

# Counterstorytelling as Epistemic Justice: Decolonial Community-based Praxis from the Global South

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## Highlights

- Counterstorytelling analyzes how dominant stories maintain specific arrangements of power.
- Counterstorytelling is a method of uplifting stories of people subjected to epistemic violence.
- Counterstorytelling is a form of decolonial praxis that centers knowledges generated in struggle.
- Decolonial counterstorytelling requires disrupting conventional modes of writing and representation.

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**Abstract** In this paper, we present community-anchored counterstorytelling as a form of epistemic justice. We—the Miya Community Research Collective—engage in counterstorytelling as a means of resisting and disrupting dehumanization of Miya communities in Northeast India. Miya communities have a long history of dispossession and struggle – from forced displacement by British colonial rulers in the early 19th century to the present where they face imminent threats of statelessness. Against this backdrop, we theorize “in the flesh” to interrogate knowledges and representations systematically deployed to dispossess Miya people. Simultaneously, we uplift stories and endeavors that (re)humanize Miya people, creating/claiming cultural, knowledge, and political spaces that center peoples’ struggles and resistance. Across these stories, we offer counterstorytelling as a powerful mode of recentring knowledges from the margins—a decolonial alternative to neoliberal epistemes that maintain institutions/universities as centers of knowledge production.

**Keywords** Counterstorytelling · Decoloniality · Epistemic justice · Epistemic violence · Global South · Miya community

## Introduction

The very act of writing then, conjuring/ coming to ‘see’, what has yet to be recorded in history is to bring into consciousness what only the body knows to be true. The body—that site which uses the intuitive, the unspoken, the viscera of our being—this is the revolutionary promise of “theory in the flesh:” for it is both the *expression* of evolving political consciousness and the *creator* of consciousness, itself. Seldom recorded and hardly honored, our theory of *incarnate* provides the most reliable roadmap to liberation. - Cherríe Moraga (2015, p. xxiv).

In the Northeast Indian state of Assam, close to two million people were recently disenfranchised<sup>1</sup> through an intricate and interconnected system of state policies and procedures. Framed as measures to distinguish “foreigners” from so-called “genuine Indian citizens,” the major policies include the National Register of Citizens (a list established in 1951 to detect and deport “foreigners” and “illegal migrants”), the categorization of D-voters or “doubtful” voters, and the deployment of Border Police to identify and detain “suspected foreigners” (Azad, 2018a; Raj & Gettleman, 2019). The National Register of Citizens is itself a colonial derivate with

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we use the term disenfranchisement to broadly convey the denial of or limited access to civil and political rights and opportunities. This includes but is not limited to voting rights and political representation.

roots in a British imperial act—the Foreigners Act of 1946, which legitimized discourses of “detecting, deleting, and deporting” so-called foreigners (deemed so by arbitrarily placed borders) as well as actions to accomplish the same. The vast majority of those targeted by this state-sponsored persecution are Miya communities who face imminent threats of detention and statelessness (Azad & Parveez, 2021; Samuel, 2019). Miya communities are descendants of Muslim peasants from undivided British-occupied Bengal who were brought into Assam as agricultural workers during the early 19<sup>th</sup> century—one of the many instances of colonial population transfers or forced migration during British colonial rule in India (<https://cjp.org.in/assam/#history>; see Murshid, 2016). Labeled as “Bengal-origin Muslim communities<sup>2</sup>” in public discourse, Miya communities have borne the legacy of being *the Other* for more than a century; in fact, the term *Miya* itself is deployed as a racialized slur or slight (Agarwala, 2019; Azad, 2018b, 2020). Therefore, Miya identity has always been a site of struggle. While the specific discourses and policies by which they are othered shift from time to time, the underlying dehumanization and violence against Miya communities have been unremitting. In the face of protracted persecution, Miya community workers are engaged in active struggle as they resist different forces that seek to erase their identities and bodies. Miya communities are increasingly reclaiming their Miya identities while rejecting the state-sponsored category of “Bengal-origin Muslims,” a monolithic category that not only flattens the complexities of their histories and struggles but also is weaponized against them in questions of citizenship and belonging. Against this backdrop, we—the Miya Community Research Collective (MCRC)—seek to build an assemblage that honors Miya peoples’ stories and brings those into the public arena to be acknowledged and witnessed (Oliver, 2001). Specifically, in this paper, we engage in counterstorytelling as a form of epistemic justice.

We begin the paper with a brief discussion of epistemic justice and how counterstorytelling can facilitate epistemic justice. Outlining the specific meanings, methods, and implications of counterstorytelling for Miya communities, we discuss counterstorytelling as a decolonial alternative to neoliberal epistemes that maintain institutions/universities as centers of knowledge production. Next, we engage in Miya community-centered counterstorytelling that wrestle with questions of migration, citizenship, belonging, and knowledge production. We trouble analytical categories, public discourse, and classification schemes used to dehumanize Miya people. By centering “theory in the flesh” (Moraga, 2015) or lived

theory, we not only interrupt discourses of cultural racism that consign Miya communities as the Other, but also explore possibilities for radical inclusion. We conclude with the implications of community-centered counterstorytelling as a powerful form of decolonial praxis that recenters knowledges from the margins. Across these endeavors, we decenter disciplines and institutions and center those at the frontlines of struggles for justice; in fact, we actively undiscipline ourselves as we consider how, where, and with whom we stand in relation to justice (Atallah & Dutta, 2021). We also heed decolonial scholar Lewis Gordon who cautions us against disciplinary decadence—“the phenomenon of turning away from *living thought*, which engages reality and recognises its own limitations, to a deontologised or absolute conception of disciplinary life. The discipline becomes, in solipsistic fashion, the world” (Gordon, 2014, p. 86; emphasis added). In this light, we turn away from discipline-centered debates and offer collectively generated counterstories as “living thought”—perforating canons and building different repositories of knowledges beyond colonial modalities.

## Counterstorytelling, Epistemic Justice, and Decolonial Resistance

### Epistemic Violence and Epistemic Justice

We understand epistemic justice as imbrications and entanglements of structures, affect, power, and praxis that transform the parameters of who we are as knowers along with the values and material implications of the knowledges we produce (Bell, 2018; Canham, 2018; Connell, 2014; Pérez, 1999). Epistemic justice is geared toward interrupting and healing from the harms caused by epistemic violence, in the ways violent structures/systems (e.g., colonial, racialized, imperialist, neoliberal, and heteropatriarchal) categorize people in their capacity and credibility as knowers (Byskov, 2020; Connell, 2014; Fricker, 2013). As Galván-Álvarez (2010, p. 10) notes:

Epistemic violence, that is, violence exerted against or through knowledge, is probably one of the key elements in any process of domination. It is not only through the construction of exploitative economic links or the control of the politico-military apparatuses that domination is accomplished, but also and, most importantly through the construction of epistemic frameworks that legitimise and enshrine those practices of domination.

Epistemic violence constitutes a mechanism for oppression as well as a specific kind of harm that results from such oppression (Dotson, 2011). To be wronged in one’s capacity as a knower violates an essential value and capacity of what it means to be human (Byskov, 2020; Fricker, 2007, p.1). We see this enacted in the

<sup>2</sup> The formerly used term was “East Bengal origin Muslims,” which was discontinued given that Miya communities were displaced and resettled in the present state of Assam, Northeast India long before the partition of Bengal into East Bengal (which became East Pakistan and then now Bangladesh) and West Bengal (a state within the territorial borders of India).

Northeast Indian state of Assam through a willful forgetting and determined unwillingness to name the historical contingencies of colonialism, violent nation-making, contested borders, and internal displacements that have shaped the politics of citizenship and belonging. These erasures have morphed into dominant or majoritarian narratives that characterize Miya people as the Other, as “illegal,” imputing them with criminal and subhuman qualities. Such narratives are widely accepted as the “truth.” They exist in a mutually constitutive relationship with blatantly persecutory public policies (such as the National Register of Citizens) and manifested as expressed hatred, collective indifference, and pernicious silence in wider civil society.

Furthermore, Miya people have limited access to dominant institutionalized spaces of knowledge production that privilege the Global North. Occupying marginal locations in the Global South, they are positioned as objects and consumers rather than producers of knowledge (Appadurai, 2006). The academy with its neoliberal capitalist structure leaves little room for experientially produced knowledge or knowledges grounded in struggles, especially those that do not lend themselves to linear time frames, quantification, and profiteering that are cornerstones of neoliberal structures of research. Colonial and neoliberal power also protect and reinforce the deemed superiority of Western historiography and Western ways of knowing. For example, the North-South and research-practice divide was starkly pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic as Miya frontline workers—community workers, teachers, poets, and researchers—responded to the acute crisis faced by their people, the vast majority of whom are migrant workers, daily wage earners, and landless tenant farmers. As they engaged in a variety of critical and urgent actions<sup>3</sup> on the ground (e.g., consciousness raising, disaster relief, legal, economic, psychosocial support, and advocacy), they were unable to respond to burgeoning calls for papers and proposals on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic around the world. It is ironic that the critical, situated knowledges generated among and by those at frontlines remain excluded from the very projects

<sup>3</sup> For example, Miya community workers found themselves having to figure out innovative ways of responding to children’s education during the pandemic and lockdown. Families who live in the riverine islands deal with multiple vulnerabilities such as poverty, floods, and citizenship crisis. They are barely able to manage their children’s educational expenses, let alone afford a smart phone for online classes. In response, Miya community workers created an education program across 10 villages—with each volunteer/community worker attending to small groups of 5–6 children maintaining public health protocols. In addition to covering materials in the school curriculum, community workers also focus on gender justice, constitutional awareness, and disaster preparedness in these sessions. For more examples, please see Ango Khabar (Our News), a community digital storytelling and news platform created by Miya community workers: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCdVidWb6n9VqUD-dqx4LZtA>

whose purported goal is to understand and document the “global” impacts of the pandemic. This is not an isolated phenomenon, but symptomatic of the colonality and imperialist structure of academic knowledge production that continue to uphold grossly unequal epistemic structures.

In view of this, we approach epistemic justice as a set of (evolving) guiding principles, values, practices, and ethics of care that not only contest dominant legitimizing frameworks but also strive to create a different horizon or landscape of understanding beyond colonial modalities. Epistemic justice is inextricably intertwined with the work of liberation, decoloniality, and decolonization in their shared commitments to the following: turning the gaze on to power; rejecting hierarchies of knowledge, methods, and evidence; excavating and naming silences; exposing logic and discourses that are weaponized against oppressed and colonized people; (re)claiming the power to narrate one’s stories; centering of experiences and analyses of subaltern peoples as important forms of knowledge; reclamation and recovery of historical memory; contesting disciplinarity and decentering disciplinary knowledge; revitalizing language, arts, and cultural practices (Anzaldúa, 2002; Fanon, 2004; Kerketta, 2018; Khatun, 2018; Moraga, 2015; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2010; Smith, 2012; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014; Watkins & Shulman, 2008). Epistemic justice is, above all, an orientation toward desire, “longing, about a present that is enriched both by the past and the future; it is integral to our humanness. It is not only the painful elements of social and psychic realities, but also the textured acumen and hope” (Tuck, 2010, p. 644). As such, it is important to note that the academy (institutions, people, power relationships) represents one of many sites of struggle for epistemic justice.

### Counterstorytelling and Epistemic Justice

Counterstorytelling is a method of telling the stories of people whose experiences are erased from or dehumanized by dominant stories and modes of storytelling; in other words, uplifting the stories of people who have been subjected to epistemic violence. Informed by critical race theory, counterstorytelling is an approach that seeks to reveal, analyze, and challenge majoritarian stories and how they maintain particular configurations of oppression and privilege (Delgado, 1989; Ikemoto, 1997; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counterstorytelling builds on legacies of indigenous struggles that have always centered conversations, storytelling, and oral histories as integral to projects of decolonization (Kovach, 2010; Smith, 2012). Counterstorytelling challenges perceived hegemonic wisdom by providing a context to understand and transform established *truths* or legitimizing narratives and associated frameworks for meaning making (Miles, 2019; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). As a process then, counterstorytelling

represents a critical decolonial imperative—to legitimize knowledges and modes of knowledge production that do not lend themselves to strict divisions between disciplines and between categories such as researcher and community or research and practice. Importantly, counterstories are not limited to direct responses to dominant/majoritarian stories as doing so unwittingly continues to center dominant discourses. Rather, counterstorytelling is as much about articulating experiences and traditions of resistance and survivance (Ikemoto, 1997; Vizenor, 2008).

Counterstorytelling occupies a central place in Miya community struggles for justice, which is denied access to the public domain—both material and symbolic—as a space where dissent and protest are often mobilized. Therefore, counterstorytelling is a crucial point of resistance for Miya people. We use counterstorytelling to “center the margins”—narrating experiences, articulating critical analyses, and raising questions that offer powerful alternatives to dehumanizing narratives generally legitimized in the academy and wider society. We elaborate upon this in the ensuing section that focuses on Miya community-centered counterstorytelling. We discuss our counterstorytelling method followed by three threads of community-anchored counterstorytelling, which will illustrate our endeavors to create knowledges that restore Miya people’s humanity.

## Miya Community-Centered Counterstorytelling

### Writing as a Collective

There is no singular narrative of who we are (as co-authors) in relation to this work. As racialized people rooted in the Global South, we tend to be called upon to render our identities, locations, and experiences intelligible to global North audiences<sup>4</sup>. These declarative statements have become normalized as part of validation strategies or truth claims in qualitative research—processes that purportedly assess the “authenticity” of our identities and of our representations (Pillow, 2003). In the legacies of decolonial and transnational feminisms, we move away from preoccupations with whether/how to represent people better; instead, we hold ourselves accountable to Miya people’s collective struggles for self-representation and self-determination (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2010; Viswesvaran, 1994). We are bound by our

<sup>4</sup> Located as we are in Northeast India, at the margins of the nation state—materially, symbolically, and imaginatively—we also encounter similar challenges around intelligibility vis-à-vis hegemonic bodies/structures within the Global South including the Indian state. That discussion is beyond the scope of the current paper. Please see the following for a closer examination of those questions: Bora (2010); Dutta (2017); Kikon (2015).

shared and divergent histories, by our experiences of being the Other in places that are home. For Abdul Kalam and Shalim, these experiences are embodied in intergenerational legacies of being persecuted and dehumanized as Miya people; for Urmitapa, this was metabolized in the pernicious label of “Bangal” (Azad, 2018a, 2020; Dutta, 2015, 2020; Hussain, 2018). From our varied rooted places and relationships to power, our embodied experiences are configured by our contentious ethnocultural identities that are systematically reduced to slurs and swear words. We are bound in our shared commitments to and shared hopes for different iterations of belonging and justice that are not predicated upon dehumanizing particular groups. Importantly, we do not use the term “shared” to imply sameness of identity, history, or experience. Rather, we understand *shared* as the dynamic realm of navigating meanings and politics, contending with historical and structural complexities that have differential impacts on us based on our proximities to hegemonic power. In doing so, we also seek to transgress colonially and disciplinarily configured binaries such as researcher-researched, university-community, and research-practice.

While we do not claim to speak on behalf of the entire Miya community, we do write as part of a collective committed to Miya people’s struggles to reclaim their humanity. It is also important to note that we are unable to name all the rightful co-authors/storytellers of this paper owing to potential threats to their personal safety and livelihoods. These decisions were made collectively, mediated by critical considerations of people’s well-being and ramifications for movement-building—a marked departure from the kinds of risk-benefit analysis that inform institutionalized ethics. Thus, we (the three named co-authors) approach this task as designated storytellers entrusted with uplifting Miya community stories and struggles on this particular academic platform. Although radical relational accountabilities in the forms of mutuality, care, and solidarity are central to our commitments to lived struggle, we do not believe that our stories/processes are either inherently knowable or categorically open to scrutiny. This refusal is a generative—not a reactive—stance that is rooted in our desire to explore decolonial possibilities that honor complex personhoods, that is, “conferring the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people’s lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning” (Gordon, 2008, p. 5; see Tuck & Yang, 2014). The stories of who we are in relation to each other are inscrutable in their entirety, and we are still living and writing these stories.

### Articulating Our Method of Counterstorytelling

The method or process of counterstorytelling involves centering and attending to situated knowledges that are anchored in lived experiences. As such, the process of

creating and constructing counterstories remain inextricably intertwined with the counterstories being produced. We have created spaces (via the Miya Community Research Collective) for active storytelling, reflections, and reflexive analyses to enhance shared understandings of complicated questions of citizenship, belonging, and justice as those impact Miya people. It is in these spaces that we have cultivated a lens of critical bifocality as we unmask the insidious linkages between policies, institutional arrangements, hegemonic culture, and people's everyday lives (Weis & Fine, 2012). We take a multimodal and multipronged approach to counterstorytelling that span research and writing for academic outlets, creative arts (resistance poetry, songs, performances), elevating our stories in popular media, popular education, and public conversations/dialogues.

Language justice is an important cornerstone of our counterstorytelling approach. Rooted in histories of resistance by people whose voices and cultures have been erased, language justice is about building and sustaining spaces for multilingual and multimodal expression (Arguelles, Williams, & Hemley-Bronstein, 2012). Valuing language justice means attending to the social and political dimensions of both language and language access, while also working to dismantle historical patterns of disenfranchisement and oppression. Importantly, language justice is not simply about providing people with more access to the status quo (e.g., English) but also about transforming institutions and expanding spaces for participation (Arguelles, Williams, & Hemley-Bronstein, 2012). Toward this end, we have made a concerted shift in our collective process to decenter both English and the written word as the basis of or criteria for knowledge production. Instead, we are working to create and nurture linguistically fluid and multimodal spaces for dialogue based on lived experiences, deep and sustained listening, mutual accompaniment, witnessing, and relating to each other's legacies of struggles and embodied knowledges. Through an iterative and non-linear process, we document these dialogical processes, transcribe/translate them, co-read, and co-analyze them, challenge, contend, rethink, and build upon them as praxis (cycles of knowledge, reflection, and action).

#### Miya Community Counterstorytelling Project: Emerging Threads

From the iterative processes of collaboration, contention, and critical dialogue outlined above, we present three community-anchored counterstorytelling threads. First, we discuss how the larger project of Miya community counterstorytelling represents an effort to claim the “permission to narrate”—a transformation of the terms of discursive

productions (Said, 1984). Second, we show how community counterstorytelling troubles coloniality of categories/categorization that regulate belonging while also offering glimpses of radical inclusion. Third, we consider how the Miya Community Research Collective is a site and enactment of radical hope for Miya people, for being and knowing in ways that center community and desire. Importantly, the counterstorytelling projects are not discrete entities, but are interconnected narratives, which collectively move us closer to the possibility of creating an alternative archive or repository of knowledge that restore, reclaim, and rehumanize Miya people's histories and identities.

#### *Miya Counterstorytelling as Claiming the “Permission to Narrate”*

For Miya community workers and activists, an important way in which epistemic injustice operates is through denial of access to sociocultural, political, and historical discourse creation. As discussed earlier, epistemic injustice is inextricably intertwined with larger structural and socioeconomic injustices. For example, epistemic (dis)advantage plays a large role in determining who gets a say in how particular socioeconomic concerns are defined and how those are addressed (Byskov, 2020; Escobar, 2007; Santos, 2006). Thus, denial of access to discourse creation limits structural opportunities for Miya people to raise their concerns in public discourse. Furthermore, this lack of access is also manifested in how discourses centering Miya voices—when they do find a venue—are received (see AxomSon, 2020 for an example of how Miya people's struggles are distorted and vilified). This has become especially pronounced in recent years with mounting Miya collective resistance against the legal, social, and humanitarian crisis wrought by ongoing citizenship exercises.

Against this backdrop, epistemic violence is evident in the deafening silence of local civil society in the face of the extreme distress and dispossession of Miya communities. Miya community workers, researchers, writers, and artists are intimately acquainted with the violence inflicted through epistemic injustice. At times, our (Abdul Kalam and Shalim) intimately lived and witnessed accounts of the injustice and suffering in our own communities are labeled as exaggerated, misguided, and divisive (e.g., see Gohain, 2018, 2019b). At other times, impossible conditions are laid down as prerequisites for any solidarity or support. An example is the continued use of the problematic distinction between “genuine citizens” and so-called “immigrants/foreigners,” with Miya community workers asked to aid the state in “apprehending foreigners.” Furthermore, Miya people's efforts to seek/create alternative spaces to articulate distress and desire (e.g., through Miya

poetry, a genre of resistance poetry) are met with intense backlash. For example, the summer of 2019 saw several Miya community workers and poets (including Abdul Kalam and Shalim) subjected to pervasive attacks in the form of op-eds by progressive public intellectuals (e.g., Gohain, 2019a, 2019b), online hate campaigns, and criminalization on account of their poetry (Barooah Pisharoty, 2019; Singh, 2019). The bases of the attacks varied from allegations of historical inaccuracies, disturbing of communal harmony, falsely claiming victimhood, linguistic issues (viz., opposition to the reclamation of Miya dialects), and acting under external influence (e.g., alleged ties to Islamic fundamentalist groups in the Middle East—a common Islamophobic narrative in India). When Miya activist and human rights researcher Abdul Kalam Azad (co-author) sought to respond to such vilification, he was denied any space in local or regional media, thus emphasizing Miya people's exclusions from the public domain. Abdul Kalam was eventually able to publish this piece<sup>5</sup>, entitled "Write... I am a Miya," in a national (but not regional) newspaper.

These are to name just a few of the conditions constituting the landscape of unjust communicative structures that severely constrain the terms of any dialogue for Miya people. Shalim elaborates upon the limits and (im)possibilities of dialogue in the face of gross epistemic injustice:

The dominant narratives—they are all encompassing. These narratives are very heavily weighted on one side. What I mean is, if we enter into conversation with such [dominant] groups, we have to concede to some of the myths. Only then, a conversation is possible. Overall, the impression they [majority groups or groups with hegemonic power] are trying to create is this—whatever we say, it is either highly exaggerated or pure lies. *How do we enter a conversation from that? It is almost impossible!* There is no mutual respect. The dominant narrative is heavily tilted because for the longest time, they have been the creators of discourse.

This is an instance of what Fricker (2013) calls testimonial injustice, a form of epistemic injustice whereby Miya writers and researchers' credibility as knowers/speakers is continually questioned on account of the long history of ethnocultural and religious prejudice and discrimination. Testimonial injustice goes on to shape what is included in the collective pool of knowledge, namely erasures or distortions of Miya people's histories and experiences, which in turn reinforce Miya people's dehumanization and renders their experience unintelligible.

Thus, for Miya community workers, writers, and activists, counterstorytelling involves unearthing and laying bare the ways in which dominant narratives are woven to deny them any meaning-making frameworks outside of the logic of assimilation and othering. In Miya people's resistance, we begin to glimpse an alternative that questions or challenges not only the state but also the liberal civil society actors that remain complicit in the maintenance of discourses that deny Miya people humanity and self-determination. Decades ago, Edward Said (1984) had noted that "Facts do not at all speak for themselves, but require a socially acceptable narrative to absorb, sustain and circulate them." For Miya community workers then, counterstorytelling is about claiming the "permission to narrate," whereby they not only name the epistemic violence inherent in dominant stories or "socially acceptable narratives" but also alter the terms of the conversation along with the very ground in which it takes space. In these ways, counterstorytelling represents possibilities for un-erasing Miya existence by creating/reclaiming narratives systematically denied dignity and legitimacy. In the next thread, we present counterstorytelling strategies that Miya people are leveraging to challenge the coloniality of identity categories and classifications while offering possibilities for radical inclusion.

#### *Counterstorytelling Against Discursive Constructions of the Other: Toward Radical Inclusion*

Questions of belonging are complex in any heterogeneous context, but they are especially fraught in South Asia where arguably, the British colonial administration engaged in one of the most extensive processes of codifying, reifying, and classifying people; processes that were antithetical to fluid and shifting categories integral to accommodating diverse local circumstances and needs (Chatterjee, 2013; Kabeer, 2005). The hegemony of ethnic identity politics in Northeast India is rooted in colonial policies and subsequently reinforced by the postcolonial Indian state through categories such as "tribal," "non-tribal," "tea tribes," "hills tribe," "plains tribe," "indigenous," "refugee," and "migrant" (Barbora, 2008; Dutta, in press). These colonially configured categories and their discursive usage are deeply implicated in both cultural and direct violence against Miya communities in the Northeast Indian state of Assam. Presently, the discursive construction of "migrant" versus "indigenous" people is one of the core categorizations implicated in the persecution of Miya people.

There is a contradictory process at play in such discursive constructions. On the one hand, there exists a selective amnesia surrounding the historical contingencies of British colonization and forced displacement (colonial

<sup>5</sup> See <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/assam-miya-poetry-culture-nrc-5895176/>

population transfer) of Miya people, which predates present nation states and border configurations/demarcations (e.g., India – Bangladesh). Dominant discourses characterizing Miya people as migrants and population “influx” from bordering Bangladesh continue to designate Miya people as the Other. On the other hand, the persistence of the qualifier “Bengal-origin”<sup>6</sup> Muslims (pitted against “indigenous” Muslims) speaks to the seemingly intractable and deterministic nature of historical events. Shalim names this location of alterity and otherness being “trapped by the border,” drawing attention to the limits of transborder linkages imposed by violent histories of nation making. Furthermore, the frame of reference for discursive constructions of indigeneity is a shifting one. At times, the referent is the state of Assam (demarcated by territorial boundaries) that excludes Adivasis (indigenous peoples) from East and Central India brought in as indentured workers in tea estates in Assam by the British colonial administration. At other times, indigeneity is adjudicated using colonial and statist markers such as “cut off dates” based on partitions/nation making in South Asia. These ambiguous, colonially inflected discourses of indigeneity are increasingly conflated with legal and cultural citizenship, such that the failure to meet the commonly used test of time argument to establish indigeneity in Assam could result in a loss of citizenship—constitutional guarantees notwithstanding.

Miya people are relegated to positions of alterity through dominant historical narratives, regional policies, and popular discourse. Therefore, a critical role of Miya counterstorytelling is to disrupt and explore alternatives to hegemonic accounts of place that erase or belie Miya communities’ history and rootedness in Assam. As agricultural workers, Miya communities have deep ties to the land, to the rivers, to forests, to livestock, to crops—but primarily as custodians rather than owners of land. This relationship is both material and symbolic given that Miya people are tenant farmers who live on and till the land in riverine islands that are highly prone to flood and erosion. These rooted narratives and schemas of meaning-making are obliterated by reductionist discourses that not only locate Miya people as the Other in the indigenous/migrant binary but also construe their relationship to land/place as exploitative one. Miya community-centered counterstorytelling uses different modalities—oral histories, Miya resistance poetry, and digital storytelling through community-based media platforms—to elevate stories of deeply embodied, loving, and nurturing relationships to the land; stories that demonstrate how relationships to land and

place cannot be encapsulated in the absoluteness or linearity of time and narrative. These sentiments are exemplified in the following excerpt from the poem entitled, *I Beg to State That* penned by Miya poet Khabir Ahmed (translated into English by Shalim M. Hussain):

Besides, you haven't yet decided what to call me -  
Am I Miyah, Asomiya or Neo-Asomiya?  
And yet you talk of the river  
The river is Assam's mother, you say  
You talk of trees  
Assam is the land of blue hills, you say  
My spine is tough, steadfast as the trees  
The shade of the trees my address...  
You talk of farmers, workers  
Assam is the land of rice and labour, you say  
I bow before paddy, I bow before sweat  
For I am a farmer's boy...  
I beg to state that I am a  
Settler, a dirty Miyah  
Whatever be the case, my name  
Is Khabir Ahmed or Mijanur Miyah

These multimodal and multisensory approaches are central to counterstorytelling that disrupt reified binaries such as migrant versus indigenous. Oral histories gathered from Miya communities, for example, present complex stories of displacement, struggles, rootedness, and radical hope as people contend with the vicissitudes of citizenship and ecological crises<sup>7</sup>. Arts-based resistance expressed through Miya poetry is yet another important mode of counterstorytelling that uphold possibilities for radical inclusion. In particular, resistance poetry honors desire, that is “not only about painful elements of psychic and social realities, but also the textured acumen and hope” (Tuck, 2010, p. 644). We see these echoes, for example, in the poetry of Hafiz Ahmed (Karwan-e-Mohabbat, 2019).

What we did not have  
Lines after lines of coconut and betel nut trees  
I told my only son  
Uproot and plant them on the embankment  
Even if we cannot enjoy their fruits,  
Hundreds will

The expression of desire is paramount for Miya poets who are attacked not only for recovering historical

<sup>6</sup> As mentioned earlier in the paper, the label “Bengal-origin” refers to Miya people’s location in undivided Bengal prior to colonially induced displacement.

<sup>7</sup> See: Climate Change and Clouds over Citizenship (July 7, 2020) <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=618024662152102> and Oral History Project: Featuring Kurban Ali Choudhury (February 19, 2021). <https://www.facebook.com/106622544180177/videos/478099476544020>

memory but also for the powerful radically inclusive imaginaries and relationalities invoked through poetry. As Miya poet Siraj Khan writes in *My Son has Learnt to Cuss like the City* (translated from Char Chapori dialect into English by Shalim M. Hussain):

Just as the tongues of beasts and birds  
 Have no books, my language has no school  
 I draw a tune from my mother's mouth  
 And sing Bhatiyali. I match rhythm with rhythm  
 Pain with pain  
 Clasp the sounds of the land close to my heart  
 And speak the whispers of the sand  
 The language of earth is the same everywhere

Through these multimodal counterstories, we, as Miya people, create, maintain, and/or shift narratives about the places in which we are rooted even if we do not belong, how people and place are mutually constitutive. We interrogate ethical/political values and power grids that determine the politics of belonging. We refuse the seeming intractability of binary categories (e.g., migrant/outsider vs. indigenous/authentic) and uplift affective histories, attachments, and everyday practices). In such retelling and rewriting of place as affective and practiced, we move toward modes of place and belonging in radically open and non-essentialized ways. Belonging, then becomes an affect and ethic rather than a secure ontological thing rooted in notions of the *authentic* or *original* inhabitant that are weaponized against Miya people. In doing so, we endeavor to establish radically inclusive frames of belonging that do not rely on competitive frames/discourses of belonging. In the next thread, we elucidate how community-anchored research (Miya Community Research Collective) is emerging as a powerful counterstorytelling approach that centers radical hope and desire.

#### *Miya Community Research Collective as Radical Hope and Desire*

We created the Miya Community Research Collective (MCRC) as a way to advance epistemic justice—situating Miya people as knowers and knowledge producers, building an assemblage that honors Miya peoples' stories and brings those into the public arena to be acknowledged and witnessed ([www.MiyaCommunityResearchCollective.org](http://www.MiyaCommunityResearchCollective.org)). We understand the MCRC's work as a (re)humanizing project—counterstorytelling against knowledges and representations that dehumanize and dispossess Miya people. We envision the MCRC's work as mutually constitutive processes of research, capacity-building, and resistance. At the heart of our knowledge production ethos is that research must not only have a direct bearing on people's

lives but must also have the potential to be transformative (Watkins & Shulman, 2008). Simultaneously, we recognize that not everything has to be deemed as research to render it legitimate, visible, or even valuable (Tuck & Yang, 2014). Thus, our community-anchored research is but one arena—albeit an important one—of our collective work. Centering radical relationality and communal knowing, we seek to create/reclaim cultural, knowledge, and political spaces that center Miya peoples' struggles and resistance. The MCRC is rooted in a desire-based framework that is predicated on honoring and upholding the complexities, contradictions, and self-determination of lived lives (Tuck, 2009). This move toward desire is threefold. First, we move away from discursive and material practices that dehumanize Miya people (including but not limited to some of the ways described earlier in this paper). Second, we move to depathologize the struggles of Miya people so that they are seen as more than disenfranchised and dispossessed. And third, we move to center MCRC's work in wisdom, hope, and emergent resistance. These moves are elucidated in the subsequent paragraphs as we share some important dimensions of our work.

Our community-anchored participatory and action research is committed to generating and uplifting knowledges that are grounded in people's everyday experiences and, which emerge in struggles against injustice. For example, the *Constitutional Rights Awareness Project* was mobilized at the peak of updating the National Register of Citizens (NRC; see introduction), a process that placed a huge evidentiary burden on Miya communities, the vast majority of whom are not functionally literate. As we—Miya community workers—assisted our people as they filled out paperwork, gathered documents, filed petitions, and attended hearing, we began to gather narratives and identify patterns of how people were being excluded from the NRC. We systematically documented and analyzed those processes and developed critical actions from the findings. One local level action was the Samvidhan Yatra (Constitutional Journey), a consciousness raising campaign around constitutional rights<sup>8</sup> and the ways in which the NRC violated those. At an international level, we organized teach-ins to foster critical awareness among diaspora populations. Yet another project is the *Miya Community Oral History Project* that seeks to create a people's archive of histories, experiences, identity struggles, arts, and culture. We look to oral histories to trouble dominant notions of migration and belonging but also for alternative, radically inclusive, non-exploitative forms of

<sup>8</sup> The appeal to values and rights enshrined in the Constitution of India has particular significance for marginalized groups, because as it was drafted by Dalit scholar and activist Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a visionary of anti-caste movement and social equality in South Asia.



belonging that do not rely on invidious categories of race and ethnicity (Sangster, 1994). Such restoration of Miya communities' own stories of historical and contemporary realities, and of complex relationships between people and place constitute powerful possibilities for promoting epistemic justice<sup>9</sup> (Seedat, 2015; Smith, 2012; Stevens et al., 2013).

Furthermore, as part of the MCRC's work, we elevate the epistemic power of ongoing community endeavors such as Miya resistance poetry movement (discussed in the previous thread) and Ango Khabar<sup>10</sup> (Our News), a community digital storytelling platform that produces Miya people's stories at complex intersections of history, ecology, citizenship, and culture. Finally, community capacity-building is integral to our research collective praxis. We understand capacity-building as facilitative of agency and self-determination, through which people break monopolies of knowledge and become capable of (re)writing and (re)telling their own stories (Appadurai, 2006; Kieffer, 1984; Lykes & Crosby, 2014; Rahman, 1993). Drawing upon principles of popular education, we seek to create spaces and opportunities for community members, especially young people, to acquire such capacities as critical consciousness around sociopolitical rights, participatory competence, media literacy, digital storytelling, and sustainability practices. Across these and other projects, we are constructing a knowledge base that documents state violence and its psychosocial impacts on Miya communities, explores culturally meaningful responses to intergenerational trauma, and uplifts Miya people's aspirations and desires. The MCRC for us then is an expression of what Maria Lugones (2015) calls communality: "communal wanting, imagining, visioning, intending and acting together." In fact, Miya community workers have been doing this work long before we formed the MCRC as a more concerted way to document non-hegemonic knowledges. Consequently, the MCRC is neither housed in nor owned by neoliberal Global North universities that continue to function as privileged sites of knowledge production.

The MCRC is a site of radical hope for Miya people. We (Abdul Kalam and Shalim) are the first generation in our communities to be involved in this kind of knowledge production and reclaiming of our community narratives. We are building the MCRC by embracing radical emancipatory dreams of what it means to lay the foundations of a community knowledge archive that does not deny or dismiss us and that affirms and honors our histories in a

way that restores our humanity and self-determination. We contest the past to rewrite it in a manner that tells more of our stories—stories that have the potential to shepherd a different non-oppressive future. In fact, more and more young people are expressing an ardent desire to collectively work for our communities, with many moved to initiate/create spaces for storytelling that render visible the labor, struggles, resilience, desire, aspiration of Miya people. Together, we step into our power as storytellers—drawing upon our everyday experiences to craft stories that are becoming part of our alternative knowledge archive. We may not be able to completely unshackle ourselves from our epistemic marginalization today. But, if we build a community research collective that empowers us to counter hegemonic narratives, in ten years or twenty years or even within our lifetime, that would be enormously meaningful for our communities. There is a powerful thread of hope that weaves through the ideas, aspirations, and praxis of the MCRC. Crucially, what makes this hope radical is "not the conviction that something will happen, but the conviction that something makes sense, whatever happens" (Esteva, 2010; p. 991). Thus, the MCRC is not simply an academic collaboration; it is about tilling the soil and sowing seeds for envisioning and co-creating spaces for collective dreaming and acting toward just, decolonial futures.

#### Miya Community Counterstorytelling as Epistemic Justice: Reflections and Future Directions

In this paper, we have presented counterstorytelling both as a method and form of epistemic justice. Our approach and stories are rooted in Miya communities, scrutinizing dehumanizing narratives used to justify Miya people's persecution as well as exploring radically inclusive and desire-based possibilities for generating knowledges and representations. There are several common threads that weave through the various examples of counterstorytelling projects presented above. First, as a community and as a research collective, we are committed to fighting the intersecting vectors of injustice meted out to Miya communities. Not only do we strive to resist the compartmentalization of different forms of justice in our counterstorytelling but also use the very stories to promote understandings of justice as indivisible (Kelley, 2020). Second, all of our counterstorytelling endeavors are geared toward excavating and naming silences, exposing the kinds of logic and discourses that are weaponized against Miya people. In doing so, counterstories challenge conventional wisdom about the relationships between people and place. Third, counterstorytelling embraces a non-linear and disrupted sense of time that is located in the present, marked by the past, but also shaped by the

<sup>9</sup> For an example, see <https://www.facebook.com/watch/106622544180177/2945537225680423>

<sup>10</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCdVidWb6n9VqUD-dqx4LZtA>

imminence of that which is presently aspired for but yet un-lived. Counterstorytelling is about mapping, weaving together, and traversing a landscape of decolonial desire (Tuck, 2009; Tuck & McKenzie, 2014). Finally, our counterstorytelling is grounded in and guided by a radical love “from below” that is shared between those rendered as Other by hegemonic forces. (Sandoval, 2000; Ureña, 2017). As Sandoval reminds us, “[i]t is love that can access and guide our theoretical and political ‘movidas’—revolutionary maneuvers toward decolonized being” (Sandoval, 2000, 141).

Any counterstorytelling project is necessarily incomplete. Therefore, even as we envision possibilities, we recognize the situated nature, the fluidity, as well as the limits of the very counterstories we coproduce. These qualities are intrinsic to decolonial praxes as we resist the coloniality of knowledge and work toward more dynamic and complex understandings of what we come to know in a lived life (Baker, 2019; Tuck & Yang, 2014). For all its immense possibility—both expressed and potential—counterstorytelling endeavors are ridden with struggles and contradictions. We struggle with the complicated task of historicizing Miya people’s struggles against a backdrop of prolonged epistemic violence that has erased Miya voices from academic knowledge repositories. How do we engage in a literature review when that literature is part of the problem, and centering it—even in critique—can unwittingly further the othering of Miya people? How do we make histories and identity categories intelligible to a wider audience that knows little about persecution of Miya people, but doing so in a manner that is simultaneously complex and concise? These are difficult and cumbersome questions that we continually navigate in our efforts toward epistemic justice. The very reason for counterstorytelling projects—exploration of epistemic praxes that disrupt dominant modes of knowledge construction—can become an impediment for academic outlets that do not fully grasp how demands to comply with traditionally accepted manuscript formats further existing epistemic injustice. Furthermore, we are early in our endeavors to create alternative knowledge archives (even though such knowledges have existed for a long time) that rehumanize Miya people. Thus, what we have presented in this paper are truly projects in the making, occurring on multiple timescales that are not always amenable to articulating complete stories. Finally, as with any liberatory project, our tools or strategies are not inherently emancipatory. Our commitment to honor complex personhood does not in and of itself guard against overdetermined representations. We recognize that in the process of writing, we continually make decisions—ethical, conceptual, affective, strategic, structural/mechanistic—about what to include/exclude; and in those decisions,

we inevitably sacrifice complexity and inadvertently flatten or erase stories. Naming those limits and acknowledging the universe of experiences/possibilities that are NOT captured in our counterstorytelling are integral to decolonial praxis.

Our counterstorytelling praxis has implications for other majority worlds peoples engaged in struggles for epistemic justice. Counterstorytelling praxis is grounded in particular historical analyses and metabolized in rooted spaces. Yet in recognizing the indivisibility of justice and striving to un-erase their essence from subhuman (in)visibility, Miya people share historical, affective, and political convergences with people resisting legacies of alterity—people whose histories, experiences, and claims for justice defy normative categories or frames of understanding. Rather than positivist notions of generalizability, we see our ideas and questions as invitations and provocations to rethink and reimagine current arrangements (Fine, 2006; Greene, 1977); akin to what Greene (1977) calls aesthetic awakenings, whereby people “locate themselves in an intersubjective reality reaching backwards and forwards in time.” Furthermore, and more importantly, we strive to move away from hierarchical flows of legitimated knowledge from the general to the particular; instead, we see these provocations as sites of possibility for intersubjectivity and solidarity across transnational struggles. In these spaces—real, imagined, and dreamed—we work toward decolonial futures rooted in our desire for possibilities outside colonial modalities of being and knowing.

## Conflicts of Interest

The authors have no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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