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From Institutions to Falchas: Rethinking Cultural Relations through Collective Practice

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'[...] grammar is just the way we chart relationships in language. [...] maybe a grammar of animacy could lead us to whole new ways of living in the world'

Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*

Developed through a series of online consultations during the Covid years, the *Asia-Europe Cultural Diplomacy Lab* brought together the author of this text alongside artists, cultural practitioners, and government representatives. While this text is spoken in the plural grammatical form, echoing the spirit of collective dreaming and the co-created processes I've taken part in, the voice is ultimately mine shaped by my perspective. We will later turn to the *falcha*, a communal resting space in Newari culture, as a lens for rethinking cultural relations.

This essay engages in an experiment: It seeks to weave observations of how practices and spaces may enable collective dreaming. How to untangle cultural relations as intercultural exchange marked by colonial hierarchies and exclusion and to create shared imaginative and ethical world-building practices? Where and how can organisations create spaces that embrace the expansive potential of collective sharing, thinking and action that foreground social change?

Architect and founder of Dark Matter Labs Indy Johar suggests that we as humanity must shift from economies of '1 Am' to economies of 'Many Are'. This aligns with decolonial thinkers like De la Cadena and Escobar who invite us to move from universal, hierarchical frameworks toward *pluriversal* ways of knowing, spaces where multiple worlds and relations can coexist and shape institutional practice. Patterns of control and approval mechanisms still lie in systems beyond our control, while practices shift towards cultural values that embrace solidarity, collective wisdom and co-created futures.

True intercultural understanding and connections happen when two- or multiple-directional dialogue is enabled across cultures, where platforms are created for the unfolding of knowledge exchange. When networks come together, they cross-fertilise, building mutual trust and diversity, creating synergies and trust. We will now share a few examples of institutional practices where groups of people came together to critically (re)frame cultural heritage as relational practice. It's within this problematic knowledge formation and imposed power structures of the past, that we need to consider current complexity within cultural relations across regions and continents, where power imbalances are still entrenched within cooperation and funding mechanisms.

The *Collecting Otherwise* programme (Het Nieuwe Instituut, 2022–ongoing) in Rotterdam supports collective participatory engagement for decolonial archiving within their own institutional collection through an intersectional and multidisciplinary working group. They address the archival gaze and propose reinterpretations to highlight among others overlooked contributions by women in planning and design or propose alternative approaches to acquiring, classifying and sharing heritage. Through their *Tool Shed* as methodology, they also engage in reflecting further on the Dutch Indonesian colonial legacies embedded in their institutional collections and archive. In this way these bottom-up approaches disentangle outdated narratives of privilege and supports a lived ecology of relational care and plurality.

In the UK, the *Transforming Collections* project (UAL Decolonising Arts Institute, 2021–2025) invited researchers to critically engage with western-centric interpretative assemblages and absences within museum collections and archives. This process surfaced colonial interdependencies within heritage spaces and enabled new, plural narratives, inviting artists into a reflective engagement through a durational artist in residence. Within this work, collections could be reimagined as living texts centring artists previously excluded and marginalised from national museum stories. This work engaged in a reflective process: becoming a site of relational dreaming rather than static heritage. In doing so, the project opened a space to pause, questioning imperial attributions within collection materials and opening new meanings and connection to emerge.

Another two examples of innovative community-led practices within heritage spaces are *Troubling Standards* by the History of Science Museum in Oxford and the *Curating, Discomfort* project by the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow. The first sought to tackle meaningful inclusion, with several community groups reflecting on gaps in museum narratives and highlighting issues of absence and representation. The second addresses contested collections by engaging community curators to reinterpret objects and present alternative narratives. Together, these contributions reveal how community dialogue can become a site for dreaming cultural relations and how demand for such approaches now outweighs accessible opportunities.

These art-design and curatorially-led programmes echoed by a growing number of a multiplicity of critical diasporic visual and performing artists, as well as filmmakers, propose alternative storytelling practices that refuse inherited colonial logics.

Seeding Transnational Infrastructures

Our human relations, interdependencies and our worldviews are shaped when *in conversation*, rooting relationality in practice. These forms of conversation spark instances of collective dreaming as perceived in non-Western cultures - a process of imagination - where the manifestation of futures comes to life when imagined.

Dreaming is not only a metaphor, but a space for connecting positionalities, embracing the unknown and making the known invisible, especially in reparative practices. Following interventions rooted in institutional practices, models for best practices in collective dreaming can be made concrete, when reflecting, reimagining, and reweaving meaning.

There is no set rule on how to dialogue, but if it's proposed with mutuality at its core, it signals understanding, nourishment, expansion, and can strengthen our sense of belonging. Spaces for dialogue and exchange, social learning and openness shape an empathic worldview, deeply nuanced and rooted in an understanding beyond the Self, a shared dream space. This action of bodies converging is intangible, it is linked with heritage, and shapes new assemblages of co-existence, from where to dream of entangled futures—futures that are yet becoming, unpredictable and fluid. We would then argue that these facilitated spaces enable momentum for collective sharing, performing rituals as communities of practice.

Bodies and minds require these spaces from where to nurture collective wisdom. However, too often global majority citizens are transformed into bodies under surveillance when engaging in international cultural relations. And so, we recognise the fragility of these encounters as they become rarer and more precious. When documenting plural voices, absences are noticeable. Too often, bodies travelling to meetings are legitimised through visa regimes and border controls. What they bring in conversation and into the collective dreaming is their sovereign relation to land, kin, culture and situated worldmaking perspective. It is undisputable that transnational meetings and collective engagement through intercultural dialogue need cross-institutional approaches and multiple funding capacity.

The 2024 Aëia-Europe Cultural Diplomacy Lab cohort proposed a series of [recommendations](#) intended to inspire policy or alternative models of practice that can respond more fluidly to traditional policymaking. In dialogue, we co-created understanding and shared learning, and these values and principles remain open to diverse framing. The following questions also grew out of this collective process, reflecting our effort to articulate a more relational foundation for international cultural cooperation. We offer them as prompts for future reflection and action:

- How can we bring greater care into international cultural cooperation projects?
- How can we act in solidarity with colleagues and partners in a world in upheaval?
- How can we ensure that time for artistic research and development is factored into exchanges and relationships?

Understanding necessitates time, so we invite the readers to engage with these recommendations slowly. Evoking slowness to dwell with the unknowing, a space for new knowledge(s) constellations, a formation of plurality.

'In our collective reflections on cultural cooperation, we spoke about the need to see cultural relations within both local and transnational frames. This resonated deeply with me. My work exists in that unstable middle—between me, my work, between histories, between languages.'

Nitish Jai

We need to stay conscious of the ways culture and cultural diplomacy is sometimes harnessed as an instrument of statecraft in the international arena. Yet rather than serving strategic agendas, we root ourselves in the relational pluriverse grammar of cultural cooperation. In entrenched bureaucratic processes we observe that the human and planetary wellbeing aspects are often missing from this meaningful equation. This very gap between language and values used by cultural producers and artists versus policy makers and funders lays a profound question of how we are to bridge and invoke a new language formation that could hold a making and creating *with*, not separating across organisations, collectives and the vast planetary selfhood.

In the 2025 edition of the Lab in Indonesia, the proposed theme was inspired by the *gotong royong* ethos, a term that translates to a collaborative way of working together in the spirit of goodwill and reciprocity, knowing that one can count on the support of others working towards a communal goal; invoked by Hindu-Buddhist practices deeply rooted in anti-colonial independence movement, this proposed concept can inspire a way of working that can truly transform top-down driven cultural relations.

How to enable a multitude of porous dialogical spaces to come to life and experiment with this concept through practice?

One answer is to create new spatial configurations from where to open possibilities for *languageing* as an active process of engaging, producing and negotiating active meaning and building trust to listen deeply and to dream anew collectively. The other is to lean into methods often found within artist-led methodologies and practices, ranging from visualisations to embodied dreaming.

Beyond the Institution: Moving with Cultures

During a recent visit to Nepal, I've encountered the traditional architecture of the *falcha*. Built alongside roads and temples and offered to the world by the Newari indigenous people of the Kathmandu valley, falchas are carved wooden platforms offering a place to rest, to debate or to simply be, they act as communal nodes of stillness part architecture, part invitation. Not built for transactions, but for presence.

When engaging with a constellation of cultural actors that come together in dialogue, spaces that support this activity: the *falchas* in our societies are often university halls, libraries, independent cultural and art spaces, museums and galleries, squares and offices of various kinds including grassroots organisations and cafes, co-living spaces and virtual spaces, in their core forming a cultural infrastructure. Further, formations of networks and spaces within the digital arena become part of this infrastructure too, but often poorly acknowledged within traditional cultural relations frameworks. These are then often spaces where transnational and local cause-led networks thrive to create synergies, new tools and methodologies.

Falchas as hubs embrace culture at its core: they represent culture of relations and interdependence within our society. Our understanding of pluri-localities of wisdom that are born from the encounters in co-creative spaces of mutual learning across cultures trespass borders and institutions.

If we are to imagine the full potential of the spatiality of cultural relations, countering the current global surge of autocratization and segregation, and the erosion of human and political rights, where are we to dream the formation of cultural relations? Inspired by deep engagement across groups that share the same goal or values, we thrive through spatial architectural practices that speak to our collective living experience: the falchas, the planetary common, spaces where to dialogue and to dream.

In the slowness of transitions and in fractured communities affected by violence, genocide and war, how can we sustain new formations of worldbuilding where we cultivate and nurture our capacity to bring culture to unfold? We must find ways to cultivate and nurture the unfolding of culture in space—to cross-pollinate, to dream, to act with all our relations, creating more *falchas*.

I will close this essay by sharing an urgent project that speaks to this intertwining of spatial and cultural seeding: The Rohingya Cultural Memory Centre. Built on a refugee camp in Ukhia, in the Bangladeshi region of Chittagong, proposed by IOM, the UN Migration Agency and conceptualised by architect Rizvi Hassan, this space was created in conversation and in collaboration with the Rohingya's craftspeople themselves. They contributed to build the roofing structure using their own bamboo weaving techniques and knowledge of material to create the *tottar ghor* (a timber house). Embodying a conscious way that helps preserve the identity of the artisans and their indigenous knowledge, people's hands became site of 'haptic histories,' helping the community to participate and relate to place through heritage. This collaborative effort enabled the formation of a learning and exhibition centre as a shelter for future dreaming of cultural relations rooted in community, seeing hope, a *falcha* acting as cultural pillar.

When we move our bodies spatially, across countries and regions, we move our heart and minds. When we move heart and minds, we move bodies and speech; with this we move insights, cultures, our ancestral transmissions deeply embedded within our identities, homes, as well as our local squares where we gather, converse, sing and imagine.

We witnessed how spatial and relational dialogues propelled by civil society and communities, often in conversation with philanthropic organisations in the arts, culture, and sometimes humanitarian aid in distressed hubs foreground interdependence and relationality. A way to contribute to and participate in cultural life, and in doing so, we are already redefining our dream space for cultural relations.

This invites a transformative rethinking of how we live and belong in the world culturally and spatially. We argue for recognising and resourcing falchas, both physical and digital, as essential cultural infrastructure for just and plural futures. Embracing both the spatial formations of fire circles and rituals, and the virtual spaces where we cultivate and nurture our capacity to let cultures cross-pollinate: to dream of more collective spaces from which to act in symphony with all that is, with all our relations.

By embracing non-linear aspects and the experimental potential of culturally driven practices motivated by plurality, we can imagine different outcomes for our shared future and engage in commons and people-centred policies, especially in times of uncertainty and polycrisis.

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The work is accessible to a broad audience, although the language may be specific to academics. It focuses on methodology, offering an overview of related cultural projects emerging from local contexts.

The aim is to create a bridge between different disciplines, between artistic and academic modes of analysis. A stimulating conversation through cultural projects; it might be helpful to describe one of the projects mentioned in more detail. I appreciated the guidelines, with a series of questions that help deepen the dialogue and invite reflection on different frameworks.

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