

# Being human in the world

## The Interlocuter



“Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world.”<sup>1</sup>

We are witnessing the emergence of neo-liberal universities and a rationalisation of programs and departments of humanities and humanistic social sciences. Disciplines fostering humanistic knowledge are increasingly being disavowed under charges of elitism or archaism even as economic expediency is driving universities to push for their consolidation and/or dissolution. In Japan, for instance, more than fifty universities attempted to downsize their humanities programs following an official dictum in 2013 to focus on disciplines that “better meet society’s needs”. In a statement made to the NY Times in 2013, Homi K. Bhabha, director of the Mahindra Humanities Center at Harvard University, announced that “The humanities are facing serious challenges in both developed and developing countries. In India for example the humanities are more or less dead, and professional schools and the study of business and technology are in the ascendant”.<sup>2</sup>

Aarti Kawlra and Françoise Vergès

AMONG ACADEMIA, however, the concern is not merely about shrinking job opportunities or redundancy, but about the rescue of the humanities from itself, namely from traditional disciplinary emphases on canonical texts and territorially defined area studies. A growing body of scholars, interested in rethinking Asian studies from a de-bordered or de-nationalised perspective, has called for expanding the vocabularies and epistemic breadth of the humanities to take cognisance of the commonalities and connections that unite rather than divide humans. This would mean investigating human vulnerabilities and versatilities as part of wider mechanisms of comparison within a global context. Such an expanded humanities has the potential to contribute to contemporary social life by building, supporting and validating humanistic acts (and communities) of interpretation, performance and sustenance regardless of the weight of their antiquity or provenance.

In this reflective essay, we attempt to go past bounded disciplinary, institutional and national prescriptions in the exploration of humanistic learning methodologies that are otherwise overlooked, or sometimes deliberately silenced, within conventional curricula and pedagogic practices. Even though we come from vastly different backgrounds, we share a deep awareness for embodied practices as sites of knowledge and cultural transmission. We are both interested in the politics of circulation – in the mobilities of people around objects, techniques and recipes – and in tracing routes that surpass the frame of national and international relations. Indeed, a search for alternative spaces and methodologies of teaching and learning has been the substratum of our individual perspectives. Aarti Kawlra, an anthropologist based in Chennai, is interested in material culture studies, and Françoise Vergès is a feminist post-colonial theorist from Reunion Island.

Working together in the platforms promoting South-South exchanges offered by the IIAS-Mellon program ‘Rethinking Asian Studies in a Global Context’ (2013-2015)<sup>3</sup> has yielded a mutual attentiveness to the pedagogical value of alternative sites of knowledge. At the IIAS Summer School titled ‘Reading Craft: Itineraries of Culture, Knowledge and Power in the Global Ecumene’,<sup>4</sup> held in August 2014 in Chiang-Mai, for instance, we articulated the need for an alternate cartography that re-centred craft-worlds in the exploration of subaltern micro-histories and ethnographies. The IIAS international conference ‘Asia/Africa: A New Axis of Knowledge’,<sup>5</sup> held in September 2015 at the University of Accra, further validated our shared interest in exhuming erased links and contributions of anonymous slaves, artisans and refugees in finding new connections and comparisons between Asia and Africa and other parts of the world. Pursuing trajectories of cloth, our shared passion, has been especially rewarding as an immediate point of identity and difference. Indigo dyed and printed textiles, for example, have animated many of our meetings and united scholars and practitioners from vastly divergent disciplines and geographies. Our aim is to interrogate the widening gap between everyday /common sense knowledge practices and disciplinary/textual knowledge about *being human* in the world and to share some thoughts on what we are calling ‘humanistic pedagogies’.

### Second wave of decolonisation?

Movements for restitutive justice across the Global South have highlighted the importance of recovering varied cosmologies and cultures of humanity that reunite people, lands, pasts, that had been torn asunder or ruptured by colonial rule. We know that for interlocutors of imperialism, such as Gandhi, Tagore, Césaire, Cabral, and DuBois, the anti-colonial struggle

had already ceased to be defined by the nationalist project and was recast as a humanist struggle for political justice, cultural (non-racialised) dignity and world peace. And even though many of their projects either failed or remain unfinished, it is their search for a liberative education – one that is free from “walled segregation in the particular or ... [from] a dilution in the ‘universal’”, as Césaire wrote in 1956 – which interests us. We suggest that a second wave of decolonisation is afoot and must be predicated upon the ‘decolonial’ as method. Instead of limiting ourselves to ‘Asia as method’ and viewing civilisationalism and the discourse of Asian (or African) unity as a “shared resentment vis-à-vis the West”,<sup>6</sup> we propose “decolonial ways of thinking and doing”<sup>7</sup> through the exploration of humanistic pedagogies.

The recovery of humanistic pedagogies is grounded in a long history of dissent and critical thinking. It can be found in Asian and African thought and among indigenous peoples who conceive the world as interconnected as well as in European craft practices and the work of philosophers and writers (Tolstoy for instance). In the world of the ‘Black Atlantic’, created by the transatlantic slave trade, it emerged as the political-philosophical issue in the anti-slavery struggle of the 18th and 19th century: What does it mean to be human when a cultural, social and economic system has declared that humanity was divided between naturally free and unfree human beings, between lives that mattered and lives that did not matter? It is ironic that slave trade reached its apex during the 18th century when thinkers of the Enlightenment promoted the idea that “all men are created equal”. It is worth recalling that this was also the century featuring revolts of slaves, among them the 1791 insurrection in the French colony of Saint-Domingue that led to the creation of the Republic of Haiti. It also inspired the rallying cry of the European anti-slavery struggle, “Am I not a man and your brother?” Later, in the period of European post-slavery colonisation and imperialism, struggles of resistance stirred poetry, songs, oral literature, manifestos, and educational projects in the South. The idea re-emerged in the 1920’s with the anti-colonial movements for civil rights worldwide. In the 1940s, the belief that colonised peoples or ‘coloured peoples’ should unite and create strong transnational institutions led to the organisation of congresses and the publication of manifestos and journals. All underlined the necessity of being emancipated from the ‘pedagogy of servitude’, the emancipation from Eurocentric representations of non-Europeans, whether inspired by Orientalism<sup>8</sup> or by other discourses that instituted a global hierarchy of peoples along the lines of race.

Pedagogical projects became strongly associated not only with emancipation from elitist European domination but also with the rehabilitation of vernacular knowledge, practices and voices of the forgotten and the marginalised, together with a rediscovery of art and culture, and their creolised and hybrid forms. This ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’, to borrow Paulo Freire’s expression, was particularly strong in Asia and inspired the first wave of decolonisation.<sup>9</sup> The newly founded nation-states devised pedagogical programmes to promote a national consciousness and sense of cultural identity as a means of self-representation and assertion. The idea culminated in the first African-Asian conference held in Bandung in 1955. Though, according to historians, the final resolution remained timid, reflecting the difficulty of reaching a transnational common goal, most recent analyses have sought to recover the historical dimension of the event. In revisiting Bandung and its ‘spirit’ here, we are not embracing its intended and unintended outcomes but re-appropriating a history and a genealogy of critical, conscious and collective thinking of the West and the rest of the world for its value in reinvigorating the teaching and learning of the humanities and humanistic social sciences.

More than sixty years ago, anthropologist Lévi-Strauss advised UNESCO to push for greater interaction and methodological unity of the exact sciences with the humanities: “technological civilization is not a separate civilization, which requires the invention of special techniques for its improvement: the humanization of social life is not the task of one profession”.<sup>10</sup> We believe, as he did, that any thinking (or judgement) about humans within a prevailing order “... humanizes it, as the emergence of a criticism is already a change”.<sup>11</sup> We are therefore proposing an educational agenda that is neither theory-centred nor centred on a particular constellation – the West, industrialisation, capital, a geo-political region, or even the global. Rather, we would like to see theory emerge from inquiries into forms of knowledge-practice that inhabit the interstices and are deemed illegitimate, irrational, vernacular, tacit, embodied and sensorial. In other words, we are seeking decolonial readings of being in-the-world. These conditions include the uses of history, culture, economics, politics, education, art, architecture, craft, design, magic, science and religion; in the past and in the present; in Asia and Africa in-the-world; de-spatialised, quotidian and dividual; those of selves capable of embracing the highest goals and truths; ways of being in-the-world by “not alienating ourselves from it and dominating it, but comprehending and uniting it with ourselves...”<sup>12</sup>



# Towards alternative pedagogies

We wish to explore the different arenas where knowledge about being human is creatively and collectively released, whilst being attentive to cognitive structures that have delegitimised these spaces of cultural expression and transmission. Masking the conditions of production, distancing producers from consumers and accumulation by appropriation of human and extra-human nature has been a requirement of capitalist economy in the era of the Capitalocene or 'age of capital',<sup>13</sup> crystallising the deification of the individual over the collective. An industrial-minded civilisation has widened the epistemic divide between the human, social and natural sciences by stressing objective and uniform solutions that alienate and rupture alternative values and beliefs of human existence in the world. According to Amitav Ghosh, a collective 'crisis of culture' underlies climate change on earth, invading even the arts and humanities with the false belief and expectation of bourgeois stability.<sup>14</sup> Our aim is to make visible these contradictions and call for the inculcation of a spirit of 'solidarity without borders'<sup>15</sup> within curricula through the integration of humanistic imaginaries, vocabularies, performances and practices in contemporary pedagogic practice.

## Spaces of humanistic pedagogies

The proximity of humanistic knowledge production in our midst is an opportunity to bring into dialogue and scholarly interrogation the *real* knowledge of being human. The cultural interlocutions of artists, writers, poets, artisans, migrants and refugees, for example, jostle for space alongside sanctioned knowledge in the humanities, but remain in simple juxtaposition as 'disjunctures' or absorbed as commodities in the global economy. Humanistic knowledge inhabits the tensions around grand narratives of advancement and decline. It resides in the interstices of spatialised polarities constructed by the global, the national, the regional and the urban. It is an opportunity to mobilise the many and varied sites of knowledge that creatively and critically interpret historical and contemporary contingencies across borders. Re-instating the humanistic pedagogical project is to bring back the methods of the artist, the writer, the linguist, the field anthropologist, historian and the scientist, to work together in defence of their engagements with the world.

A further turn towards humanistic forms of knowledge can produce original work if it rests on a new pedagogy, on new ways of reproducing knowledge, of teaching and learning, that support rather than de-authorise or expropriate alternative ways of being and doing. They are alternative because they defend an ecological method and pedagogy, or an eco-pedagogy of imagining (and cooperating) the self *in relationship*, both to human and non-human nature. At the IAS Summer School on alternative readings of craft practices, for instance, our exposure to back strap loom weaving in a village north of Chiang Mai was especially instructive in using craft as a pedagogic tool and lens for humanistic knowledge. It drew our attention to weaving as an embodied knowledge practice; the significance of the senses in grasping tacit knowledge outside the classroom; and the artisanal household as a site for the inscription of micro-histories of sustenance and knowledge transmission where gender asymmetries in productive arrangements occur within a milieu of 'cooperative conflicts'.<sup>16</sup>

Humanistic pedagogy nourishes the art of attention and challenges the 'culture of speed'<sup>17</sup> in the academy to promote 'sentipensante (sensing/thinking) pedagogy' in educational practice. It is a methodological tool that recognises the value of an extended grounding in critical thinking *and* doing in order that learning "encompasses wholeness ... helps students transcend limiting views about themselves...".<sup>18</sup> Humanistic pedagogy encourages active reflection, of stepping back and thinking about one's own thinking, to halt the pursuit of a solution, and ponder instead upon the multiple paths to comprehension, and estimating whether the framing of the problem itself is limited or skewed. Most importantly, humanistic pedagogies do not distinguish between the classical and the folk, the performative and the textual, the abstract and the physical, the political/economic and the commonsensical for critical insights. We propose a pedagogic practice working with 'tools of conviviality' – the methodologies that relate individuals and groups to one another in 'creative intercourse' with each other and the world of nature around them.<sup>19</sup> Anchoring ideas of human cooperation, generosity, and trust as shared pedagogic themes across diverse learners builds values of interdependence and permits broader definitions of identity, freedom and self-reliance.

Humanistic pedagogy embraces the highest goals and truths about being human in the world and is rooted in ideas and practices that surpass conventional physical and mental borders. It is a collective process of bringing together people drawn from vastly different circumstances, imaginaries and practices in mutual exchange and expression. For instance, the recent workshop "Cartographies of the (post)colonial space" conducted by Françoise Vergès, brought artists, curators, art historians, poets, philosophers, and historians to work together for two days at an exhibition gallery in Paris.

The aim was to display and self-reflexively discuss complex issues using personal effects, texts, images and the body. The first day saw the group's energy buoyed by shared activities around themes such as borders, migrant, hybridity, State, colonial, and of cooking, cleaning and planning the exhibition space and in helping each other rehearse a performance or a reading. On the second day participants 'performed' their individual perspectives not only for the benefit of the public but also as an exercise in decolonial thinking and doing *in situ*. There was a reading of an excerpt from Frantz Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth*; a dance performance, dramatization of a poem; display of coffee as a product of imperialism, but also of one's own history; viewing of biographical photos and a film on contemporary urban isolation; browsing through a participant's personal anticolonial, feminist library. The pedagogic exercise or 'show' where the tangible and the tacit were interwoven was undone on the same evening.

Any epistemic rethinking in a global context is therefore not only about discovering forgotten chapters of history or adding marginalised narratives to the master narrative, but also about recovering hidden histories and practices of cooperation. Our references to cooperative alliances are to be found in alternative workshops, in practices of sustenance, and spaces of collaborative work, all the while seeking to eschew the view that individual interest and accumulation, together with its intractable configuration of conflict, is *inherently* human. Arguably, notions of cooperation and learning are developed in the human-space work configuration of both the artisanal workshop and the rational factory. But it is the mutuality of relations between the master and the apprentice in the context of the craft workshop, where knowledge is "caught" or "stolen with the eyes",<sup>20</sup> that continues to be the basis for the survival of craft in the South and deployed as a panacea for development and post-conflict/post-disaster rehabilitation across the globe.

We are interested in challenging the division between pedagogy for higher education and pedagogy for the people, between 'high' and 'low' education, and between technical and humanistic education. Ecological humanistic pedagogy challenges all forms of dehumanised work in favour of shared life-affirmative practices of work; it refuses the marginalisation of the humanities; it is attentive to the ways power circulates; it recognises experience and talent; it acknowledges the relation between master and apprentice though it rejects its reification; it resists the economy of speed for efficiency and rehabilitates the fact that time is needed to nourish knowledge. It advocates a pedagogical/research process that is built on the virtues of comparison and the recovery of creative knowledge to be found, not only through a dialogue across disciplines, but also from outside the academy, in conversation and collaboration with civil society practitioners, activists and other social agents and actors.

We consider work and livelihood, visual and performative practice, language and translation, food and health, and memory practices as sites of humanistic knowledge. These sites gesture to the convivial alliances forged in non-prescriptive workshops, museums, galleries and theatres; neighbourhoods; sidewalks; community centres, camps and other anonymous public spaces of convivial activity, including those provided by the Internet. They are alternate arenas of knowledge transmission, exchange and human reproducibility. They represent ecologies bound not by the endless pursuit of profit, but by the promise of being human in the array of cooperative conflicts that dynamically shape the everyday in all its diverse entanglements.

Below: Aarti Kalwira and Françoise Vergès with a weaver from Ban Sam (left) and Nussara Tiengkate, weaver and designer. IAS Summer School, Chiang Mai, 2014.



Attending to tacit and embodied forms of knowledge in the development of humanistic pedagogies offers the opportunity to integrate craft-based practices with digital technology. Why and when do people come together for music for instance? How does music persuade one to rethink classroom pedagogic practices? What are the forms of knowledge (cognitive, sensorial, emotional and social) that are produced in the spaces of conviviality generated through music? How is this knowledge inculcated and transmitted? Multi-media interfaces have the potential to mobilise trans-border networks and narratives to illuminate alternate geographies and modes of being and belonging and are important spaces for knowledge production and transmission.

Such an approach will give back to the body and the senses its central place in knowledge transmission along with written texts. Combining perspectives from the natural, social sciences and the humanities through the heuristic of a site of knowledge, brings to the fore the question of how knowledge is produced, by whom, for whom and significantly with whom. The methodology opens up for description and analysis our relational, negotiated, and partial perspectives. It recognises that only a long, complex practice of critical thinking, doing and feeling, together with a dialogue between different ethical, aesthetic and moral traditions can respond to the continuing human crises of dislocation, dispossession, fragmentation and polarisation in the world today.

The recently awarded IAS-Mellon program, titled "Humanities across Borders: Asia and Africa in the World", is an opportunity for creative experiments in humanistic pedagogies across multiple collaborating institutions of higher education and their civil society partners in Asia and Africa. Over the next four years we hope to deepen our engagement with embodied teaching and learning practices in the spaces of exchange offered by the program, together with its expanding network of individuals committed to the development of a curriculum for humanities across borders.

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