

Real World Challenges and Academe

Neelam Raina

In a post pandemic world, we start to rebuild our communities, economies, societies, and we gather lessons learned. One big thing that stands out is our need to be more open to new ideas, approaches, and thoughts - to truly be interdisciplinary. No global challenges that we face can be addressed or resolved without this way of thinking. As researchers and practitioners, we see a clear need to dissolve, resolve, and build bridges between subjects and disciplines and the word 'interdisciplinary' becomes fashionable again.

But what does it mean to be interdisciplinary, intra, and transdisciplinary?

And is it even possible? We need to rethink the way we write and publish, which is a challenge. We need to rethink the way we evaluate and reward interdisciplinary work, the way we study and examine our doctoral work, the way we create departments, schools, and teaching curriculum as well as what we define as innovation in these spaces.

How can we travel the journey of extremely specific expertise towards a PhD and yet be able to broaden out its value and use to communities and the larger world? How do we weave in global challenges and their extensive inter-sectional inequalities? How do we steer clear of replicating knowledge and power hierarchies? How does what we do today impact how we will be able to think and live with the technology that comes at us from all directions? How do we harness our creative energies and our understanding of ethics and principles of equality and equity in everything we do?

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Left: The teak pillars of U-Pein Bridge along Taungthaman Lake in Myanmar. (Photo courtesy of Zin Mar Latt)

On Place-Based Teaching and Learning

Zin Mar Latt

In the Academic Year 2019-2020, I taught General Anthropology (Anth-1101) to first year students. My colleagues and I, as part of Humanities Across Borders programme and in conversation with Dr Aarti Kawlra, re-looked and re-examined the course outline of General Anthropology in 2018-2019 to make it more connected with the world. Our idea has been to combine the classroom and fieldwork to show how the concepts of general anthropology that the students learn in the class can be connected with the world around them using code words. As extensions of the fieldwork, the students analyse the learnings from the fieldwork with what they learn in the classroom and the theoretical concepts.

With the intention of revising the course of General Anthropology (Anth-1101), I adopted the HAB approach to explore everyday practices, poems, corpuses, and oral histories using U-Pein Bridge situated on Taungthaman Inn as a site of meaning and knowledge.

In the middle of February 2020, the students visited U-Pein Bridge, situated near Taungthaman village by taxi. Their objective was to find out whatever they could - stories, experiences, lores, etc., related with the word concept of their choice.

When I asked the students to list terms connected with intangible and tangible heritage in anthropology, they identified: belief, norms, oral history, relationships, values, practice, symbols, etc.

During the discussion time in the class, a student, Aye Phyu Cynn Thant, described the way they connected code/concept words with the community thus:

When we arrived at the U-Pein Bridge, our group noticed a range of things that

we identified under tangible culture. They are U Pein Bridge, different kinds of crops like sunflowers, beans, corn, boats, and stalls of shops, dirty water, fortune tellers, teak poles used to build U Pein Bridge and visitors.

Conversely, we also learned what intangible culture is after we interviewed the informants. Some of the significant intangible cultures that we observed were visible through the voices of the community members, the bells hanging on the ropes outside the huts,¹ beliefs, worship and behaviour of the informants.

Two additional concepts were added - historical space and livelihood. Given the departure from traditional way of teaching, this experiential exploration of anthropological terms, helped the students to practically connect with what they had learned in the classroom. When I used to teach these concepts, the students had not internalised them. But this time, there was a difference and it was evident in the notes that they collected from the community living near the U-Pein bridge.

Zin Mar Latt,
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Myanmar

Notes

- 1 In Upper Myanmar, as part of the novitiation ceremony, the parents of children who will change novicehood rent bullock carts with decorated cows with hanging bells to pick novices up to go around the village and then to pay respect to the pagoda and finally to worship the guardian spirit (Nat).



Fig. 1 (left): An A.I.-generated image based on a text prompt of a swamp of presentness. (Image courtesy of Surajit Sarkar)

Fig. 2 (below): Image posted to the social media of the author's colleague, holding a sketch of her grandfather, "Artist Namboodiri," by G. Aravindan.

On Digital Engagement, Sameness, and Our Ability to Discern

Surajit Sarkar

For researchers and students, digital engagement continues everyday, during and off work. A text-prompt A.I. artwork of a swamp of presentness is filled with digital sameness [Fig. 1]. My apprehension emerges from this techno-sensorially enhanced presentness affecting our ability to discern. Everything is equivalent in this mediation, a throwback to the time digital technologies were held by default a democratic tool. Today, as billions record their thoughts in public, the echo chamber of social media is an imperfect mirror to reality, its biases now making the swamp of presentness more difficult to disengage.

Reflecting upon the moment needs knowledge of background, structure and the dynamic between them. It is difficult, more risky when surrounded by the provocations of presentness. In the teaching-learning world of the humanities, a route is sometimes made by holding dear the comfort zone and associated risk averse imaginations. Subverted by the consumerism of objects, trends, and ideas, it becomes near impossible to imagine an autonomous professional, leave alone be one. Between discipline and subject, specialisation and area, it can feel almost dangerous to break the mould. Exercising self-control, also known as self-censorship, becomes a laudable public act.

On the other hand, there are those who are struck with ennui, an overwhelming need to escape the presentness. A couple of hours ago, I saw on the social media of a 30 year old colleague, a post on the passing away

of 97 year old 'Artist Namboodiri,' legendary painter from Kerala. It is a sketch by him of G Aravindan, iconoclast filmmaker, who had died even before my colleague was born. It is a family treasure, taken out to be shared, this time on social media. Her hand holds the crumpled paper down, as she takes the picture, a silent acknowledgement of listening to those who have trudged through the swamp before [Fig. 2].

I am glad that some are looking back from the present and making their own connections to the past. It's a long way home, but it is the only way.

Surajit Sarkar,
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The Challenge of Sustaining Partnerships within the HAB West African Platform

Mohomodou Houssouba

At the launch of HAB in 2017, four West African institutions constituted the West African platform: Institute of African Studies (Ghana), National Institute of Social Sciences (Burkina Faso), Institute of Humanities (Mali) and the Laboratory of Analysis of Societies and Powers / Africa - Diasporas - UGB LASPAD (Senegal). The block enjoyed territorial continuity within an integrated regional community (ECOWAS). HAB was a unique opportunity to create or boost cooperation among the four institutes and eventually extend the network to others. All expressed an interest in holding periodic meetings in the different countries. These would be occasions to stage events that bring the results of research and exchange closer to the larger campus. Departing from academic-style presentations was a shared desire, so experiential workshops, exhibitions, and

interactive podiums were considered more adequate formats. Road trips would offer the opportunity to bring students, teachers, and their research into contact with populations along the way.

In this regard, my own bus trip from Bamako to Ouagadougou to meet colleagues at the partner institution in Burkina Faso (September 2017) was both a self-test and part of the study the Ghanaian team was conducting along borderlands. Bus travel was the closest to living the "grassroots" regional or pan-African experience they explored in the neighborhood, at the borders between Burkina Faso, Togo, and Benin. During the overland journey, I was able to talk with people from all over the region, in French, Bambara, and Songhay; a Malian student returning to his campus in Ouagadougou, a Senegalese tailor rejoining his shop after a stay with his family near the border with

On Walking Libraries and Challenging Conventional Pedagogies

Kojo Opoku Aidoo

The Humanities Across Borders program represents an intellectually and methodologically disruptive and radical departure from the pedagogical practices that I am familiar with.

In the course of developing a humanistic pedagogy, I encountered griot-like figures (migrants in Ghana, Togo, and Benin) during field stints, who build their knowledge through their analyses of how the world is. They are regarded for their reflective philosophical knowledge, as 'walking libraries' with up-to-date knowledge and histories of their communities. With wide-ranging historical

knowledge, they demonstrate unlimited possibilities for the formal educational establishment. They tell their stories from memory extemporaneously, elaborating on actions and events. These experiences challenge the conventional pedagogical paradigms and call for alternative frameworks. The formal classroom setting with its structural limitations and trappings of scripted literacy curriculum can benefit immeasurably from such wise, knowledgeable griot-like figures.

Kojo Opoku Aidoo,
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Ghana

More Questions Than Answers

Stephen Hamilton

Pictured here is a textile produced in India for the Ghanaian cloth market being sold by Jansen Holland, a Dutch company that sells wax prints and other African textiles. It is a black and white cloth that appears to use a combination of a type of compound weave and floating warps. The patterns are taken from *kente*, a fine handwoven cloth originating in central and southern Ghana.

In contemporary Ghana, *kente* has become a marker of national identity, and among African Americans, *kente* has been adopted as a potent symbol of African pride and is still a luxurious fabric, one reserved for special occasions and surrounded by an air of ceremony and honor. Expensive wax print fabrics may be culturally important, precious, and imbued with a sense of prestige, but they cannot compare to the deep cultural significance placed on *kente*.

The need for Dutch cloth producers to insert themselves into the market for handwoven textiles despite already dominating the market for expensive wax prints resurrects images of longstanding colonial exchanges. The dynamics of these exchanges speak to a long history of Europe's fascination with the African cloth market and the complex ways they have managed



Above: Handloom Cloth woven in south India for the West African market at the Jansen Holland Shop, Tilburg. (Photo courtesy of Stephen Hamilton)

to compete with local cloth production using products made in Europe and India.

This trip to the Jansen Holland shop raises many questions about power dynamics and the control of production and distribution in non-white countries to other non-white countries. Who are Jansen Holland's primary competitors in the production of this handwoven cloth? Are they weaving cooperatives, guilds, and independent artisans in west Africa with nowhere near the amount of capital or resources as a Dutch textile company? Are they Chinese and Indian commercial textile producers who also make printed textiles for African consumers? Who are the Ghanaians buying this fabric? What is the economic situation for the Indian weavers producing this cloth? Are they commissioned by this Dutch company or employed by them? What are the dynamics of their interactions with Indian craftspeople?

Stephen Hamilton,
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What I Learned at the Saturday Market in Leiden

Orraya Chawnan

The setting of the Saturday Market is a completely different image from the other local shops during the weekdays. It opens twice a week - a small one on Wednesdays, and the main one on Saturdays from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm. It is full of local or foreign products and foodstands (e.g. Mabroek). The nature of the market makes it common to visitors, making the experience worthwhile. People come to shop but also to relax and enjoy their Saturdays with family and friends.

During our walk in the market street, we met this old couple who were sitting and enjoying their food. Their names were Harry and Suze, and both were over the age of 65. They left their house for the markets to spend their Saturday in a fun way. Here, in the lively street, the couple eats "herring", a Dutch specialty, a fish from the North Sea, listening to music from the music box,



Above: Harry and Suze enjoying the music and eating herring. (Photo courtesy of Orraya Chawnan)

and enjoying the scenery. So, for me their experience revealed that the purpose of the market is not only about selling and buying things but it turns a space into a communal and interactive place where people joyfully spend their Saturdays.

Orraya Chawnan
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Mali, a traveling salesman from Gao trading grain across borders ... With regard to HAB, my arrival in Ouagadougou coincided with the announcement of a four-million-dollar grant awarded to the University of Ghana by the Mellon Foundation, the main sponsor of HAB. The news sparked envious exchanges about advances made by an established and well-connected university like UGH, at Legon.

The institute leaders organized formal and informal meetings on campus and in town. I met with scholars of different generations, many with impressive achievements and long-term studies of their own. The four-day stay reinforced my conviction that personal contact would play a key role in strengthening partnerships, and periodic visits and rotating events, for example around indigo in Mali and Burkina Faso, would help build a self-driven regional platform. The MoU signed thereafter between INSS Ouaga and ISH Mali pointed in the right direction. It should soon translate into joint fieldwork and scheduled visits between the two neighbors. In addition, future events like the Krokobitey (Ghana) workshop on crafts and ecotourism in 2018 opened up perspectives for transdisciplinary exchanges and discoveries within the region. Still, the major interregional gatherings would take place outside the region, in Dar es Salaam

and Amsterdam in 2018, Leiden in 2019, and Chiang Mai in 2020. Such venues limited the numbers of West African participants to a select few. The Covid pandemic cancelled physical meetings. The switch to online platforms drew a further wedge between the (digitally) well-resourced institutions and their less-endowed partners.

Looking back on this period, the activities conducted in the four countries did not coalesce into a dynamic shared platform at the regional level. Does that mean it's all lost? Not necessarily, as I think of the "Crafts as Method" workshop held in Saint-Louis in Senegal in November 2022. With scholars and highly skilled practitioners coming from Ghana, Mali, Senegal, and other continents, it demonstrated the potential for building a productive West African core around indigo, textile, bead, pottery, for example, to get in conversation with other African regions, Asia, Latin America, and so on. So, while the aftertaste of unfulfilled promise lingers, there is still time for a new momentum in the regional platform.

Mohomodou Houssouba,
University of Basel,
Switzerland

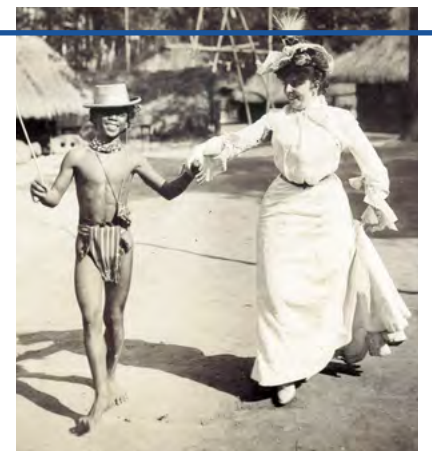
Recovering the Story of Passive/Insignificant Faces in the Colonial Visual Archive

Enrico Joaquin Lapuz

Pictured on the right is a young boy from the Igorot ethnic group of the Philippines, as he performs the cakewalk, a popular dance of the time, with Austrian-American opera singer Mrs. Wilkins. At a glance, the picture could be interpreted purely from a propagandic perspective, pushing the American ideal of "benevolent assimilation" in showing the positive impact of Western civilization on the savage Filipinos. During the fair, Mrs. Wilkins had taught several singing lessons for Igorot children, with the children having performances of American songs like "My Old Kentucky" in front of exhibitgoers. James Gilbert in his book *Whose Fair?: Experience, Memory, and the History of the Great St. Louis Exposition* argued that the interaction captured could be seen as a glimpse into cross-cultural interaction with 'native' peoples through pop culture, molding and shaping the unknown & exotic into something more relatable.¹ Wilkins acted as a representation of the American citizen, interacting with the 'savage' and unknown Igorots in the photograph, also adding a level of familiarity to the spectacle.

The caption of this photograph given by the photographer Jessie Tarbox Beals, *Mrs. Wilkins teaching an Igorot boy the cakewalk at the 1904 World's Fair*, also perpetuates this by placing the singer as the active participant in the exchange and the point of focus, with the Igorot boy (one of her students) acting as a passive receptacle to receive her knowledge. This is on top of a lack of a name given for the Igorot boy, indicating that what was more important was the act of being taught the cakewalk instead of who it was being taught to. To this day the name of the boy is still unknown, despite appearing in other photographs and this particular photo being on the cover of books and websites that talk about the history of the fair.

Interpretations like these look at the photograph beyond what it initially



Above: A photograph of an Igorot boy wearing a bahag (loincloth), a top hat, and cane while dancing with Mrs. Wilkins, who is dressed in white, during the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. Photograph by Jessie Tarbox Beals (1870-1942) and retrieved from the online collection of the Missouri Historical Society.

presented, but in doing so still put the colonial power in the center as the active in this exchange. The American perspective is placed as the focus, when more could be done to enrich the story of the young Igorot.

What was his name? How did the boy feel about this dance? Igorots performed for fairgoers their own cultural dances, such as the celebratory *ballangbang*. In the dance, men played gongs and set the tempo while the women performed the actual dancing. With the cakewalk also being performed in celebrations, did he find similarities to the movement as he takes the lead in the picture, hence the enjoyment on his face? Did he know about the history of the dance, or if so, would he feel different about performing it?

Enrico Joaquin Lapuz,
IIAS, The Netherlands

Notes

- 1 James Burkhardt Gilbert, *Whose Fair?: Experience, Memory, and the History of the Great St. Louis Exposition* (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 152.