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# International Applied Humanities Networks and Global Cultural Engagement [1]

While taking part in an energetic three-day convening at Georgetown University dedicated to "Global Performance, Civic Imagination, and Cultural Diplomacy," it became clear that the meeting was itself evidence for the continued emergence of a global network linking artists, performers, cultural policy makers, human rights activists, social justice advocates, academics, diplomacy practitioners, and others in international affairs, all variously pursuing new intersections of the arts with cultural diplomacy. The conversation sought to further encourage the development of this incipient global network of the "applied arts," in the process asking what it means when the arts are incorporated into the work of other sectors and put to other ends, like diplomacy.

In addition to the opportunity to witness this effort of network-building, the meeting served as further evidence of increased attention to partnering, collaboration, and reciprocity as the basis for global outreach by often U.S.-based non-profit and other agencies of non-governmental and citizen diplomacy. In a sense, through a variety of diverse endeavors across the applied humanities and arts, we are seeing the spirit of "mutualism" enacted – less emphasis on the pursuit of national self-interest and more pursuit of closer inter-relationships – a concept taken up here and there in the policy discussion about public diplomacy but, at least so far, not robustly pursued in practice. This appears to be changing.

Organizers Derek Goldman and Cynthia Schneider set the tone for this meeting by comparing the efforts currently underway with past U.S. programs like the Jazz Ambassadors during the Cold War. Although that program was highly successful then, times have changed and now it is neither appropriate nor effective simply to take your show on the road, as it were, to demonstrate one's "culture in a monolithic way." Nowadays it is necessary to "work more collaboratively" and to ask, "What story do we want to tell together?" Theater is one richly expressive avenue for collaboration. Goldman summarized this trend during the meeting as a "movement away from models of display to imparting agency to others."

Throughout the meeting "performance" was discussed as a methodology to the ends of: amplifying local voices, enabling people to find ways to tell their stories, creating contexts for public dialogue, enabling social critique, transforming conflicts, or pursuing reconciliation. Art was discussed not as a medium of message delivery so much as "a part of the agenda of others," where, along with the transfer of skills such as choreography, a collaborative goal is to better appreciate how other people express themselves and what this might mean for how they are currently thinking about themselves, their circumstances, and their worlds.

The Georgetown meeting provided multiple examples of this sort of collaboration, such as Theatre Without Borders, which facilitates global theater exchange among people and institutions. Theatre Without Borders is currently collaborating with the Peacebuilding and the Arts program at Brandeis University to use performance creatively to transform

understandings of conflict in chronic conflict zones around the world. Utilizing the tools of community-based performance, this project seeks to nourish and to restore peoples' expressive capacities as a way to help them better address publicly questions of justice, memory, identity and resistance, but also complicity. This is a collaboration, in other words, that enables dialogue among the participants in, and victims of, chronic violence. But it does not impose an agenda on that conversation.

And this emerging network around socially-engaged applied artists who work globally is just one corner of a larger international environment in which a mixture of cultural producers, workers, and agencies – including non-profits, museums, archives, and libraries – are pursuing parallel applied and humanitarian work with partners. What I will call "applied humanities networks" now comprise a growing diversity of creative collaborations leveraging the knowledge, expertise, and creativity of U.S. cultural professionals, in the service of a variety of international partnerships well beyond the traditional work of arts management.

By and large these activities are not on the radar of decision-makers in international affairs, but they include such efforts as: participatory curation, applications of new social media, archival training, oral history and public memory projects, cultural heritage conservation, digital game design, documentary film, culture mapping, the negotiation of cultural copyright and building of cultural commons, and the management and exhibition of antiquities and other national cultural collections, among other activities. One feature of this work is cultural diplomacy, though not as we conventionally understand it.

A collaboration between U.S.-based folklorists and like professionals concerned with intangible cultural heritage and their Chinese counterparts, the China-US Forum on Cultural Sustainability, is another case of an incipient transnational applied humanities network that has direct implications for cultural diplomacy. On the one hand, the Forum contributes to the internationalization of folklore studies. On the other, it directs comparative attention to the often differing theoretical, policy, and practical frames that inform what is, nevertheless, shared attention to the sustainability of intangible cultural heritage (hereafter, ICH) in both countries. And, the Forum sets out from a shared commitment among scholars and practitioners in both countries to identify, document, present and safeguard ICH, as critical to their "national interest and well-being."

The Forum facilitates collaborative U.S.-China efforts to chart, compare, analyze, communicate widely, and to generate shared products focused on "tradition-based cultural expressions" through a variety of related initiatives. In the course of their collaboration, ICH practitioners from the U.S. and China have to work through different underlying assumptions and theories that shape and define the scope, meaning and location of ICH in both countries, including different challenges posed for national culture industries, community development, cultural tourism, and for the status of cultural minorities. One difference is distinct time horizons bounding attention given to ICH among scholars: recent popular culture is given regular attention by U.S. practitioners while Chinese counterparts direct their attention to much older forms of traditional cultural expression. Part of the purpose of the Forum, therefore, is to engage such differences through the encompassing goal of professional development among ICH specialists in both countries.

Notably, the Forum is a model for how to take up what can be potentially explosive bilateral questions (e. g. the status of religious or cultural minorities in China) without also imposing any particular agenda. In fact, collaborators on the U.S. end, like the American Folklore Society and Vanderbilt's Curb Center, are actively engaging with the Chinese Folklore Society

and other counterparts, with the stated goal of establishing a “field of folklore studies with Chinese characteristics.”

A final example is a recently constituted applied humanities network, now working in the humanitarian context of disaster relief, organized around the Haiti Cultural Recovery Project. An effort coordinating many partners and led by the Smithsonian, the project has mobilized applied cultural practitioners from the U.S. and elsewhere to support the efforts of Haitian cultural professionals to rescue, safeguard, and restore the country’s national cultural heritage in the aftermath of the 2010 earthquake. The rescue of key expressions of Haiti’s heritage has provided continuity to Haitian cultural identity by saving artifacts of collective cultural memory, helping to maintain a cultural basis for Haiti to address its post-disaster national identity going forward.

Incorporated into the overall disaster relief effort, the Cultural Recovery Project is primarily composed of museum professionals – conservators and curators – engaged in the work of stabilizing, documenting and restoring artwork, including: paintings, murals, artifacts, documents, media, architectural features, and historical and archival items. Smithsonian conservators also train their Haitian counterparts in the skills of conservation and restoration, to help build and promote a sustainable Haitian-led center.

The work of rescuing Haiti’s threatened art evolved into an opportunity to relationship-build, to share “common values” around heritage conservation, and also an opportunity for new shared creative cultural expressions. Understood by Haitian counterparts as “arts for survival” that activate the relationship between culture and resilience through the interconnections between art, healing and community, so far these include a documentary film, considerable media coverage, a website, as well as new museum exhibitions focused on the recovery effort.

Notable is the kind of U.S.-Haitian relationship this project represents. A cultural recovery base was set up in Haiti, rather than bringing the artworks to the U.S. for treatment. Capacity-building of Haitian counterparts is one major feature of the project going forward. Cultural conservators from the Smithsonian and other U.S. institutions have taken a supporting role in helping Haiti consolidate its own efforts. All decisions about relative cultural value in the work of identifying, inventorying, and prioritizing individual items of cultural heritage are made by Haitians. The guiding question of the collaboration is “What do Haitians want to do?” A basic goal of the project is to preserve the ability of the Haitian people “to tell their own story to future generations.”

This collaborative work is making the case that effective cultural diplomacy need not aspire to control the message. It is not best deployed when closely linked to the priorities of policy makers or defined national interests. Nor is it always desirable for acts of cultural diplomacy to be framed in terms of the goal of the representation of a people. The development of new applied humanities networks, which feature the efforts of U.S.-based cultural producers and workers, suggests another approach, which we might take note of as a means to rethink conventional wisdom about cultural diplomacy. The new approach includes: working through collaboration rather than exchange, ceding authority while bringing skills, promoting the agency of others, and pursuing shared creative outcomes, while seeking to address the needs of others in humanitarian terms. This approach avoids trying to convert people into receptive audiences for our own story—however much we happen to like it.