



Craft as METHOD

Aarti Kawra (HAB Academic Director)

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In November 2022, Humanities Across Borders (HAB) co-hosted a Graduate Humanities Institute (GHI) Workshop titled 'Craft as METHOD' (craftasmethod.org) together with Senegalese partners of the University of Gaston Berger (UGB), Saint Louis, and supported by the Mellon Foundation's Consortium of Humanities Centers and Institutes (CHCI). The weeklong workshop brought HAB partners from as far as Mexico, India, Singapore, Thailand, Taiwan, the US, and the Netherlands, as well as colleagues from neighbouring Mali and Ghana, to the historic oceanic port of West Africa. Inscribed under the UNESCO convention as a site of 'outstanding universal value,' an island wedged between two arms of the mouth of the river Senegal, Saint Louis has most recently been marked as the place of origin of 'Ceebu jën,' a rice, vegetables, and fish dish whose recipe comes from local fishing communities on the island.

The meeting was an occasion to use 'craft' as a point of departure to demonstrate the educational (pedagogical and curricular) potential of open discussions between scholars, artists, designers, museum and library professionals, community practitioners, NGOs, and other civic actors against the backdrop of the lived experience of local participants, and the social, economic, political, and ecological contingencies of their context.

The location of the HAB meeting in Africa was significant, not only because it was the first in-person meeting of the HAB consortium partners outside Asia since 2020 but also because it opened the question of 'craft' as legitimate knowledge, epistemologically eclipsed since colonial times. This topic has been a preoccupation among HAB partners for some time now. Meeting in the colonial architectural setting of Saint Louis, with the students from a university whose first stone was laid by anti-colonial political thinker and first president of Senegal, Léopold Sédar Senghor, in 1975, put a spotlight on HAB's focus on civic engagement using the local realities of craft as a shared experiential setting and intellectual pre-occupation.

For most participants, the most significant aspect of the Workshop was the insertion of community-based craft practitioners, artists, designers, photographers, and writers whose work is embedded in the culture and ecology of Saint Louis and its surroundings. Not only did this elevate the discussions that took place during the roundtables and in smaller groups, but it also encouraged dialogue among artisans practicing different crafts - and from different regions. Following the workshop, there were many proposals for shared syllabi, modules, and graduate schools around indigo or glass beads, in collaboration with practitioners, museum professionals, and other stakeholders, along the Asia-Africa axis of collaborative knowledge. The workshop was also an opportunity to rethink not only how knowledge is produced but also where it resides, with whom and how it is acquired.

"Hearing the conversations between Muhammed Mudasir Tijani, a professional indigo-dyer and Ebenezer Djaba Nomada "Cedi," a famous glass bead-maker from Ghana, showed the value of broader dialogue among craft producers and between craft

producers and academics. Similarly, Soxna, who makes jewelry out of cloth, participated in Cedi's demonstration—sharing and displaying his beads along with her own. Given the fact that Cedi is an English speaker and Saana is a French speaker, their communication-through-craft also showed the way in which learning about physical objects transcends language."

Wendy Singer, Kenyon College Ohio, USA

"Language is not an insurmountable barrier when talking of materials and practice. It became evident when I, as a listener not conversant with the language and having to abstract ideas with help from neighbours at the presentation, suddenly recognised a 'wow' moment. It first happened when Évelyne was presenting "Southern pottery: clays from Casamance" and she described how she washed the salt out of the mangrove delta clay using a technique borrowed from drinking water collection funnels in her home region. Another similar moment happened during the presentation by Ebenezer from Cedi Beads, when hearing of the observation that the clay of termite anthills is a naturally produced firebrick for the kilns."

Surajit Sarkar, Founder Centre for Community Knowledge, Ambedkar University Delhi, India

"We met the practitioners from the Workshop again at their booths just across the street from our hotel. Few hours ago, they were demonstrating their craft, expressing their life's challenges and sharing their thoughts with us at the Workshop venue. We heard them speak about the making of pottery, wax-print clothes and glass paintings, along with their stories and gestures of pride. Issues such as the ecological relations of craft to mangroves and rivers, feminist strength, China's force of appropriation in the global market of goods and material resources... at once became 'real' and made a deep impression upon us. There was no need for any academic concept or theory to establish this understanding. At these moments, I was a student inspired by a 'master's' class."

Min-Chin Chiang, Taipei National University of the Arts, Taiwan

"It was clear that in-person meetings that span a few days allow for so much more productive conversations than online ones. To be sure, online meetings can get the basic job done, but there is much creative 'bouncing-around' of ideas when people are seated around a table, whether during official meetings or over lunch/ dinner. A few of us, for instance, began to talk about having students across different contexts - India, the Netherlands, Brazil - interact with each other around emergent situated social justice questions. It immediately struck us as a worthwhile endeavor, and we have since then started working on developing the idea and applying for small grants to make this possible."

Rohit Negi, Ambedkar University, Delhi India

"During my stay in Saint-Louis, I would be continually confronted with the gap between the formal façade of statehood and modern enterprise and the everyday practice of eking out a living, especially on an island village-city, which quickly looks like a fishbowl for those at the bottom of the chain of production and consumption. In this regard, there is not much difference between the countries across the border and the region."

Mohomodou Houssouba, Mali and University of Basel, Switzerland

"This experience has inspired me to further center questions of craft as forms of knowledge production and transmission into both my research and pedagogy. I am now working with a group of colleagues to establish a dye garden on campus (University of California, Riverside) to use for teaching purposes, for example."

Jody Benjamin, University of California Riverside, USA

"The workshop further revealed that through the study of crafts, scholars can interrogate histories of people, labour, and gender relations, as well as issues of trade and cross/cultural learning. For example, the Senegalese bead weaver talked about how she drew inspiration from glass bead

making in Ghana, while Cedi, the Ghanaian bead maker, revealed how he learnt the Murano technique from his global engagements. We can also see the interconnectedness between the practices as well as the challenges that practitioners in Ghana and Senegal face. It also became evident that we can conceive craft as non-textual reading. For example, by seeing different colours, shapes, and forms of beads, you can tell value, class, rituals, and symbolism."

Eric Lawer, Institute for African Studies, University of Ghana

"At Leiden University College, we are discussing the questions around decolonizing academia. The HAB approach provides tools for how to do this. It is not just about shifting the readings or expanding the canon but also really questioning where knowledge resides. Does it only reside in universities? Or in the Global North or even the Global South? The week in St. Louis solidified that if we want to decolonize, we must shift whose knowledge we value. For too long, only one type of knowledge or Umwelt was praised. There are opportunities to shift this paradigm. Shifting this idea of knowledge is also shifting power dynamics."

Jyothi Thrivikraman, Leiden University College, The Hague

The Unknown University: notes on 'Collaboration as Method'

Laura Erber (IIAS Fellowship Programme Coordinator)

I attended the Craft as METHOD workshop—in my capacity as the (new) Coordinator of the IIAS Fellowship Programme—to explore possible links between the fellowship programme and Humanities Across Borders (HAB). What is striking about HAB is the effective form of collaboration established there; it all depends on a common desire to transform institutions from the inside.

The Unknown University is the title of the volume that brings together the poetic work of the Chilean author Roberto Bolaño. The word "University" in his works does not name a fixed and delimited institution, but evokes learning processes from which life and society, in their complex entanglement, are not neutralized beforehand. I use Roberto Bolaño's title and its web of possible meanings here because, in a certain way, the experience participating as an outsider-insider in the HAB meetings in Saint-Louis, Senegal, has been the closest I have been to the Unknown University. The Unknown University will then be the name of a spacetime of experiences of ephemeral communities, experiences where thinking, creating, and living are not distinguishable from each other.

Due to their dynamics and synergy, the meetings of the HAB allow a reflection on collaboration as a method, which involves an enormous amount of invisible work difficult to describe in the documents that normally account for our academic activities.

The HAB meeting brought to light the concreteness of the effects—dramatic for some—of the isolation produced by the pandemic as well as of the community and academic reconfigurations it generated. The speeches of each member were guided fundamentally by a need to continue to elaborate, from mutual listening and collective effort, an effectively south-south academic (and trans-academic) platform. They took place beyond the design determined by the modern forms of control of the modes of valuing knowledge in this new axis of intellectual engagement not controlled by the North.

This meeting, the interventions of each partner, the reports of activities implemented, and the clashes with the



bureaucracy of the university machinery and the regional/national powers and their vicissitudes make the notion of collaboration more dense and concrete. Collaborative projects aimed at building more porous institutions require a struggle that can last for years with the university administration. This work, which involves the slow navigation of bureaucracy, is also part of the gestures of collaboration when it ceases to be a harmless word at the service of beautiful descriptions of academic life.

There is an enormous amount of work involved in the construction of a space of exchange that effectively values the moment of meeting. Collaboration as a method starts by defending the importance of bringing together researchers and practitioners from very different countries and contexts. To do so, it avoids building an artificially neutral environment guided by the pure idea of time optimisation and the corporate idea of efficiency.

Collaboration as a method allows us to reflect on the bottlenecks, on the fatigue and on the gaps that the academic space imposes. Instead of being seen as sacrificing the individual trajectory in the name of the institutional community, cooperation between HAB members is taken as the very vocation of higher education spaces.

The University as we know it will only be transformed by the mass of critical energy of the "unknown universities" that also inhabit it if scholars can take on their discomfort and reinvent their role by going beyond nostalgia, discouragement, or magical solutions imposed from above.

For information on the HAB programme: www.humanitiesacrossborders.org