

A HISTORICAL REVIEW OF LIBERATION AND KNOWLEDGE PRACTICES

In this chapter we're going to explore a short history of the social movements that have centred knowledge production at the core of their activities. It is to give weight to the community self-determination, collective liberation and base building that has taken place from which we have all benefited.

Colonialism maintains a stranglehold on knowledge production through an elaborate publication infrastructure largely based in the global North...[to] gatekeep what qualifies as "legitimate" publishable knowledge.

- Sylvia Tamale, Decolonization & Afro-Feminism (2020)⁹



The Industrial Revolution changed communication. Advancements in paper production and the development of cross-nation transport networks meant that words and ideas could now spread quicker than before - subject to their policing by a states' self interest.

In all corners of the colonised world people were using this new infrastructure to spread word of resistance, survival, love, and pathways for change.

In the USA, Native American Indigenous movements and voices such as the Winnebago Prophet Movement, a spiritual and political movement in the 1820s-30s among the Winnebago people, led by a figure known as Wabokieshiek, generated written materials advocating for indigenous rights and cultural preservation. The Ponca Chief, Standing Bear pamphlet "The Ponca Chiefs: An Indian's Attempt to Appeal to the American People," of 1879 highlighted the struggles of the Ponca tribe in the face of forced removal.

These were met alongside the Abolitionists such as David Walker whose "Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World" (1829) was a significant pamphlet that called for slave revolt and immediate abolition. It had a profound impact on the antislavery movement. As well as Frederick Douglass's "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?" in which he delivered a powerful critique of slavery on Independence Day, and The American Anti-Slavery Society, founded by William Lloyd Garrison and others, who produced numerous pamphlets and publications, including "The Declaration of Sentiments" and "The Anti-Slavery Record."



In 1971 the Panthers built on the liberation school pedagogy with the establishment of an elementary school in Oakland for the children of party members. Within a few years of the party's founding the Panthers' politics and approach to education began to shift. Abandoning revolutionary aspirations, activists gradually returned to community organizing and rediscovered the progressive teaching methods of the Freedom Schools

The weathering hypothesis was proposed to account for early health deterioration as a result of cumulative exposure to experiences of social, economic and political adversity. The weathering hypothesis proposes that the cumulative burden of these stressors as individuals age is "weathering," and the increased weathering experienced by minority groups compared to others can account for differences in health outcomes. In recent years, the biological plausibility of the weathering hypothesis has been investigated in studies evaluating the physiological effects of social, environmental and political stressors among marginalised communities. This has led to more widespread use of the weathering hypothesis as a framework for explaining health disparities on the basis of differential exposure to racially based stressors.



The Combahee River Collective in 1974. Left to right bottom: Demita Frazier and Helen Stewart. Left to right top: Margo Okazawa-Rey, Barbara Smith, Beverly Smith, Chirlane McCray, and Mercedes Tompkins.

Image © (Margo Okazawa-Rey)

In Europe, a different narrative was being weaved with the use of pamphlets, the role of the industrial economy and the people within. The publication of the Communist Manifesto of 1848 sent shockwaves through the urbanised and industrialised people of Europe. It set a precedent for methods and means for the sharing of knowledge for social change. It is hard to see Vladimir Lenin's 1917 "The State and Revolution" without Engel's "Socialism: Utopian and Scientific" of 1880 and, more extreme and anarchist rooted, "Revolutionary Catechism" by Sergey Nechayev (1869).

Outputs of the Industrial Revolution became an unintended pathway for knowledge to be produced and shared outside of Church and State hegemony. Rising literacy also brought both capacity and desire for information, knowledge, and expression.

Perhaps one of the strongest eras of knowledge production and sharing was in the post-war "post-colonial" era. People, organisations, and movements critiqued the so-called freedoms proposed by their governments and societies. Whilst those that started a century before them had made many things clear, the oppressor had too got stronger, creating an interlinked, international, socio-economic system mirroring colonial rule but providing accessibility and inclusivity to whoever contributed to the production of capital. Regardless, the *system* was still in place.

In the second half of the twentieth century there were a number of non-mainstream social movements that convened to articulate through dialogue, research, and communication the lived experience of their surroundings and the systems that shape them.

Some of these social movements created the socio-architectural foundations that many of both mainstream and non-mainstream organise around today.

The Black Panther Party formed in 1966 in the United States, advocating for Black liberation but also emphasising political education and knowledge production. They published newspapers, organised community programs, and provided resources to educate and empower marginalised communities. The Black Panther Party's Breakfast for Children Program made a significant impact on both the communities it served and the broader society. It remains an important symbol of grassroots activism, community empowerment, and the fight against poverty and racial injustice.

Formed in 1974 in the United States, the Combahee River Collective was a Black feminist organisation that aimed to address the intersecting oppressions faced by Black women. They produced foundational texts, such as the "Combahee River Collective Statement," which highlighted the importance of centring the experiences and knowledge of marginalised communities. The Combahee River Collective is renowned for introducing and developing the concept of intersectionality. They emphasised that systems of oppression, such as racism, sexism, and classism, intersect and mutually reinforce each other, leading to unique experiences of discrimination and marginalisation.

This framework can be seen as being foundational to the work in the early 1990s by Professor Arline. T. Geronimus in her work on the 'weathering hypothesis'; that chronic exposure to social and economic disadvantage leads to accelerated decline in physical health outcomes and could partially explain racial disparities in a wide array of health conditions amongst racialised Black women. The Combahee River Collective's work highlighted the need for a comprehensive and inclusive approach to feminism that addresses the interconnected nature of these forms of oppression. Their influence on the knowledge production ecosystem can be seen through the integration of theory and practice, recognising the importance of both intellectual analysis and grassroots activism.

And, with the agreement of the majority of those people whom we are going to listen to, we will then engage in a struggle with everyone, with indigenous, workers, campesinos, students, teachers, employees, women, children, old ones, men, and with all of those of good heart and who want to struggle so that our Patria called Mexico does not end up being destroyed and sold...

- Sixth Declaration of the Selva Lacandona, Zapatista Army of National Liberation (Mexico)¹⁰

The Zapatista Movement in Chiapas, Mexico, has been recognised for its emphasis on knowledge production, community-led education, cultural autonomy, indigenous rights, land rights, and grassroots empowerment.

They advocate for the rights of indigenous peoples to self-determination, participatory democracy, and social justice. The movement seeks to challenge the neoliberal economic model and the exploitative practices that harm local communities and the environment.

The Zapatista Movement has faced brutal discrimination from the Mexican government on a few accounts however its possible greatest strength has been its ability to dismantle the neoliberal economic model by demonstrating self-sustainability through symbiotic relationships with Land. Since their uprising on 1st January 1994 in response to the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) they have established hundreds of self-managed autonomous municipalities, known as "caracoles" and "good government councils," where local communities make decisions collectively.

The caracoles and Good Government Councils aim to foster collective decision-making, community empowerment, and autonomy. They provide spaces for dialogue, consultation, and consensus-building among community members. Decision-making processes prioritise the voices and participation of women, indigenous people, and marginalised groups.



Zapatista women meeting in 1996. (Julian Stallabrass / CC BY 2.0)

This is our simple word which seeks to touch the hearts of humble and simple people like ourselves, but people who are also, like ourselves, dignified and rebel. This is our simple word for recounting what our path has been and where we are now, in order to explain how we see the world and our country, in order to say what we are thinking of doing and how we are thinking of doing it, and in order to invite other persons to walk with us in something very great which is called Mexico and something greater which is called the world. This is our simple word in order to inform all honest and noble hearts what it is we want in Mexico and the world. This is our simple word, because it is our idea to call on those who are like us and to join together with them, everywhere they are living and struggling.¹¹

The Zapatista's are not alone.

- The Kurdish Women's Movement, particularly active in regions like Rojava in Syria, promotes autonomous and community-led education initiatives. They emphasise women's empowerment, democratic confederalism, and knowledge production rooted in local contexts and indigenous traditions.



Kurdish Women, photographed in 2019

Image © Marwa Arsanios

Education and training plays a fundamental role in allowing the settlers and encamped families living in the Agrarian Reform areas to join forces and organize to transform their own conditions and make it possible for many others to have access to land and a more dignified life.

- Friends of the MST¹²

- The Landless Workers' Movement is a Brazilian social movement advocating for land reform and rural workers' rights. They prioritise education as a tool for empowerment and have established hundreds of schools and educational centres in their settlements, emphasising community-led education and promoting critical thinking.
- The Popular Education Movement, active throughout Latin America, is inspired by popular educator Paulo Freire's pedagogical approach. It emphasises participatory and liberatory education methods, empowering communities to critically analyse their reality and work towards social transformation.
- The Indigenous Environmental Network across the USA and Canada is a grassroots environmental justice organisation that works to protect indigenous lands, sovereignty, and cultural rights. They prioritise knowledge sharing within indigenous communities and engage in community-led education initiatives to strengthen indigenous voices and knowledge systems.
- The Landless Peasants' Movement in India is a movement of landless peasants fighting for land rights and agrarian reform. They have established "People's Schools" that focus on critical pedagogy, sustainable agriculture, and social justice, aiming to empower marginalised rural communities through education and organising.

While each of these movements has its unique characteristics, and are not blueprints for replication, they all share a commitment to knowledge production, community-led education, and the empowerment of marginalised communities. They recognise the power of education as a tool for social transformation, consciousness-raising, and building alternative systems that challenge existing power structures.

Knowledge production exists within cultural means too: art, literature, music, theatre, and film. These cultural productions can convey deep insights, provoke reflection, challenge dominant narratives, and contribute to knowledge creation. In his must-watch talk, the architect Michael Ford says “hip-hop is the post occupancy evaluation of modernism”¹³.



‘My work is defined by my love of Black music. The ingenuity exhibited throughout history by Black musicians is what drives me to rethink approaches to architecture and design,’ Ford explains. ‘I position hip hop culture as the post-occupancy evaluation of modernism. Meaning that hip hop offers an unsolicited, unfiltered, and raw critique of the places and spaces where the culture was born and where it lives today.’¹⁴

The Hip Hop Architecture Camp® positions Hip Hop culture as a catalyst to introduce underrepresented youth to architecture, urban planning, and design. During each Hip Hop Architecture Camp®, our participants learn how to write and record a track based on their observations, critiques, and visions for their communities.

Photo © Muundo Inc

Today, in the UK we can see cultural organisations such as MAIA exploring the intersection between knowledge production, creativity and cultural expression. For example, the Black Land + Spatial Justice Project amplifies and invests in the wisdoms, creations and possibilities from Black imaginations for land and spatial justice.

Embracing diverse knowledge systems, fostering inclusive and equitable knowledge production, and recognising the value of different cultural perspectives are essential for promoting both knowledge advancement and cultural progress in society.

The challenge we must now face is how to facilitate an infrastructure that supports a diversity of knowledge production rather than allowing it to be solely born from either academia or in struggle, under the auspices of resource (financial) constraints.

Infrastructure is about space and time and allowing people to move at their own paces. Resourcing radical knowledge infrastructure is about creating a sustainable and distributed ecosystem that allows for knowledge to occur at an organic pace, a post-capitalist infrastructure rooted in care, solidarity, love, reciprocity, and mutual symbiosis.



‘MAIA is an arts and social justice organisation, based in the West Midlands, UK and working worldwide. They believe that artists have the capacity, talent, imagination and boldness to transform the world. So we connect community-rooted artists with resources and design infrastructure to support the possibilities for change. Their mission is to redefine what it means to be an artist, challenge who gets to make their dreams real, and invest in the transformative possibilities of the Black imagination.’

Image © Copyright: Thom Bartley

INTERVIEW WITH KAVIAN KULASABANATHAN



Kavian is an Eela-Tamil physician focused on state violence as a determinant of poor health. From this starting point, he is interested in uses of the collective imagination, community-led and -owned models of care and place-making in journeying toward abolitionist, collectively liberated futures. He organises with Race & Health and the People's Health Movement.



We held space with Kavian to delve deep into his knowledge about the development of social movements and organising over a historical period of time.



WE ASKED KAVIAN FOUR QUESTIONS AND SELECTED SOME KEY QUOTES, THE FULL INTERVIEW CAN BE READ IN THE APPENDIX.

01 _____

How Kavian reflects on Sylvia Tamale's statement on the stranglehold that colonialism has on knowledge production?

02 _____

The tensions held within marginalised Peoples on forever documenting their trauma and tragedy through research and the equal needs to be producing literatures, practices, and ways of being reflecting a new existence.

03 _____

Is there a challenge of organising through social media and internet based facilities rather than being in space, in person, in communion with each other?

04 _____

Does Kavian have a vision for how knowledge produced within social movements continues?

TO ERADICATE A WAY OF KNOWING IS A MAMMOTH TASK THAT DEMANDS IMMENSE VIOLENCE...THE ERASURE PAVES THE WAY FOR THE IMPLANTING OF COLONIAL KNOWLEDGE (EMPHASISING THE SINGULAR HERE).

THIS DRAWS ON A LINEAGE OF PRACTITIONERS FROM FANON - WHO DESCRIBES THE 'COLONIAL ALIENATION' - TO NGUGI WA THIONG'O IN HIS TREATISE 'DECOLONISING THE MIND'.

IN IMAGINING, IN PREFIGURING A PARADIGM WITHIN WHICH SOCIAL MOVEMENT KNOWLEDGE IS PRODUCED NOT IN RESISTANCE TO A ZEITGEIST, TO ME THAT MEANS A REJECTION OF STANDARDISATION, OF FIXITY, OF STABILITY, OF EDGES REMAINING AT THE EDGE, AND INSTEAD MEANS AN EMBRACE OF THE EVER-IN-MOTION, OF THE SURROUNDS, OF THE NOT-QUITE-GRASPABLE.

MAYBE THE SECOND THING I WANTED TO BRING IN IS THE SPATIO-TEMPORAL DEPTH OF EXPERIMENTATION AND COUNTER-HEGEMONIC PRAXIS AROUND KNOWLEDGE PRODUCTION - GROUNDED IN MOVEMENT AND COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE - THAT IS HAPPENING RIGHT NOW, AND WANTING TO SUPPORT THESE. I GUESS EXAMPLES HERE IN THE UK THAT SPRING TO MIND ARE THE FREE BLACK UNIVERSITY, HEADMASTER ANDRE ANDERSON AT FREEDOM AND BALANCE, AND THE ANTIUNIVERSITY MOVEMENT THAT GOES BACK TO THE 1960S IN THE UK.

INTERVIEW

AFRO-FUTURIST SUN RA TALKS ABOUT HOW BLACKNESS 'HAS ALWAYS EXISTED ON THE OTHER SIDE OF TIME'. I LOVE HOW TAO LEIGH GOFFE SPEAKS TO THE 'NOT-YET-STANDARDIZED', BUILDING ON GLISSANT'S WRITING ON CREOLE AS 'NOT-YET-STANDARDIZED LANGUAGE'. SHE CASTS BLACK TIME AS NOT-YET-STANDARDIZED TIME, A "PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUE OF STANDARDIZATION AS AN IMPERIAL IMPULSE" THAT "ACCUMULAT[ES] ON THE OTHER SIDE OF HISTORY AND THE EDGES OF THE PLANTATION AS A RESOURCE FOR BLACK FUTURES".

WWW.HAWAIIAN

THERE IS SUCH A DESPERATE NEED FOR PHYSICAL COMMUNITY SPACES THAT ARE ACCESSIBLE IN THE BROADEST SENSE OF THE WORD, THAT HAVE ACCESS TO NOURISHMENT – PARTICULARLY DELICIOUS AND SPECIFICALLY LOVINGLY PREPARED, SEASONED FOOD – AND ARE SPACES OF JOY, OF CREATION, OF PROPOSITION, OF MUSIC, OF DANCE! CRITICALLY, WE MUST CREATE THE CONDITIONS FOR THESE SPACES TO BE OWNED BY THE COMMUNITIES THEY SERVE AND WITHIN WHICH THEY ARE SITED.

KAWAUNATHAN

THE ARCHIVE IS POWERFUL, AND TO CREATE THE MATERIAL INFRASTRUCTURE FOR COMMUNITIES TO HONOUR HISTORIES OF RESISTANCE IS ESSENTIAL. THE ARCHIVE IS ITSELF A SITE OF RESISTANCE IN MANY CONTEXTS...

THE OTHER PART OF THIS IS A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE ON WHAT ISN'T IN THE ARCHIVE – TO UNDERSTAND THE ARCHIVE AS UNSTABLE.

IF I THINK ABOUT MY OWN PEOPLES OF ILANKAI/TAMIL EELAM, OURS IS A STORY OF DISPOSSESSION, OF SETTLER COLONIALISM, OF ETHNIC CLEANSING AND ARMED RESISTANCE TO THAT WHICH TRIED TO BUILD A DIFFERENT WORLD. HOW ARE THESE STORIES KEPT ALIVE? WHERE MIGHT WE COLLECTIVELY STEWARD THESE MEMORIES?

THE FIRST IS THE REJECTION OF STANDARDISATION, AND MORE IMPORTANTLY OF CERTIFICATION (EXAMS, ASSESSMENTS FOR THE CONFERRING OF TITLES, DEGREES, PIECES OF PAPER) – WHICH ACTS SIMPLY AS A PROXY FOR ONE'S UTILITY TO CAPITAL. THE SECOND IS TO ENABLE PRACTICES AND KNOWLEDGE ITSELF THAT IS THEN COMMON-ED – REJECTING THE COLONIAL NOTION OF 'TERRA NULLIUS' AS SOMETHING TO BE CLAIMED OR ENCLOSED.

I RECOGNISE THAT TO SHARE SUCH PHYSICAL SPACE CAN POTENTIATE A QUICKER AND CLEARER TRANSMISSION OF AND CO-IMMERSION IN KNOWLEDGES – WHETHER FELT, THOUGHT OR SENSED.