



Cross-Disciplinary Impact and Influence

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Critical societal challenges

Since 2015, the Global Arts + Humanities has invested in cross-disciplinary collaborations that amplify the transformative power of the arts and humanities to respond to critical societal challenges. *Critical societal challenges* — those which are multi-causal, multidimensional and resistant to singular solutions — push the boundaries of disciplinary understanding and call for cross-disciplinary collaborations, the integration of diverse perspectives and multifaceted solutions.

The construct of *solutions* is but one framework for understanding impact, especially the impact of humanistic research and creative practices. The phrase “critical societal challenges” itself bears layers of meaning worth deconstructing. *Critical* can mean urgent, pressing or necessary, but it also points to a methodological orientation. This orientation includes the recognition that modes of inquiry are informed not only by disciplinary frames but also by material histories and embodiments. Likewise, *solutions to complex problems* can only be transformative if they attend to these historical and cultural contexts.

The Society of Fellows

The Global Arts + Humanities’ new signature **Society of Fellows** program is structured to provide faculty and students a supportive environment to identify and engage critical societal challenges from diverse disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives.

The inaugural 2020-21 Society of Fellows program brought together eight Ohio State faculty fellows, 19 graduate fellows and 11 undergraduate fellows to produce and share cross-disciplinary research on issues related to the annual theme of Human Rights Past and Futures. The program’s impact is due in large part to the disciplinary diversity of the cohort:

- **Faculty fellows** span 8 departments (Departments of African and African American Studies, English, Geography, History, Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, Philosophy, Political Science, Spanish and Portuguese, and Teaching and Learning) across two colleges (College of Arts and Sciences and College of Education and Human Ecology).
- **Graduate fellows** represent 11 departments (Departments of Anthropology; Art; Arts Administration, Education and Policy; Dance; English; History; History of Art; Linguistics; Spanish and Portuguese; Theatre; and Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies) as well as the School of Music and the Center for Folklore Studies.
- **Undergraduate fellows** from 12 different majors (business; dance; economics; linguistics; medical anthropology; migration studies; political science; romance language studies; Russian; sociology; Spanish; and women’s, gender and sexuality studies) and nine different minors (Asian American studies; civic engagement; economics; geography; human rights; Portuguese; public policy; studio art; and women’s, gender and sexuality studies).

The Society of Fellows annual theme of Human Rights Past and Futures has proved to be a sustaining conceptual framework to address the challenges and divisions that the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened. Through spirited biweekly seminar meetings and participation in the monthly **Digital Dialogue series**, fellows contemplated human rights *sphere of influence*, exploring the potential and the limitations of human

rights frameworks to address both emergent crises and systemic inequities. They also considered the forces that compel the norms of socio-political and legal recognition and which communities and populations are perceived as bearers of human rights and under what conditions.

Sphere of influence

Within international politics, the concept “sphere of influence” refers to a sovereign nation’s power and control over a foreign area or territory. To consider human rights sphere of influence, therefore, is to consider historical struggles for rights and recognition. It requires understanding the paradoxes of human rights universalism, including powerful democratic nations use of human rights appeals to justify violent occupations and interventions.

In the Society of Fellows, critical and cross-disciplinary humanistic methods of analysis and practices informed fellows’ critiques of the sphere of influence paradigm within international human rights politics and scholarship. Contemplating human rights sphere of influence prompted vital conversations among fellows about advocacy and allyship, intercultural communication and translation, and global-local interdependencies and complicities. Through their research and creative productions, fellows traced iterations of rights claims as they travelled through advocacy networks, cultural productions and academic scholarship. They examined the policing of space and citizenship and interrogated the links between the global climate crisis and forced migration and displacement. Joined by guest scholars and artist-activists Iyko Day, Annie Isabel Fukushima, Eunjung Kim, Tiffany Lethabo King, Rachel Lewis, Cristian Pineda and Shui-yin Sharon Yam, fellows participated in the highly-attended Digital Dialogue webinar series, offering insights on topics ranging from Indigenous rights, disability activism, cultural heritage and colonialism, and the role of arts and humanities in fostering critical human rights practices and imagining more equitable futures.

Innovation and Impact

Just as the Society of Fellows’ multidisciplinary structure compelled a critical approach to human rights, assessing the impact of cross-disciplinary, collaborative work requires a shift in institutional orientation. It requires that we break down the sphere of influence paradigm and its emphasis on a metric of sovereign control and dominance by demystifying disciplinary protocols and evaluation systems. And because social change is a process and not a destination, the metrics used to discern impact must attend to process. To do collaborative work is to embrace the spaces in-between disciplinary logics and imaginaries; these moments of encounter and recognition of the in-between spaces provide a way for us to chart an ethical path that counters solutions that reproduce exclusivity and hierarchy. Shifting away from hierarchical calculations of value toward relationally-constituted rubrics enables a view of impact as a process attuned to inclusivity and collaboration and to fostering shared potentials. This shift prompts us to ask critically-reflexive questions: *Who determines what counts as knowledge? How do we capture knowledge as an iterative, collaborative process? To what degree are all stakeholders included in these processes?*

To this end, a team of Global Arts + Humanities faculty and staff have developed an innovative suite of cross-disciplinary tools for use by our affiliates. These tools will supplement conventional disciplinary assessments and performance metrics by drawing greater attention to scholarly practices and processes of engagement. For instance, our collabORATE card deck — which will also be offered as a virtual, multi-platform experience — aims to help cross-disciplinary teams translate disciplinary language, methods and practices; amplify and articulate intuitive and cultivated methods; and facilitate processes that enable teams to converge around a challenge requiring multi-faceted solutions.

The Global Arts + Humanities Discovery Theme provides material support and conceptual tools to foster cross-disciplinary inquiry, drive innovation and amplify impact. We invite you to learn more about our **Society of Fellows, funding opportunities** and **programming**.

