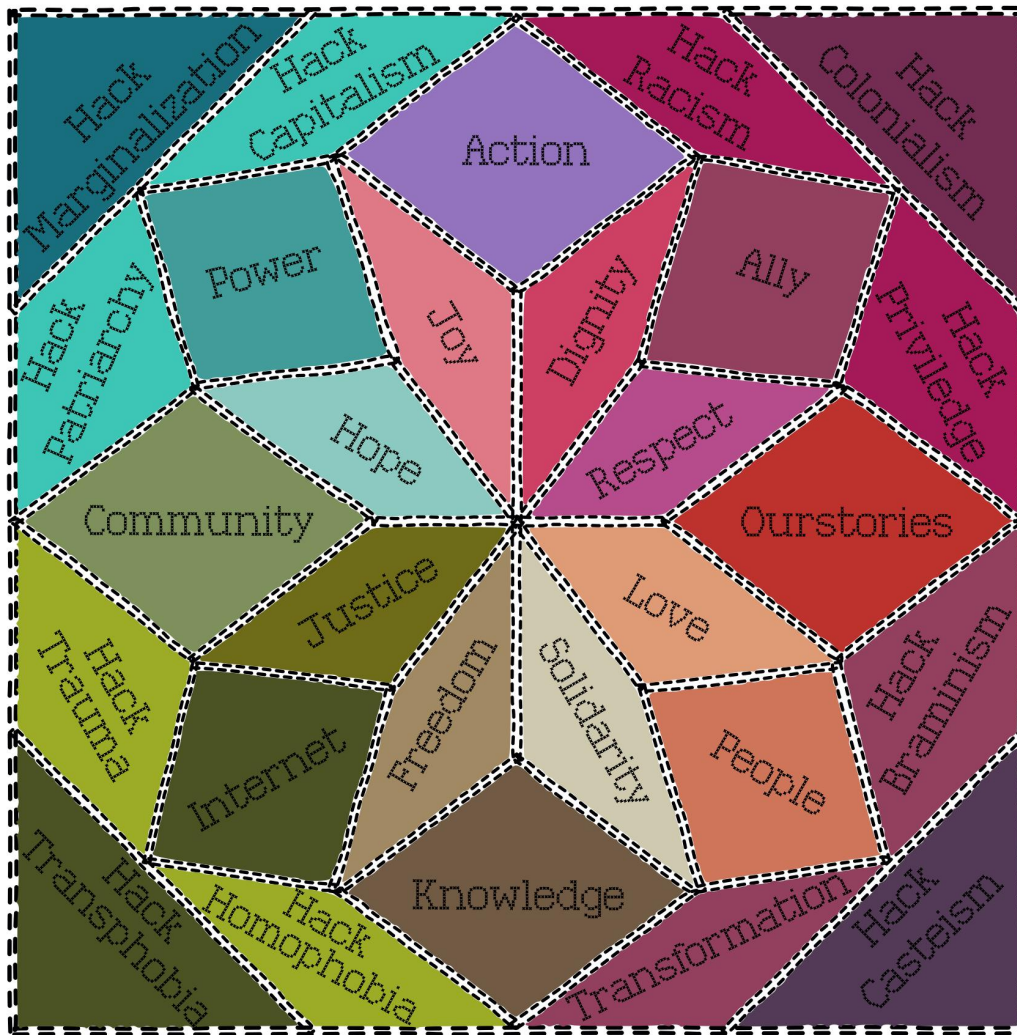


# OUR STORIES



# OUR KNOWLEDGES

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*December, 2018*

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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. The design and illustrations are also inspired by some of the traditions and practices of our communities. For example, the cover reflects the ways in which hand-made fabric is culturally important for all our peoples. In particular, quilts are an integral part of both Native American and Bosnian community life. Similarly, the oak tree - which inspires the illustration for our different knowledge practices - is an important symbol for San Diego and the land of the Kumeyaay, where we created these resources. And our faces are in illustration to mark the lack of safety and security that Dalit and Bosnian community organisers currently face, in doing this work.

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, our stories, 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.



# PART I



# 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 LGBTIQAs 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.

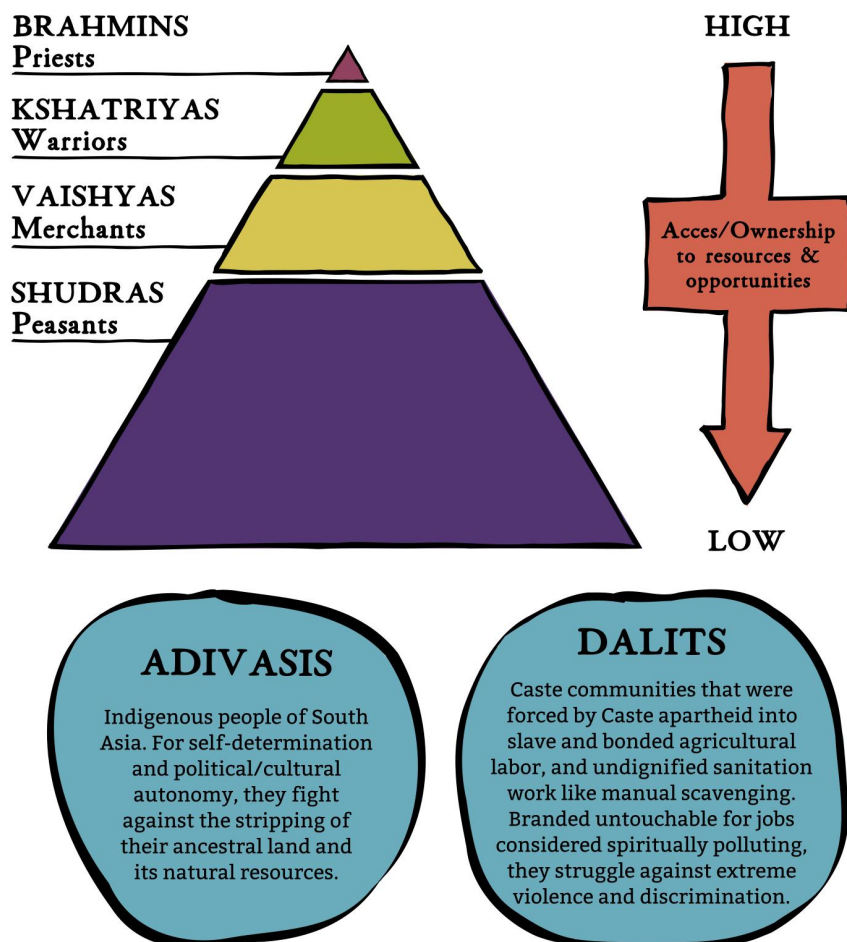
Brahmanism predetermines social possibilities, including a person’s access to the divine, to a profession, education, love, marriage, socio-economic wellbeing, access to land, and public resources. All this is based on the Caste-group you are assigned at birth. These prescriptions set up a perpetually 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.



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## PART II

# TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICES FOR BUILDING COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGES



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## CARE : A FOUNDATION FOR TRANSFORMATION



For marginalized communities, there is no “off” switch between who we are and what we do. We come from peoples who have experienced multiple past generations of trauma and bear the burden of this trauma on our bodies and in our spirits. This turbulence in our bodies and minds means that our people die younger, we lose leaders often, we sometimes translate our external trauma into abusive relationships with one another, and our social justice movements become fragile. Many times over, our people have to start their work from scratch.

To break this cycle, our pathways to liberation must include visions for how we can heal and transform along the way. We know that a foundation of practices for both self and collective care is core to our survival. We are all inspired by Audre Lorde’s words: *“Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”*

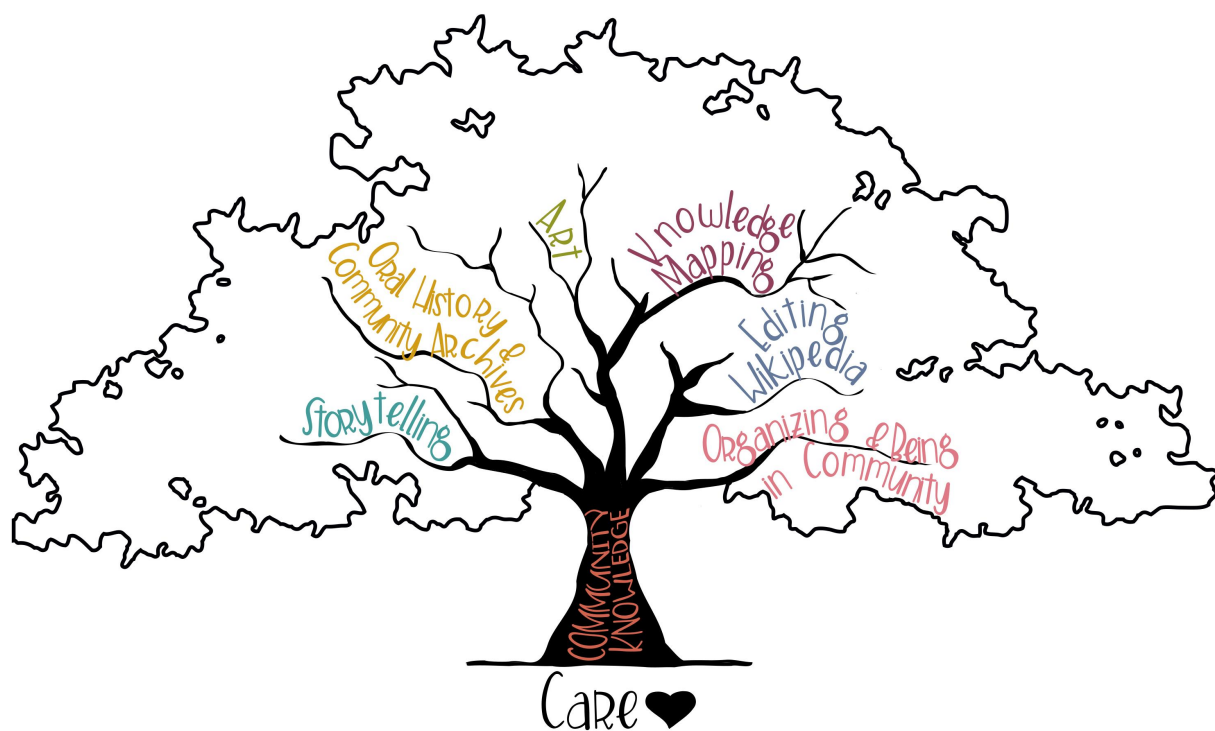
Yet the ways we sometimes seek *self-care* originate in the wealthy (often Western) world and focus on personal practices of relaxation that take time and money. While this can be helpful, these practices also tend to isolate, draw us inward and pull resources out of our communities. Over time, we have learned that we can move away from this commodification of our trauma by focusing on *collective care*. Practices for collective care seek to lighten burdens for ourselves and our future generations, building resilience and achieving transformation with one another.

We learn from our ancestors to weave care through the work you do in the community, for the community. For us, that has meant radically transforming the ways of seeing and being that we see all around us in the world every day. We have created these shared spaces and practices of community healing that also are spaces of community knowledge building. These are not only radical strategies for social change but also healing projects. We share them with you, in solidarity, here.

## MAKING COMMUNITIES' KNOWLEDGES VISIBLE

Knowledge exists in multiple forms and does not have to be linear. We believe that every person owns their story through knowledge of their lived experiences in their own authentic structure of memory and comprehension. It is important to locate that personal knowledge in the larger context of community and ultimately world knowledge. But that making and situating is also a participatory and collaborative process, rather than just a product.

For our part, we have explored several collectivist processes — storytelling, oral histories and community archives, art, knowledge-mapping, editing on Wikipedia, community organizing, and just being in community.



# STORYTELLING AS A WAY OF KNOWING AND SHARING



For centuries, our ancestors and communities have used stories to pass their knowledge from generation to generation. Storytelling is a powerful technique to document and share our communities' histories, struggles, and celebrations. Stories can be shared from a personal perspective, as well as a community's perspective, and they situate us epistemologically within the world. There is also a healing and transformative effect from telling your own story and from making the issue, cause or experience visible. Technology has also extended the impact of storytelling, offering more options for anonymity, wider outreach, and digitalization of pre-existing material.

Some of the stories we present below illustrate these ideas and how they play out.

## THE NEWE CREATION STORY (PERSE)

*The Newe creation story depicts the journey of the people from the north to present-day Nevada. Coyote is the central character. He is a frequent protagonist and provides many lessons. In this story, he is charged by Upah to carry the people (contained in a basket) to a specific destination. Because he is always a curious creator who is impulsive and rarely follows instructions, Coyote opens the basket to peek inside. After satisfying his curiosity, he fails to properly replace the lid. This mistake allows the taller people to escape from the basket. When he arrives at the final destination, only the short people are left. While the story can seem like a fun tale, it presents important information. First, it explains how the Newe (Western Shoshone) came to be in this geographical location. Second, it illustrates the consequences of not following instructions. Third, it explains the phenotypic differences between Native American people from different regions. For the Newe, oral tradition provides the information needed to know who we are as a people. It is a tool that teaches group norms and expectations for behavior, our history, and cosmology. Performative and situational, it supports a looped learning process where the listener learns different lessons depending on when, where, and by whom the story is told. It is also reciprocal; the*



storyteller also learns. Colonization and subsequent Federal policies viewed our stories as folklore, pushing them to the margins. Today, folks are recognizing the importance of oral tradition as a form of knowledge transmission, resulting in a resurgence of indigenous stories.

### OKVIR'S DIGITAL STORYTELLING (AZ AND BELMA)

Digital stories are a powerful and healing way for both individuals and groups to process their experiences. Each participant writes/tells/creates the story from their own perspective, using their own voice and words, choosing images and accompanying music. This is recorded in a digital format, and the stories run for 2-3 minutes. Interactive, open-source, digital media storytelling is a resource and a tool for social change for raising the visibility of authentic LGBTIQA experiences in Okvir's community. In the collection, *Freedom in My Own Way*, digital storytelling provides a participatory model to develop, articulate and share stories of what freedom means to LGBTIQA persons, sharing some of the most important events and issues that affect us and that have shaped us.

Some of the topics in this collection are self-acceptance of one's transgender identity and/or sexual orientation, overcoming the trauma of gender and sexuality-based violence, and the importance/lack of friendship and support, among others. Parallel to this process, each person gains a set of skills in using open source programs (GIMP, Audacity, etc.). All material used and produced is Creative Commons licensed, but at the final stage of the process, each storyteller chooses the terms and conditions of their consent, including whether or not they want their story to be published. This is especially relevant in LGBT-phobic and oppressive contexts, where the teller is not publicly out with their sexuality, gender identity or specific traumatic experience. Along with the consent, the storyteller chooses their own preferred name and whether or not to remain anonymous, which also is highly relevant in oppressive contexts.

In the end, a press conference for Coming Out day in 2016 presented the stories to the wider public, using them to promote and make visible the voices from the LGBTIQA community. In this way, digital storytelling was used for our own personal experience and empowerment.

## DALIT AUTOBIOGRAPHIES AND DIGITAL STORYTELLING (MAARI AND SANGHAPALI)

*Dalits have always used the format of telling the “life-story” as a form of knowledge exchange. Telling your own story is a means to share the wisdom you gathered so younger ones don’t have to learn things anew. It can be told by one person to many in the community at the same time. For the teller, it can be cathartic. Story-telling in Dalit communities is often performative, affective, full of modulating intonations that evoke emotions that are used to solidify the content of the learning in the mind of the listener. Often the telling can be translated into a community performance of street theatre. In post-“independent” India, the written word began to become the major means with which to communicate to a “national” audience. Stemming from the familiarity of the style of village storytelling, many of the first books written by Dalits were their autobiographies. A spate of autobiographies started coming out in the 1970s. The books addressed Dalit struggles within and outside their communities, their relationships, and the ways they resisted and persevered. Some of the earliest autobiographies are “Baluta” by Daya Pawar, “AjunUjadayace Ahe” (There is Time for Daybreak) by Madhav Kondvilkar, and “Majhya Jalmachi Chittarkatha” (The Kaleidoscope Story of My Life) by Shantabai Kamble.*

*One of the first autobiographies written in this way by a Dalit woman is “Jina Amucha” (The Prisons We Broke) by Baby Kamble, which highlights the plight of the Dalit women. It depicts the transformation in their life because of the outcomes of the Ambedkarite Movements for liberation. It shows how Dalit women gave up all the customs and religious beliefs that made them slaves for thousands of years. The path they ventured on, of self-respect and rejection of the gods and goddesses of the Hindu religion, is the key feature of The Prisons We Broke. Baby Kamble is also critical of the internal systems of patriarchy in her own community.*

*Since the early 2000s, many Dalits took this writing to digital platforms. Digital platforms came as a great relief as most established publishers were unwilling to publish authentic Dalit issues and wouldn’t even publish Dalit writing without large-scale distortions of their work first. Digital platforms such as social media and blogs such as [Velivada](#) became very popular sites to present personal viewpoints, politics, art, and creative writings. “Dalit History Month” used [Facebook](#) to post about Dalit/Adivasi/Bahujan leaders (those marginalized by caste, religion, and ethnicity), important milestones in history, and atrocities against our communities. We also worked on platforms, such as [Medium](#), and created our own historical timelines including [dalithistory.com](#), a participatory radical history project. “Our story may have begun in violence but we continue forward by emphasizing our assertion and resistance.”*

# ORAL HISTORIES AND COMMUNITY ARCHIVES



Most of the world's knowledge is oral. And because so much of our knowledge has not been written down or published, it can be easily invisibilized in Western hegemonic knowledge structures. Conducting audio and video oral interviews to record our communities' oral knowledge and housing those records in an archive is one way of making our oral histories visible. When the archive is made available online, this allows even more visibility to the broader world.

Archives hold a powerful potential for justice, transformation, and healing once a story is told, recorded, and shared. More importantly, our stories tell of the process, and the process becomes transparent, inclusive, and open for all to participate. Our archives are our community sites of location of memories and practices, intersecting past, future, and present, and sites of reflection as well. They contain complex, messy, human stories and essence. They embody non-linear temporality in the sense of memory, being and doing. They can be territorially or physically scattered, and they provide a polyvocality of stories and standpoints, and (non) identities, which are normative and non-normative. We use storytelling, open source and multimedia tools to do this work, identifying those points that can breathe light, subsequently heal, and strengthen our political capacities.

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## KVIR ARHIV (AZ AND BELMA)

*War, gender, sexuality, and security make an intersecting point for first and second generations of war survivors. We wanted to record the attempts and efforts towards peace and resistance against ethno-nationalist practices from anti-war, feminist, and LGBTIQA persons. Dominant public discourses related to war are highly gendered by stereotypes and present specifically normed historical accounts regarding gender and ethnic identities in favor of the ruling ethno-national parties. Most of the narratives around the war revolve around heteronormative accounts and are ethno-nationally pre-defined.*

*However, queer experiences are today shared rarely and only within the already closed LGBTIQ community, and as such they are officially undocumented, unrecognized, invisible, and further silenced and closeted in broader historical frameworks.*

*Our LGBTIQ Storytelling Project - Kvir Arhiv (Queer Archive) initiative records, documents, collects, and makes visible personal stories, her/their/histories and actions of LGBTIQ persons in Bosnia and Herzegovina during and after the wars of the 1990s in former Yugoslavia. Throughout 2017, we initiated a storytelling collection of more than 40 hours of oral histories (audio and video interviews and a documentary on gender, sexuality, war and security), where more than 50 LGBTIQ, feminist and anti-war activists contributed their personal archives, stories, documents, letters, photographs, and memories. Red Embroidery, a [documentary](#), is a collection of oral histories within the Queer Archive about the intersection of gender, sexuality, war and security in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Slovenia and Croatia. It is a collection of personal testimonials and political accounts of 12 feminist, LGBTIQ and antimilitarist pioneers on solidarity and their contribution to feminist, anti-war and LGBTIQ movements in these countries. Parallel to this work and supported by Whose Knowledge?, we have generated a timeline of LGBTIQ history covering 30 years. Then we started writing articles on Wikipedia about LGBTIQ activists and artists from the region.*

# ART AS RESISTANCE, EMPOWERMENT, AND IDENTITY



Art has been defined as the human expression of creativity and imagination. However, art is more than this narrow understanding. Art is also a tool of life and resistance. We use art for portraying a collective/personal demand, resistance, desire, and the (im)possibility of our realities. It tells our stories, lives, dreams, suffering and hopes — locating us within human experiences, connecting us to those who came before us and those who will come after us.

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## DALIT ART AND EXPRESSION

*When you hear people talk about India, you would notice how much they talk about the richness of traditional or classical music and dance. That is what 3% of the Indians perform and project as Indian classical music or dance.*

*The indigenous folks have always expressed themselves through various forms of arts. But they are considered too raw and unpolished by the mainstream. Storytelling, songs, dance, and playing dappu/parai were expressions of the process of labor, production and creativity. They are forms of resistance. Our music, our protests and all kinds of resistance movements in India have never been complete without the Parai or Dappu. Playing Dappu or Parai is a collective process that is not confined to just music or dance but is a form of healing.*

*The stories, poetry, autobiographies, music, paintings, and street plays from Dalits always portrayed the violent caste system and the ways our communities have been resisting. These are the ways we assert our rights. Apart from the traditional Dalit art forms, we have also been exploring more contemporary art forms, such as creating our own light signs by “Jhalkaribai Light Society”, projections on prominent public places, film and documentary making, photography, rap music, and die-ins which are an extension of Dalit street theatre.*

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### KUMEYAAY ART

*Resistance can also be manifest in challenging the concepts of what is considered classical music or a fine art in the dominant society. Songs, art and musical instruments from indigenous communities may have origins that vastly predate the generally accepted examples taught in academia. The very definitions of art then become, themselves, the forefront of establishing the validity or equivalency of indigenous art forms in the present context.*

### WHAT IS KNOWLEDGE? ART EXHIBITION

*In 2018, Whose Knowledge? organized an art exhibition at Wikimania in Cape Town. Wikimania is an annual conference where Wikipedia geeks, encyclopedians, community organizers and technologists from around the world gather to talk about Wikimedia projects and “the sum of all human knowledge.” Because Wikipedia and Wikimedia have defined knowledge very narrowly to date, we wanted to try using art to expand attendees’ understanding of what knowledge means to different communities. We asked artists from marginalized communities around the world to share visual artworks responding to the question “What is Knowledge?” The exhibition showcased art from South Africa, Namibia, Spain, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, India, Zambia and the United States. It focused on complex topics at the intersection of knowledge, including gender and sexuality, race, capitalism, and systems of organizing knowledge. The art was seen by hundreds of Wikimedians, helping spark conversations and insights exploring plural, diverse, and expansive definitions of knowledge from multiple artistic perspectives.*

### OKVIR'S THEATRE FORUM

*Having been inspired by Augusto Boal's technique of Theatre of the Oppressed, we used the Theatre Forum as a tool of transformation of gender and sexuality-based oppression. We brought together queer persons, artists and activists through our mutual connections based on creative expression and our collective motivation for social change. Our community designed and prepared a public theatre play (core-group, design group, scenography, audio production, trainers). The play "It" (Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian "To", which is a derogatory term for gender and sexual "outcasts") shows our authentic stories of struggle with LGBTIQ oppression in family, education and gender-based discrimination.*

*We combined our poetry, music, graphic design and scenography into one public forum theatre play. The entire process took ten months of monthly workshops until the play was ready. What was special about the play was that people from the audience intervened in one story from the play and changed the course of the story. The process was empowering for every participant where the group connected and felt empowered to share their experiences with wider audience. We also made a brochure in local languages documenting our Forum theatre process for other groups who want to use the same technique. We made a documentary movie as well, but due to security concerns of some of the participants who are not out with their sexuality and/or gender, we did not publish it. Instead, we kept it on DVD and we have distributed it only within our community and friendly groups.*



# KNOWLEDGE MAPPING — VISUALIZING GAPS



Knowledge mapping is yet another way to start making the invisible visible because often we literally can't see what's missing until those gaps are explicitly stated. Whose Knowledge? has explored how to map these gaps with both Dalit History Month and the Queer Archive projects by gathering with members of the community to brainstorm context, key people, events, and issues that are important to the community. Group members can then begin to identify what of this knowledge is already online, for example on sites like Wikipedia, and what remains missing and can be added. The community organizers can then begin to compile sources and prioritize filling those gaps that are most important to them.

If you'd like to try adapting this process for your community, [here](#) is a resource to help you get started. The story of the Dalit community's work around Dalit History Month can provide a good example.

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## MAARI'S AND SANGHAPALI'S STORY

*As part of the Dalit History Month Collective, we were involved in knowledge mapping over several years. Our initial process was of an intensive searching and inquiry with many community members, having folks submit information they want to see represented about themselves online, researching for sources of information, and noting where there were prominent gaps to be filled. The most fulfilling part of our work has been that this process remains dynamic and ongoing. With each passing year, people are using the base of knowledge maps to do what they want to do with Dalit History Month. From creating readable and shareable social media posts to people doing their own events, the Dalit people have taken ownership of this initiative and made it their own. We witness the mapping growing year after year, watching Dalit students, elders, artists, historians, children, queer and trans folks take it and shape it to their needs. We feel it has generated a lot of information, joy, and focus on our community. We are grateful.*

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### OKVIR'S STORY

*Troughout the start of our work, we have used technology as one of the main tools of visibility for the talents of our queer community members. At first we established our website [www.okvir.org](http://www.okvir.org), building it as resource-based, inclusive and networked space for affirmative promotion of creative talents and skills of LGBTIQ persons. Our editorial philosophy is to advocate for the freedom of self-expression of talented LGBTIQ individuals and initiatives, to promote LGBTIQ creative/activist/academic work, and to provide education on LGBTIQ rights and culture in Bosnia and Herzegovina and develop resources. We used our community contact base of queer persons active in formal, informal and independent fields of academia/activism/cultural production to build the platform together. Following this, our work on our website and [Kvir arhiv](#) has resulted with mapping the most important queer persons and events related to our stories and present it in a visual form of a [regional timeline](#), with the support of Whose Knowledge?*

# EDITING WIKIPEDIA



As the world increasingly goes online for knowledge and information, visibility on platforms such as Wikipedia is becoming more and more important. Wikipedia content is often the first search item returned when a Google search is done. And yet, because Wikipedia's editors still skew to being overwhelmingly white, male, straight and Global North in origin, much of the world's knowledge remains missing from the resource.

To address this, many marginalized communities are working on adding knowledge to Wikipedia. We all have unique stories of adding our knowledge to Wikipedia, and we're sharing those stories here so that they can inform and inspire more efforts to center marginalized knowledge in the world's most visited encyclopedia.

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## PERSE'S STORY

*I began using Wikipedia in my courses in Fall 2018. I employed place-based learning whenever possible and felt that focusing on the local indigenous Kumeyaay experience was necessary for teaching a course on Indigenous Decolonization in an ethnic studies department at the University of San Diego. The purpose of engaging my students as Wikipedians was for them to deconstruct the ways settler colonialism infiltrates and shapes the body of knowledge. By focusing on English Wikipedia, my students were able to examine a platform with global impacts. The pedagogy I employed included critiquing the assumptions of Wikipedia and utilizing a decolonizing pedagogy to complete the editing project. Assigning readings and assignments that incorporate an Indigenous ontological and epistemological foundations are necessary for creating a decolonizing classroom.*

*In my course, I wanted my students to not only create new articles in Wikipedia, but to write them in a way that honored the four R's of indigenous research: reciprocity, respect, relevance, and responsibility. Therefore, the subjects of the articles were chosen in consultation with Kumeyaay folks (relevance). My students established relationships with the folks they were writing about (respect). They reflected on the ways that they were learning from the community and the importance of the articles being available to Kumeyaay people (reciprocity). Finally, they invited the community to view the articles together and to offer editing suggestions (responsibility).*

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## ORGANIZING AND BEING IN COMMUNITY



How we do this work is as important as what we produce. A whole lot of invisible labor and organizing goes into any method or projects for building and sharing our knowledge.

Mobilizing resources and people, creating guidelines, how-to guides, checklists and other documentation, convening groups, disseminating and communicating what we're doing and what we've learned, and building practices of self-care so that we can continue to do this work — all of these take time and energy to organize.

We also need spaces of joy and celebration to be in community together. For many of our communities, it is in these spaces that we are able to transfer knowledge in informal ways. These experiences ground us in our identities and shape our understanding of ourselves and our place within our communities and the world. Celebrating milestones and successes, enjoying time with elders, playing games, visiting at a queer-friendly cafe, spending time in peer counseling sessions, and attending cultural events are just as necessary and important as the other knowledge-focused projects and processes we organize.

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### PERSE'S STORY

*The summer and fall are the time when Native American Tribes and communities in the United States hold their celebrations. These celebrations include tribal-specific celebrations and ceremonies as well as inter-tribal events, such as powwows, fiestas, and fandangos. These gatherings are not usually a place where formal knowledge-building occurs; however, they are sites of knowledge transference nonetheless. Visiting with folks who end up telling you their family history, ancestral connections, and area history is a common experience. Also, even those who are not purposefully trying to learn songs will pick them up from hearing them at all the gatherings. Even at inter-tribal events that bring indigenous people together from across the United States and Canada, through conversation with others we are able to find connection between and among each other and our communities. Finding a relative or in-law that you never knew you had is a frequent occurrence.*

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### OKVIR'S STORY

*In 2015 we established the very first structured LGBTIQA peer-to-peer counseling in Bosnia and Herzegovina because we felt the need to support each other and be there for each other. With LGBTIQA Counseling we are empowering our community members and encouraging their development and activist engagement. Peer counseling sessions are regularly conducted twice a week at the premises of Association Okvir in person and/or via Skype and social networks. Over the last year, we have also had regular supervision sessions with a professional psychotherapist in order to track our own development progress as counselors. Therapy referrals to LGBTIQA-friendly therapists were made according to the need. Additionally, we have edited and written, printed and distributed a brochure, "Rescue Triangle" on transforming violent relationships for LGBTIQA persons.*

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## PART III

# ADDING OUR KNOWLEDGE TO WIKIPEDIA



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# WHY DO WE WORK ON WIKIPEDIA?

The colonized narrative of indigenous and marginalized peoples has been reinforced through centuries of vested financial, religious and social interests in the status quo. It permeates society. Historical researchers have embodied their confirmation biases, cherry-picking to support preconceived conclusions. Sometimes, “research” and descriptions about our people have involved outright deception and racial bias, for example when [Native American boarding schools](#) would manipulate photographs to show students as paler and more westernised, i.e. “civilized”.

For many of us, deconstructing the existing structure takes work on many different levels. The traditional approach is through legislative action, curriculum development, teaching the teachers, and literature. Wikipedia affords us another level of strategy in that we can reach people of all ages and education levels directly through the internet. This bottom up approach is a new gateway to influence and educate a wide segment of the population. How to utilize notability, find appropriate citations, and develop the editorial experience that establishes confidence in other editors, are all aspects of the hurdles to fully realizing the potential of Wikipedia. These are not insurmountable, and we carve out a middle ground where we adapt to Wikipedia rules and tenets while expanding the conception of what should be considered notable or citable.

[Wikipedia](#) is the 5th most visited website in the world, with over 40 million articles in nearly 300 languages. Nearly half a billion people visit it every month. It is the most obvious place to go for free and public knowledge online.

But Wikipedia is not yet the encyclopedia of the world, neither in terms of who contributes nor what is contributed. Only [20% of the world edits 80% of Wikipedia currently \(primarily white male editors from North America and Europe\)](#), and [1 in 10 of the editors is self-identified as female](#). Studies by Mark Graham and colleagues at the Oxford Internet Institute have found that [84% of Wikipedia articles focus on Europe and North America](#), and [most articles written about the global South are still written by those in the global North](#), so that even where content is present, skewed representations remain. Wikipedia is also the free and open database for many other content providers on the internet, including search engines like Google. The knowledge gaps on Wikipedia get reflected and amplified all over the internet.

Most Wikipedians are white men from the global North. Even in the United States, the number of black, brown, and Native American Wikipedians are far too few. But most of the

world's population is in the global South (Asia and the Pacific Islands, Africa, Latin American and the Caribbean). And, at least 51% of the world's population is female or non-binary.

In other words, the marginalized of the world *are* the majority of the world. And we and our knowledges are not yet on Wikipedia in full and rich detail. Our knowledges are not or properly represented, even though Wikipedia is meant to share the “sum of all human knowledge” and be the encyclopedia that “anyone can edit”.

All of us work on Wikipedia to make it better. Some ways in which we do this:

- *Expand Wikipedia's content* — we work to add our missing knowledges.
- *Diversify Wikipedia's contributors* — we work to have more contributors who come from every part of the world, and different marginalized experiences.
- *Advocate for a more supportive and welcoming Wikipedia environment* — we work with ally Wikipedians to help bring the majority of the world through more safe and welcoming cultures and practices.

As we do this, we know that some Wikipedians feel that we as marginalized communities are being too political about our histories. We disagree, respectfully. We know that we should inform and educate through Wikipedia, rather than advocate. We use Wikipedia's policies and guidelines as we work. But we also ask that Wikipedians educate themselves to understand the structures of power and privilege that have silenced or made invisible our histories and knowledges. We are not published in the same quantities as those who are straight, male, white, *savarna* (“upper-caste”), or who live in Europe or North America. When we are published, this may be in languages that are not easily known or understood by many Wikipedians. And when we describe the important people, spaces, and events of our communities, they may feel foreign to other Wikipedians. But these are the challenges of our past and present experiences: they should not limit us from making Wikipedia better.

The open nature of online platforms, such as Wikipedia, has created a paradigm shift in the authentication and dissemination structure of this historic knowledge base. This provides hitherto unavailable pathways for marginalized communities to bring forth a decolonizing pedagogy. A decolonizing pedagogy requires that students learn information in ways that challenge the dominant practice. Wikipedia has a policy requiring articles be written from a neutral point of view. But centering the perspectives and knowledge of marginalized communities requires us to understand that no one is “neutral”, that our beliefs about what is “true” comes from our experiences and the ideologies we hold.



## WHAT WE HAVE DONE

By bringing together marginalized community organizers and scholars who have deeply embodied knowledge of their own communities, together with long-time Wikipedians and techies who know how to navigate these online spaces, radical knowledge gets produced. One of Whose Knowledge's strengths is convening multiple kinds of expertise so that we can bridge gaps as people seek to add their knowledge online. Whose Knowledge? worked with each of the three communities below to support Wikipedia-focused projects, connecting with resources and allies, always led by the needs and focus of each community. There's still much work to be done both on Wikipedia and the sources it relies upon. We hope the stories of some of the communities doing this work will inspire more to get involved, understand its limitations, and also make space to think beyond the boundaries of the online encyclopedia in its current form.

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### DALIT HISTORY MONTH (MAARI AND SANGHAPALI)

*The context in which the Dalits entered Wikipedia was during the Dalit History Month celebrations. It has always been a struggle to place our ancestors in the story of the building of modern South Asian nations, be it the freedom struggle or resisting the oppressive power structures within the subcontinent, we have constantly been trying to locate our communities in all the mainstream narrations of the major milestones in the history, not always with success. As a result, Dalits have been creating space for their communities in digital platforms such as Wikipedia, a widely used and widely viewed, global knowledge platform, as a way to archive our knowledge.*

*One major thing that really pushed us to peer into Wikipedia in the first place was the fact that our stories have never been represented properly and accurately in history textbooks. We were curious to know how we and the stories of our communities were being told or represented on online*

platforms. What we saw was a reflection of what happens offline — under-representation, erasure, and complete dismissal of our contributions, our struggles, and our leadership in movements that shaped our nations. This is what provoked us to add more Dalit knowledge into Wikipedia.

When we started editing Wikipedia, we first started by identifying the number of articles that existed in Wikipedia related to Dalit, Adivasi and Bahujan communities. We created a major mapping document that listed existing articles, the major and minor edits the existing articles needed, and missing articles that needed to be created. Since 2015, we have carried out 20 or so Wikipedia Editathons, and trained more than 100 editors from the community, edited more than 250 articles, and added 30 new articles and 45 new images on the Commons.

As we explored the techniques of editing Wikipedia, we faced lots of backlash because the gatekeepers watching South Asia-related articles did not think talking about Caste was important or relevant to international platforms such as Wikipedia. They did not feel that Dalit editors could be rational. They refuted our sources, even those which would have been perfectly acceptable in the most conservative of academic processes. So many of even the easiest to defend and most obviously verifiable edits were reverted. With even the easier edits being rejected, we faced even more insurmountable challenges with respect to ones in which we were sourcing oral citations, non-peer-reviewed Western academic journals, websites, videos, or traditional knowledge.

Toxic, long-time Wikipedian reviewers called us names and used cursed words against us. When we called in Wikimedian allies to help, we were accused of meat puppetry (calling in a crowd of editors of your own persuasion to influence the representation of a fact). Finally, they labeled our edits “activism”. We re-lived the trauma of our offline lives online. We re-lived the inability to represent our people’s histories offline, online. We re-lived the doubting of our intelligence, the ascribing of damaging stereotypes to our people, all of it — on Wikipedia’s white-on-blue platform.

### QUEER ARCHIVE (AZ AND BELMA)

*Queer issues, activists and artists from Bosnia and Herzegovina are invisible in most online spaces. Further, most of the persons who have contributed to the Queer Archive have no online entries on Wikipedia. So with the support of Whose Knowledge?, we have started the process of knowledge mapping, gathering sources and images with proper permissions, and writing Wikipedia articles.*

*We first created a map of relevant and key LGBTIQ human rights defenders and cultural workers, public events and community issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which were missing from Wikipedia. We then wrote 10 articles on pioneers of LGBTIQ activism and arts in the region. We also made a public, searchable, queer timeline of the most important persons, issues and events relevant for queer his/herstory in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Slovenia, Serbia and Croatia, which we had incorporated into our Queer Archive website. The public timeline is of crucial importance for the regional queer community as it provides an overview and insight within the continuity of resistance and struggle of the queer community in the Western Balkans region.*

*For the first time, queer history has become entrenched with mainstream history in such a visual form, revealing the participation but also the challenges achieved by the communities in several of the states formed after the collapse of Yugoslavia.*

## DECOLONIZING PEDAGOGY AT UNIVERSITY OF SAN DIEGO (PERSE)

*In 2017, I attended a Kumeyaay-Wikipedia workshop that focused on how to build indigenous knowledge into online spaces. In the workshop, I had a moment of realization: the online world is central to many of our lives and the information contained in this space reflects the current and historical power structures. Kumeyaay folks at the table expressed their wish to see their histories, stories, astronomy, cosmology, and heroes represented on Wikipedia. While there was support for this, the main concern was the time and energy needed for editing. The solution was to find folks to do the work. By the end of the event, I was determined to find ways to include Wikipedia in my courses.*

*The Whose Knowledge? team directed me a number of [resources](#) on their wiki page. I had my students create their own Wikipedia accounts and asked them to edit existing articles focused on general California Indian topics. This mainly consisted of adding references and changing the wording to reflect an indigenous perspective. In the first attempt, I did not engage the local indigenous community to ensure I structured the assignment in a way that was reciprocal, respectful, relevant, and responsible. In my second attempt, I had more time to design an assignment that aligned with the expectations of working with indigenous communities. I spoke with two Kumeyaay folks and asked permission to focus student articles on Kumeyaay people and institutions. I then contacted the folks who would be the subjects of articles to get their permission. Students then chose their topics and contacted the community person they would be working with. Building this relationship was important to establish trust (as universities have a bad reputation in Native communities), and students then felt accountable to their community partner for the quality of the article.*

*As the course instructor, I bore a responsibility to Native communities and to Wikipedia. Having students adhere to norms of Native communities required that they had an understanding from a practical and theoretical perspective. I also brought in an ally Wikipedian from Whose Knowledge? as we neared the second publishing stage, but I should have asked for help even sooner. At the end of the second course, the students invited community members to a celebration where they explained their writing process and received feedback with recommended changes before publishing. Utilizing Wikipedia as a teaching tool is a decolonizing methodology that I will continue to build into my courses. My classes have only touched the surface of the information that local Kumeyaay folks hope to make available online. My goal is to invite other members of our campus community and local indigenous communities to make this aspiration a reality.*

# CHALLENGES WE FACE

## SOURCES

Wikipedia relies on “reliable, verifiable, published third-party sources” to determine what information should be included and what should be left out. But what one considers reliable and verifiable itself depends on context. Because of the context in which Wikipedia was developed, the sources that Wikipedians consider most reliable and authoritative overwhelmingly skew towards Western newspapers, such as The New York Times and Der Spiegel, and academic books and journal articles written and published in the global North.

Knowledge from marginalized communities is too often marginalized in these written sources as well. Our knowledge is very often oral. Our knowledge, when it is written down, is very often published on the community sites, blogs, or local newspapers that Wikipedia editors are more likely to consider biased or unreliable. Our knowledge rarely is included with great accuracy in the New York Times. Indigenous knowledge, queer knowledge, Dalit knowledge, women’s knowledge — especially the knowledge of black and brown women from the global South — is often missing from those sources, or represented through the lens of the authors and publishers who are not themselves of those communities. Inaccurate knowledge about us is written by white global North scholars from outside our communities.

All too often, we find ourselves missing the right sources to prove that our knowledge is valid on Wikipedia. So what can we do?

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### SANGHAPALI AND MAARI’S STORY

*After our first Wikipedia editathon, we started looking at various challenges we faced and how we could address the issues around this platform. Though we had sources, they were coming from the “upper” Caste perspective. So we decided to reach out to people in our communities who are scholars,*



*professors, and others on the ground and find sources documented in regional languages, local newspapers, and publications, etc. We pushed hard to include more content from non-English language regional published sources. We began editing in non-English regional Wikis. We also began collecting oral stories and video testimonies to try to get some sort of archival, university affiliation to make it citable. And we've consistently encouraged others from Dalit and Adivasi communities to help by writing their own stories (while giving the full picture of what to expect). We hope to compile into an anthology and publish it in a book so that it can be quoted and cited. We're also writing about our own experiences and working to get this writing published in more "mainstream" sources. But at the same time, we are also contesting the popular notions of what can be used as a source. Writing op-eds on the problems of sourcing for marginalized peoples, connecting with the Wikipedia community, and building more allies who can help challenge and improve Wikipedia's sourcing policies, also have to be part of the solution.*

## NOTABILITY

Imagine being oppressed for thousands of years and then being told your community's leading artists, scholars, and activists don't deserve an article on Wikipedia. For us, this is a common occurrence, as we try to represent our knowledge on Wikipedia. The wall we keep running into is called "notability".

On Wikipedia, notability is a policy used by editors to decide whether a given topic warrants its own encyclopedia article. Wikipedians say that notability is not determined by a person's fame, importance, or meaningful contributions to humanity, but only whether significant independent coverage in multiple reliable sources exists about them. When our communities are missing from the accepted sources, then we're considered not notable on Wikipedia.

Notability is a criterion for existence on Wikipedia. As such, a lack of notability renders one effectively invisible. So many biographies of people from marginalized communities are quickly deleted either because the sources to prove their notability are inadequate, or because people from outside our communities don't understand contexts (of notability) outside their own privilege. This matters tremendously to our people who have been chronically dismissed and denied a place in the story of human culture and accomplishment.

### SANGHAPALI AND MAARI'S STORY

*Editing Wikipedia is not just fun and challenging but also traumatic. One issue that has been troubling us for a long time is of notability. For instance, two of the articles that I tried to make changes to were “Suicide of Rohith Vemula” and “Delta Meghwal Rape Case”. Rohith and Delta were students who were killed through systematic institutional discrimination and physical and sexual violence. But they were also people in their own light. Delta was even a recognized artist in her state.*

*However, Wikipedia's rule is that when a person becomes notable because of their death, their article will be titled as if the death was what made them notable, rather than their life. This is adding salt to the wounds of already mourning peoples. We believe that each of those articles should be named after the person rather than their death, and so we've been arguing for that on Wikipedia. For thousands of years we have been portrayed as victims of violence and oppression, and that is reflected on these online platforms too. How a person's identity is reduced to one event in their life and how that one incident determines their entire identity online is something that needs to be questioned and contested. Rohith Vemula and Delta Meghwal were fighters and challenged Caste in academic spaces so much that they were killed by the system. If you don't understand the relationship between the causes and consequences, and you limit your view to just what has been stated in the mainstream, you are not fit to determine anyone's notability. And this should be acknowledged by Wikipedia.*

## FACING OPPRESSIVE STRUCTURES... AGAIN

On Wikipedia, we often encounter very similar structures of oppression to those we experience offline in our daily lives.

In its design, Wikipedia is open for anyone to watch, review, and change. But in practice, Wikipedia is dominated by those who already know how to navigate its maze of rules and unwritten norms. Long-time Wikipedians know how to find and challenge content while using policies as justification for their stance and social status as support for their acts. Experienced Wikipedia editors know how to watch thousands of articles at a time in areas where they have an interest or feeling of competency and control. They are equipped to tag

articles and mark them for deletion, to remove paragraphs that they believe are insufficiently referenced, and to deny the validity of citations that they judge to be unreliable. This results in an experience of great scrutiny for those of us who write about marginalized communities on Wikipedia.

Our behavior is not only watched more closely, but we are held to the highest standard of compliance — which is often a double standard compared to those writing about, say, railway stations, or The Simpsons.

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### PERSE'S STORY

*The oppressive structures inherent in the Wikipedia platform impacted the editing assignment I incorporated into my Native American and Indigenous Resistance Movements course. My students completed their article drafts in their “sandbox”, which is like a personal drafting space, similar to an artist’s sketch pad. One of my students was writing an article on a local Kumeyaay scholar, one of the first people from her tribal Nation to complete a doctorate program with an impressive educational resume. Of all the article topics we chose, we expected hers to face the least scrutiny during the publishing process. Surprisingly, an editor moved a student’s article into community review while it was still in her sandbox. As a result, she had to wait weeks for her article to be reviewed, and then it was nominated for deletion because the scholar was determined to not be “notable” enough.*

*The power issues in this example are two-fold. First, editors are not supposed to go into other people’s sandboxes. The editor exercised their power as an established Wikipedian to enter my student’s workspace and mark her article for review. Second, the established guidelines that determine who should be included in the encyclopedia prevented a key Kumeyaay scholar from being seen as notable enough to warrant their own page.*

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## OPPORTUNITIES WE SEE

### CREATING NEW SOURCES

If we want to have articles on Wikipedia, and we don't have "reliable sources", it is (unfortunately) our responsibility to create them. There are a lot of different ways to do that. The Queer Archive, Okvir, will ask the Internet Archive and MIT University to co-host and publish their content. Another way is to make allies with local and regional reporters, so we can ask them to write articles about the people and stories that remain missing from Wikipedia. We can also write our own academic articles and books and have them published by respected outlets, so that our knowledge will then, finally, be seen as reliable. These actions can take time and resources but they have to be part of a longer-term vision and ongoing processes in the work of representation on Wikipedia.

### BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH WIKIPEDIANS WHO CAN BE ALLIES

In 2017 and 2018, many of us joined Whose Knowledge? while attending Wikimania, the annual gathering of Wikipedians. There we met Wikipedians who can act as allies in our projects going forward. And we aim to do more of this in the future.

Wikipedia, despite its anonymous nature, is a community of real people. Wikipedians host editathons, meetups, photo contests, and both regional and international events. In order to represent our knowledge on Wikipedia, we have learned and are still learning the importance of building relationships with long-time editors, especially those who share our desire to better include marginalized knowledge in the encyclopedia. Building relationships takes time, but there are many Wikipedia groups who work on issues of systemic bias, whether it's the gender gap, lack of content about queer folks, people from the African diaspora, Dalit/Adivasi/Bahujans, indigenous culture, or the intersection of these issues.

## WIKIPEDIA IN OUR OWN LANGUAGE

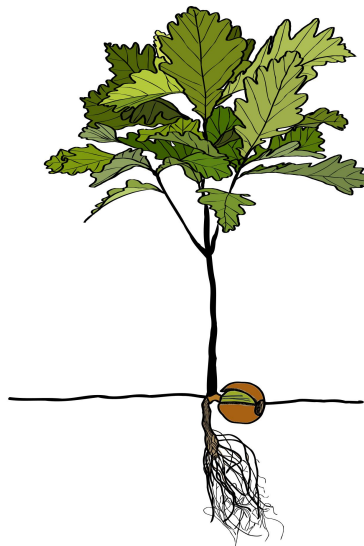
Maybe we need a Kumeyaay language version of Wikipedia. There are actually hundreds of different language versions of Wikipedia, and more can be added.

Language itself can be a defining aspect of worldview. Language can be relational, as the root of words implies an acceptance of the basis for the word. *Indigenous*, *sovereignty*, *nature*, and many other words don't have a direct corollary in the traditional Kumeyaay worldview. As we develop our sources in English, we must work toward the day when those sources and articles can be in Kumeyaay and truly represent the native perspective. A solution to this problem is creating a Kumeyaay language version of Wikipedia where Kumeyaay people and speakers can create a more representative encyclopedia. Unlike on English Wikipedia, whole articles would not be deleted because the editors could only understand English sources.

## CREATING OUR OWN WIKI FOR COMMUNITY-SOURCED KNOWLEDGE

We have too often found that Wikipedia's rules were stacked against us — especially when it comes to issues around notability, neutral point of view, and reliability of sources. We realized that while Wikipedia represents an open and democratic space, it is still governed by the same hegemonies that exist in our societies. Still, we persisted and made a lot of edits, and created many new articles with the help of our allies at Whose Knowledge?

But that is not enough. Even as we continue with our mission on Wikipedia, we feel a strong need to create our own spaces for telling our stories — a space that celebrates our history, and empowers our present to rebuild our future. This is how we, as Dalit women, came up with the idea of creating our own wiki: *Bahujanpedia*. Named after the word “Bahujan” (the majority of the people), this separate platform will challenge “upper” Caste and normalized narratives of our histories and create knowledge that centers the truth of Caste-oppressed peoples (Bahujans).



## FURTHER RESOURCES

[Resources to understand, practice, critique, and teach with Wikipedia](#)

[Framework for mapping community knowledge](#)

[Checklist for editathon organizers](#)

[Dashboard setup for tracking edit-a-thon contributions](#)

[Resources on open licenses and repositories](#)

[Resources for adding images to Commons and Wikipedia](#)

## PART IV



# HOW TO ALLY AND BE A GOOD GUEST



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## HOW TO BEGIN?

Everyone is — or can be — an ally to someone else. So, the first step to allyship is to recognize the power and position of oneself and find ways to form alliances. We all hold different structures and positions of power and privilege in different contexts. In some situations, we can hold power “over” others in the room or space, and in other contexts, we are the ones who feel disempowered by others. Consider the following:

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### ANASUYA’S STORY



*From a South Asian perspective, I am a savarna or so-called “upper caste” Indian, so I come from communities who have oppressed and vilified others through the Caste system for millennia. I have deep structural power and privilege in a room of Dalit, Bahujan or Adivasi communities. So, for example, when I support the Dalit History Month collective with Wikipedia editathons, I play the role of an ally. On the other hand, I live today as a brown woman from the global South with a strange accent when I’m in my current home in the United States. I’m seen as a “woman of colour” who sometimes faces different forms of discrimination and bias, and in that context my white American friends become my allies.*

### BELMA'S STORY

*From a perspective of a white, gender fluid, middle class Bosnian, I come from a community who have oppressed Roma people in Bosnia. So I have deep power and privilege in a room with Roma women, and for example, when I did a digital storytelling session with Roma women in 2016, I was present in the space as an ally. On the other hand, I am also a queer, gender fluid person, with a history of PTSD, addiction and other mental health challenges. I face different forms of discrimination and oppression in society, and that makes me feel outside societal "norms". So I, too, have allies.*



### JAKE'S STORY

*I'm a white, Jewish, North American, upper-middle class man from the wealthy suburbs of Philadelphia. I have been given great opportunity, leniency, and recognition throughout my life. I embody one of the most privileged social positions on the planet, and so my role when working with women or people of color, for example, is to be an ally. On the other hand, I am also a cancer survivor with a serious history of mental health challenges. The struggles with my body and mind are not easily visible but they locate me outside of the norms of what a privileged 35-year old would experience and have to overcome, and I, too, appreciate having allies in these contexts.*



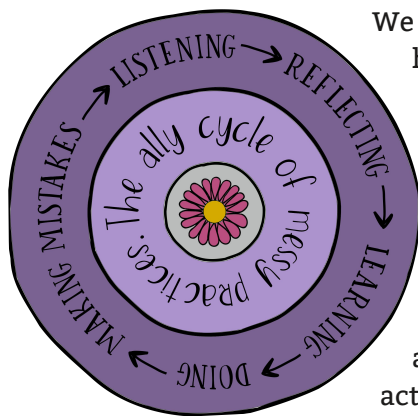
## ... AND WHY BE A GOOD GUEST?

Wherever we live in the world, and wherever we travel, we live on the lands of indigenous communities and in the ecosystem that sustains them. So unless we are from those indigenous communities ourselves, we are also always guests of others. In our work of centering marginalized communities and their knowledges, being a good guest starts with understanding these often painful and extractive histories, and then learning to be an ally who acknowledges, affirms, and centers these communities in our work.

“Ally” is not a word that is easily translatable into all our languages — but ultimately, ally is not about the name we give ourselves or each other, but about actually doing the work. As some put it: [ally is a verb, not a noun](#). We become better allies by showing up and doing what the communities we support need us to do.

# LEARNING THROUGH MAKING MISTAKES: THE CYCLE OF MESSY PRACTICE

Being an ally is a process of learning, and that means making mistakes. In the same way that ally is a verb not a status, being an ally is not a static achievement, like winning an award. Instead it is a series of cycles. Because this work is hard, complex, and sensitive, involving humans with different backgrounds and levels of privilege and power, it is also messy. And that's okay.



We come to allyship with preconceived notions, expectations, habits, and biases. It is not until we engage in the messy work of allying with marginalized people that some of our biases are revealed, and we may feel embarrassed. More importantly, though, we may learn that our biases have impact: they hurt or harm those we are trying to support.

It is critical that we, as potential allies, reach out and dig in anyway, understanding that each slip-up of language, awkward gesture, inappropriate comment, or embarrassing action, when examined openly, will help us grow.

One way to think about growth is that it is nothing more than a result of improving after making mistakes. It's natural, inherent to the process of learning, and nothing to be ashamed of! A key to learning as an ally is observing what is happening around us, asking questions where we are unsure or confused, and being receptive to feedback when it is given to us. The worst kind of ally is one who is unwilling to receive feedback and learn. But being so afraid of making mistakes that we don't even try isn't a strong ally practice either.

In many cases, what feels like a harsh criticism is actually a perfect opportunity to make a change. Take feedback in stride, don't overreact in the moment to defend yourself, and don't make yourself the victim of the story. Do take time to think and talk through what happened with someone trustworthy. It's even better if that someone is not a marginalized person themselves, but another ally. Let's help each other ally better.

At the heart of being an ally is the humility and courage to engage, knowing that even though you won't get it right the first time, or every time, the work is so important that it's worth it. With time and experience one learns to make fewer, or at least different, mistakes. But we never stop learning.

# A WISHLIST FROM MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES FOR SUPPORTING AND CENTERING OUR KNOWLEDGES

WE NEED SAFE SPACES OF OUR OWN. WE'LL SHARE BRAVE SPACES WITH YOU.

Marginalized communities need safe spaces of our own. We also sometimes have sacred spaces of our own. We need allies not to feel offended and left out when they are not invited to these spaces. Think about it this way: if you are from a powerful community, most spaces feel safe to you, but they don't to many others.

So as responsible allies, do not enter safe or sacred spaces, unless specifically invited. And even when you are, be good guests and respectful of the radical hospitality being offered to you.

**Example: when a circle of black women invite a brown woman to learn about their histories, it is not a space for the brown woman to take over the conversation with her own story, unless specifically asked to do so.**

**Example: even as the Kumeyaay people may bring some of their knowledge online freely and openly, other knowledge is sacred, and may never be shared with the broader world. You must respect this.**

Brave spaces, though, are more public spaces that we share together as marginalized folks and allies — in these spaces, we hope you'll show up with courage, generosity, and thoughtfulness to stand at our side.

## RESPECT SILENCE...

When you observe that there is a moment of silence during any of the conversations you are part of with marginalized communities, don't assume the silence is awkward, or assume that

people don't have anything to say. Don't assume they don't understand and jump in to fill the space. They might be processing, thinking, imagining, creating, and about to say something amazing.

**Example: In many Native American communities, Tribal Councils are the primary decision makers for the community. When people come in from the outside community they are often put off by the tendency for Councils to contemplate discussions. These periods of silence can last several minutes sometimes. For non-native peoples, silence is considered an awkward place in a conversation. Non-natives feel obligated to fill the space and will often start rambling or questioning the Council to get a response. This can actually be detrimental to the dialogue and shut down the communication.**

## ...UNLESS THEY ARE SILENCES OF OPPRESSION

On the other hand, some silences are silences of oppression. They may suggest that the person who is silent feels either unwelcome, unsafe, or disempowered in the conversation. In these situations, it's critical for us as allies to support and enable a sense of welcome, safety, and affirmation of the person's expertise and experience.

### PERSE'S STORY

*I was in a meeting with a group of white women faculty who were discussing the composition of an advisory board charged with overseeing the project. The goal of the project was to hire women faculty in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM disciplines). None of the faculty they suggested to sit on the board were women of color. I didn't say anything because they were taking all the space and were even talking over each other. As the only woman of color and a non-tenure track faculty member at the table, I didn't feel empowered to point out the fact that none of the women they were proposing were women of color. None of my colleagues noticed my silence.*



## LEAVE OUR INSIDE LANGUAGE ALONE, ESPECIALLY OUR JOKES!

Every community has an inner vocabulary or language of its own — and this is as true for marginalized communities as it might be for Ivy League politicians. Please don't appropriate this inner language... especially the jokes we feel comfortable sharing with another community member. They somehow don't feel funny when an ally uses them.

**Example: In some queer communities, it is fine for us to call each other faggot, fairy, or tranny, but when somebody outside of our community calls us that, it is very hurtful and disrespectful.**

## EDUCATE YOURSELF...

It takes enormous emotional labor for someone from a marginalized community to give an ally basic history, geography, and politics lessons. We get asked to do this all the time by otherwise well-meaning family, friends, and colleagues. Please educate yourselves, or learn from other allies who may have more knowledge than you.

### AZ AND BELMA'S STORY

*As queer Bosnians who often get visited by researchers and students doing research on post-war countries, we find ourselves having to give people basic information all the time. We need allies to please do research on the context prior to coming to Bosnia. Educate yourself on the terminology. For example, the words: "civil war", "conflict" etc. are not the words that describe the dynamics of what happened to us, meaning "the war". Also, please don't treat us like numbers and quota for your research, for example, when you ask us whether it's okay to gather Bosniaks, Croats and Serbians in one room. We are not divided in this way, and we function beyond these categories. We'd also like you as allies to discuss your expectations, fascinations and exotics with somebody else, not us. We understand that it may be appealing to you to come to a post-war country to write a PhD on gender, sexuality and war/genocide, but you need to learn to respect the complexity of human experience and war survival, whether as a queer or a straight person.*





### JAKE'S STORY

*I was facilitating a large meetup at a conference. In order to avoid an unproductive session, I cut group introductions short so that we wouldn't spend half the time on this one small part of the conversation. When I made that decision, I literally took the microphone out of the hand of a woman of color, to direct the discussion towards broader topics. After the event, which I felt I had "saved" from failure, an elder woman of color came up to me and told me that I had really upset her because I had taken away another woman of color's imminent chance to speak. It was done hastily, and the optics mirrored dynamics that are painfully all-too-common in marginalized communities. How did I respond externally? I thanked her for her feedback. Inside, though, I was devastated. But rather than process those emotions with the person I had upset, after the event I sought out another ally (also a white American like myself) to process with. It was appropriate to vent and talk with another ally about how hard I was trying to ally well. I needed that, but the right move was to wait and not burden the person I had upset with my own distress.*



### ...AND AFTER EDUCATING YOURSELF, ASK, DON'T PRESUME

But if, after you educate yourself as much as you can as an ally, you still are uncertain or have doubts about your actions, please ask, don't presume. Asking always opens up the opportunity for learning, and doing better!

### BUILD RELATIONSHIPS OF TRUST (AND THIS TAKES TIME)!

As members of marginalized communities, allying for us is very much about building relationships of trust through ally actions. Please remember this can take time and we learn through practice.

### SIKO'S STORY

*I come from a white American culture that can be very often focused on producing and demonstrating "measurable outcomes." One practice I've had to cultivate as an ally is to let go of the pressure I sometimes feel to act towards fast outcomes when starting to work with a community that I'm new to. In the past two years, I was lucky enough to be invited to Sarajevo to start getting to know the LGBTQIA community there, and to the Barona reservation to begin to learn about Kumeyaay knowledge priorities. In both cases, I've made mistakes that I felt embarrassed about, but because our relationships have grown over time, there is room for my errors to be forgiven. I'm grateful for my colleagues' patience and friendship as I learn. Spending time together and not rushing the pace has helped build trust, and this is what allows the rest of the work to flow.*



## NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US

As our friends in the disability rights movement say, discussions and decisions about marginalized communities cannot happen without centering our leadership and our knowledge. If you find yourself making decisions about communities who don't look like you or have different experiences than you, then... pause, reflect, and ask yourself why they're not the ones leading the discussion!

### SANGHAPALI'S STORY

*In one of the Wikipedia editathons that we did for Dalit History Month, we had a very good ally who was invited to be in the space to support the team. She obviously came with a good intention and respect for the event. When I started talking about the wiki markup formatting language, and introducing them to markup Source Editor, she said, "The wiki markup is too intimidating*

*for the new editors” and that I should instead introduce them to simpler Visual Editor first. I felt the Dalit Wikipedia editors should know what goes into making an article and also I knew my community was intelligent enough to learn, make mistakes, and produce. But she kept pushing me to use the Visual Editor and not the Source Editor. I believe that every statement we make has a meta message, and it was really rude for an ally to presume that they know better and that they understand the community better than the community member themselves. From my end, I feel I should have sat with her and told her what I would do in a similar situation.*



## ATTRIBUTE, BUT SAFELY

Marginalized people are too used to having their land, possessions, artifacts, and culture stolen, borrowed, and appropriated. Take care not to do the same with the words and ideas of the people you are supporting. If you hear a useful story, or a clever phrase, or a novel strategy, don't present it as your own. This is appropriation and it is a painful reminder and way of making marginalized people more invisible. At the same time, consider context. Some things that marginalized people share are not safe for public sharing, or not intended for people outside a trusted group. As always, if you're not sure, ask.

### PERSE'S STORY

*I have a colleague with whom I work closely on issues of diversity. We frequently discuss my responses and thoughts on blogs and articles I've read. After I have these discussions with him, I hear him use my words and phrases in conversations with faculty, students, and staff. He never specifies where he heard these ideas or concepts. It frustrates me because when I express my perspectives around these issues with these same folks, they think I'm repeating my colleague.*



## GROW THE ALLYSHIP

It's really exhausting for us as marginalized communities to be the only ones responding to the spectrum of marginalization – from bad information about us to abusive behaviour towards us. As an ally, we need you to step up and have the difficult conversations for us when you can: especially in the everyday spaces of your family, your friends, and your workplace colleagues. These are people who already love and trust you — if you can give them new information and new ways of thinking and doing towards marginalized folks, they are far more likely to listen to you, and change with you.

Through this, you can build our growing community of allies! We need more of us supporting and standing up for each other everyday.

## SPECIFIC SPACES FOR ALLY ACTION

### WIKIPEDIA

The world's most popular reference source is also one that reflects the deep imbalances of power and knowledge in the world. Less than 20% of the volunteer editors are women and less than 20% of the biographies on the site are about women. Most of the editors writing about the global South are not from those regions. Since so many people come to Wikipedia for basic information about topics, it plays a critical role in the information ecosystem. As an ally, you can help make it more inclusive, both in terms of its contributors and its content. You can speak up in deletion debates and policy discussions where marginalized community content is being excluded, help find additional sources for articles about marginalized communities where missing references put them in jeopardy, and ask Wikipedians from marginalized communities what else they would like allies to help with.

### SOCIAL MEDIA

Platforms like Twitter can be vicious or even dangerous places for marginalized people to engage. Designed for 'free expression', they also create many opportunities for harassment and abuse. As an ally, you can lessen the labor and danger of social media by stepping in and taking on aggressive voices or outright trolls. Don't make a queer activist defend themselves against every attack alone. Challenge trolls and call out their behavior. Or, send a reassuring positive message to the activist that reminds them you care and are there to support them, that their work matters, and that you are available to help. Twitter is a 'brave space', but you can help make it a 'safer' space.

### CULTURAL HERITAGE AND GALLERIES, LIBRARIES, ARCHIVES, MUSEUMS (GLAM)

So much of human knowledge and culture never makes it into the halls of national museums or prestigious universities. More often that knowledge is held and kept in the communities of people who have witnessed and transmitted their experience. Large institutions with respected collections can do a lot to broaden what knowledge is preserved and include it in the human cultural record. For example, an elite university could support a queer community archive in Bosnia. This involves giving up some control and loosening expectations around what counts as worth recording. If you take the supportive step of

allying with a community archive, you let that community preserve their history in a way and form that feels safe and valid for them. You also ensure that the knowledge is not lost and can make its way into more mainstream conversations or scholarship.

## ACADEMIA

Universities conduct much research about marginalized communities, but they also perpetuate their marginalization. One way this happens is through citation, or rather, not citing the works of marginalized people (even in articles about them and their history!). A citation acts as attribution, it centers knowledge from the margins, and it makes the expertise of marginalized people visible in academic spaces. Citations are not just technical elements of research, they are elements of scholarship with political and strategic value.

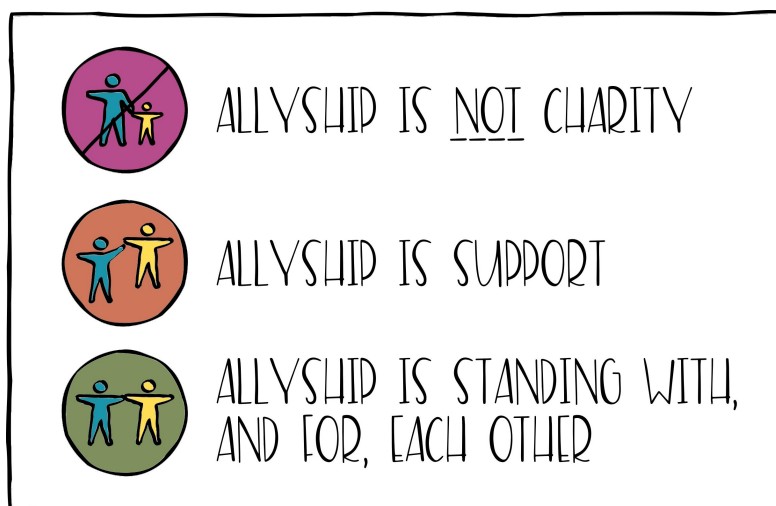
## EVERYDAY SPACES: OUR FAMILY, FRIENDS, AND WORKSPACE

As an ally, it's easy to focus on the big gatherings, protests, conferences, or trainings. Let's not forget the everyday spaces we inhabit most of the time. Allyship starts at home, extends to close networks of friends, and can permeate a workplace. These environments may not be explicitly marked for radical action, but they have the benefit of regular presence and the ability to hold more intimate conversations. Talking with our parent about oppressive language, our partner about the history of colonization, or our colleague about unfair workplace dynamics, can open new doors and create more allies. As an ally, our privilege comes with influence.

Let's be visible with our commitment to social justice, and take moments out of our lives to have small but meaningful interactions in the spaces we inhabit most often.

## ALLY DOS AND DON'TS

Allying well is not about absolute rules, but there are some general practices that really help and some myths that get in the way. Here's a list of some things to remember about what an effective ally does and is (and what they don't do and are not).



## AN ALLY TAKES ON THE GRUNT WORK

There are many intellectual, theoretical, and strategic topics that need deep discussion and careful planning. As an ally, don't overlook the large amount of other kinds of work that enable that 'higher-thinking'. Being an effective ally is as much about taking on the labor of childcare, event logistics, scheduling, setup and cleanup, printing, and running errands. First, these are not 'lesser'; they are essential to making change. Second, that work overwhelmingly falls on and is already done by those with less privilege. The work may be invisible or seem irrelevant. Your job as an ally is to take on that work, because it frees up marginalized people to think and collaborate in a space of creativity without so many distractions and burdens.

## AN ALLY IS NOT THE THOUGHT LEADER

Related to taking on non-intellectual labor is stepping back to let others speak and lead. It's tempting to try and develop, and then demonstrate, familiarity and expertise with issues faced by marginalized people. That's not your role. Marginalized people need allies, but they can be frustrated by having those who are supposed to help them step in front of them. Recognize that marginalized people are experts in many different ways, including in embodied experience. Being an ally is about respecting and affirming this expertise and experience, by stepping back while being present. If you ignore this advice, you may find yourself the target of real anger. As a well-intentioned ally, you may be offended or pushed away by this. Realize that your role is to support, and others cannot take the lead if you are always talking. Don't give up, and don't feel silenced yourself. Silence can be incredibly powerful when it is used to hold space for others. Your presence and silence, your listening and restraint, helps create an environment that supports and empowers others. Silence and listening with an open mind and heart can help others heal, and it will allow them to lead. Silence can be courageous, too.

## AN ALLY IS NOT THE OPPRESSED: YOU ARE NOT A VICTIM

When you encounter the millennia of oppression that marginalized people have faced, it can be overwhelming and very emotional. You may feel deep sadness, anger, or confusion about your culture and ancestor's role in that oppression. Remember that as hard as it is to face those historical and present realities, you are not the victim. It is distracting if you put your emotions about other people's struggles before those people and their struggles! This isn't to say you shouldn't feel and take time to process your emotions, but in spaces designed to empower marginalized people, don't forget your privileged role. If you fail to do this, you might be told to save your tears. It's not that your feelings don't matter, but if you're allying with marginalized people, your feelings are not the main focus.

## AN ALLY UNDERSTANDS WHERE ANGER COMES FROM AND DOESN'T TAKE EASY OFFENSE

As you work with marginalized people, you may expect those you are supporting to always appear with grace and patience, even when you mess up. This is an unrealistic expectation, and it ignores the deep pain and lifetimes of struggle that people have to carry and overcome. Life for a marginalized person is hard enough without having to always act perfect and calm. There is a need to vent and express difficult emotions. It's not always soft and accommodating. Indeed, part of overcoming oppression is loudly and clearly shouting NO to dynamics that perpetuate oppression. If you 'tone police' and dismiss marginalized people because they aren't always patient and friendly and understanding, you censor their voice and tie their hands with a code of behavior that is contrary to their liberation. An ally makes space for anger.



## AN ALLY DOESN'T EXPECT APPLAUSE

With so much to learn and think about and do as an ally, you may expect due praise for taking on this work. It is hard to be an ally, but if you think it's hard to be an ally, try being the oppressed! An ally can take breaks when they need it, but the life of a marginalized person is always under challenge, pressure, and even threat. You are there to ally with others, and if you do it well, you will help create more fairness and freedom in the world. You may receive appreciation, or you may not. You're not there for applause and you're not the hero of this story.

## AN ALLY CALLS OUT WHO'S MISSING AND MAKES SPACE FOR PEOPLE TO SPEAK

Part of being an effective ally is being aware of who is and is not present in a conversation or space. Pay attention to who is missing. Is your organization attempting diversity initiatives without people of color in leadership? Is your group of friends organizing protests in defense of native lands without any indigenous people? As crucial as being mindful of those gaps is, so is pointing them out to others. A boss who congratulates his new team for being superstar thinkers may need an in-the-moment reminder that the great group is also all white North American men. Smart and talented, sure, but not inclusive. The corollary to noticing who is missing is noticing who is present but not speaking. Listen for the silence of marginalized people. Ask them if they would like to share. Make space for them. At the same time, be aware that sometimes silence is needed and chosen for reflection and processing. Rather than assume one way or the other, just ask.



## FURTHER RESOURCES

### UNDERSTANDING PRIVILEGE

Ampersand's blog post [Privilege is Driving a Smooth Road and Not Even Knowing It](#)

Brown-Betty's blog post [IBARW: A primer on privilege: what it is and what it isn't](#)

Cornel West's book [Race Matters](#)

Djamila Ribeiro's book "[O que e lugar de fala?](#)" (Afro-Brazilian feminist author's Portuguese work on whose voices get heard, soon to be published in English)

Francesca Ramsey's video "[Why does privilege make people so angry?](#)"

Helen Kim Ko's article on [8 Ways People of Color are Tokenized in Nonprofits](#)

Geek Feminism Wiki's blog post [Privilege](#)

Julie Pagano's blog post [On Making Mistakes](#)

Mazharin Banaji and Anthony Greenwald's book "[Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People](#)"

Tekanji's blog post "[Check my what?](#)" [On privilege and what we can do about it](#)

Thenmozhi Soundararajan and Sinthujan Varatharajah's article [Caste Privilege 101: A Primer for the Privileged](#)

### LEARNING TO ALLY WELL

Anna Mardoll's blog post Feminism: [How To Be A \(Male\) Ally](#)

Geek Feminism Wiki's blog post on [Elementary mistakes in Feminist Discussions](#)

Francesca Ramsey with [5 tips on how to be a good ally](#) (also [read the tips here](#))

Julie Pagano's blog post [So You Want To Be An Ally](#)

The Angry Black Woman's blog post [The Dos and Don'ts of Being a Good Ally](#)

Whose Knowledge?'s guide on [How to Center Marginalized Knowledge on Wikimedia Projects](#)

## SUPPORTIVE PRACTICES

Cris Crass's article [Tools White Guys Who Are Working for Social Change...](#) and other people socialized in a society based on domination

Felicia Garcia's [Guide to Indigenous Land and Territorial Acknowledgements for Cultural Institutions](#)

Heather Plett's article on [What it Really Means to Hold Space for Someone](#)

Julie Pagano's blog post [Ally Smells: Appropriation](#)

Kesiena Boom's post on [100 Ways White People Can Make Life Less Frustrating For People of Color](#)

Sangtin Writers Collective and Richa Nagar's collectively written book in Hindi, then English [Playing With Fire: feminist thought and activism through seven lives in India](#)

Shannon Morreira and Kathy Luckett's article [Questions Academics Can Ask To Decolonise Their Classrooms](#)

Valerie Aurora's [Ally Workshop Handout](#)

You can also download the 4 parts of this resource separately:

**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**