The "Dialogic Museum" Revisited: A Collaborative Reflection

John Kuo Wei Tchen and Liz Sevcenko

In May 2010, Jack Tchen and Liz Sevcenko sat down over soup noodles to reflect on their early experiences and subsequent struggles with the idea of "dialogue-driven" practices, and its implications for museums. This collaborative essay began with that conversation's transcript and then layered subsequent thoughts and edits.

Jack (John Kuo Wei) Tchen is a historian, curator, and dumpster diver. In 1980 he co-founded the New York Chinatown History Project, now called the Museum of Chinese in America (MoCA). He co-curated the museum’s new core exhibition in its new space that opened in 2009. He is the founding director of the Asian/Pacific/American Studies Program and Institute at New York University.

Liz Sevcenko is founding director of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, a network of historic sites that foster public dialogue on human rights and social justice issues, and inspire visitors to address their contemporary legacies. Before launching the Coalition, she spent over ten years developing dialogic public history projects in New York City and around the country.

How did you come to your original idea of "dialogue"?

Jack: In 1989 I wrote "Towards a Dialogic Museum" reflecting on nine years of work with the New York Chinatown History Project (NYCHP), now the Museum of Chinese in America (MoCA). It marks a certain moment with all the possibilities of that moment. We were a part of the emergence of the "new social history" movement, which pioneered a variety of ways to document the story of people who had not been part of dominant historical narratives.

Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World

The Chinatown History Project related to how history, politics, and citizenship/power emerged in New York. In New York City we have the New-York Historical Society or the Museum of the City of New York— they both represent a historical formation of white Anglo American institutional power that emerged in the 19th century. But what was/is not collected? What is not exhibited? What dialogues are not going on? And therefore, in that absence, why must different collections begin to emerge in that breach?

Another reason for the formation of the NYCHP was a disconnect between new immigrants from Hong Kong and Canton and the older rural Cantonese...
The Lower East Side Tenement Museum re-creates the apartments of former immigrant residents of 97 Orchard Street, such as the Levine family, who ran a dressmaking shop out of their home in the 1890s. Photo by Battman Studios.

immigrants who had been through the era of the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882-1968) and survived it. When new immigrants arrived, they did not know about the Exclusion Laws. They were not familiar with the anti-Chinese/anti-East Asian racism of the U.S. So part of the NYCHP’s goal was to create that bridge to communicate back and forth within the Chinese New York community. It wasn’t a project that was meant to be just going out to the larger public.

For me, to be dialogue-driven is a work process where documentation, meaning, and re-presentation are acknowledged to be co-developed with those whom the history is of, for, and about. Conventionally, curators are trained to become experts of a collection already deemed valuable to a historical enterprise or university. When we wanted to explore the formation of New York Chinatown in the 19th century, we realized it was founded by the thousands of small hand laundries scattered in the New York metropolitan region. There was not documentation about this low-status, racially excluded community. There were no collections. There were no academics studying this experience, except for one. There were no Chinese American historical groups. This was a subaltern history best understood by those who lived the experience and came from it.

As young, college-educated smart alecks, we quickly became humbled. To be dialogue-driven was to admit what was actually going on and to demystify the knowledge formation process. Mike Frisch’s theory of “shared authority” is critical to this working process. Issues of power are always at stake. And fundamentally, the understanding of the significance of a past time/place from the vantage of the present moment, what Mikhail Bakhtin called chronotopes, are always at stake.

That one scholar—who did a brilliant ethnography of Chicago area hand laundries—was Paul Chan Pang Siu, a University of Chicago sociology Ph.D. student who was the son of a laundryman. When he sought to publish his dissertation, the University of Chicago Press turned him down. I’m proud to say that thirty-six years later I was able to get The Chinese Laundryman: A Study of Social Isolation published (1988). He passed away just months before the book came out, but Professor Siu was delighted to finally have his study gain the recognition it deserved.

Liz: I read your essay in college, and it was totally mind-blowing and inspirational to me. I was seized by the hidden histories that could emerge in what I understood to be your definition of a dialogic museum: one whose narrative is developed entirely through the diverse stories and perspectives of those who lived it, not as a master narrative written by a historian. This inspired me to try my own small dialogic museum project: a history of Hillhouse High School in New Haven composed only of objects donated by different generations of students, from the 1920s through the present, and the memories they wrote. What interested me most was what happened when they all came together to see the exhibition, and were so surprised to see that others had such different experiences at the same place: like many urban public schools, it had totally transformed from the fifties to the seventies to the nineties. This made me think that community-curated exhibitions provide the opportunity for another type of dialogue: exchange across...
difference about the different ways people can experience the same thing, why they did, and why it matters.

But by the time I started working in New York in the mid-nineties, I assumed that uncovering marginalized histories was a basic responsibility of museums—that particular idea of “dialogue” was no longer radical in the field. But many museums began embracing the idea of opening a space for “the community” to tell their stories without raising the questions of power, access, and voice that were so central to NYCHP’s approach—questions of who was speaking, who was not, and what we mean by community—were not raised. In some cases, when the “public” were invited to shape the narrative, they could even reinforce existing inequalities. When I started at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, for instance, many visitors felt honored to have their ancestors’ experiences of working-class tenement life validated as American history for the first time in a museum. But many spoke out to distance themselves from new immigrants living in similar conditions. The idea of “dialogue” we pursued drew connections between groups with different experiences. But we also wanted to facilitate discussion on the deeper issues underlying social conflicts. This was harder.

So the museum’s president, Ruth Abram, decided to reach out to museums across the world to see if others felt that they had a similar mission. What started as a meeting among nine historic sites from radically different contexts has become, a decade later, an international exchange community collaborating on these issues.

From the beginning, the idea of “dialogue” brought museums in very disparate contexts together. The group decided to call themselves “Sites of Conscience” and to create a deliberate definition of a new kind of museum form. One of the main foundations of Sites of Conscience was this commitment to “stimulate dialogue on pressing social issues.”

Over the last ten years, “dialogue” has been the idea that binds us, and at the same time, what’s most hotly debated, in a wonderfully productive way. There are at least three different ideas, or layers, of a “dialogic museum” circulating, with different implications for sharing authority.

The first idea of a dialogic museum is one that promotes public discussion of a truth that has been forgotten or deliberately suppressed. This is a particularly critical goal for museums working to expose a truth that the state has denied for decades and make it incontrovertible—for instance that 30,000 Argentineans were disappeared, or that the US government authorized and practiced torture. Here the goal is to get people to recognize and talk about something that’s critical for their understanding of their society and their place in it, to make this truth part of an accepted portrait of who we are. In this “dialogue,” it’s public officials, the media, and perhaps educators who are doing the talking, supporting a single story and establishing its credibility, so that they shape the way the nation collectively talks about the past. This is not so much about sharing historical authority, but seizing it—taking it out of corrupt hands and using it for social good.

The second idea of a dialogic museum is based on the kind of community curation pioneered by the NYCHP and theorized in your article. Here it seems “dialogue” is between academic historians and people with lived experience; the established exclusionary narrative and the individual story that challenges it; and between the different perspectives of each individual story. Face-to-face discussions among people with shared experience can also help to unearth new memories, or develop new collective understandings. This is sharing museums’ and historians’ traditional curatorial authority, tapping into the knowledge and perspectives of people who have been marginalized. It also shares the authority of a single narrative, embracing multiple perspectives that together create a larger truth.

The third idea builds on both of the first two, but goes a step further, opening the museum as a space for using new truths about the past as the starting point for discussion about their unresolved legacies, and what we should do about them. Here, “dialogue” is more literal, direct face-to-face discussion among visitors—tourists and those with direct experience alike—on questions of shared concern, such as Who is American? and What responsibilities do we have to each other? Questions on which, because of their different past experiences, they may have very different perspectives. Here, sharing authority is about serving as a forum for open discussion of the implications of the past for the present, as opposed to imposing a single conclusion or moral.

Tchen, Sevcenko, The “Dialogic Museum” Revisited
**Jack:** I agree all three ideas are operative. The Chinese Exclusion Laws are not taught as a major issue in U.S. history and are unknown to the great majority of Americans. We’ve sought to collaborate with the bearers of this knowledge, Chinese Americans subjected to exclusion and racism, as the laws violated their human rights, to document their stories and then accurately contextualize them. And once affirmed, we’ve fashioned public programs for the larger public. This question of what social histories necessitate all three layers of dialogue is what defines a subaltern experience, in other words, to be legally and culturally non-beings, not just non-citizens, but in the case of Chinese in the U.S. during the Exclusion era defined as “alien ineligible for citizenship” or fundamentally un-American.

In effect, this has been the ongoing challenge of the Museum of Chinese in America—to keep all three dialogues alive with different constituencies. For MoCA that founding, internal Chinese American dialogue is incomplete. The fact of the matter is that post-Exclusion Era Chinese Americans continue to be impacted by perceptions of alienness or racialized otherness. The legacy? After so many years of social, cultural, and political marginalization, New Yorkers finally elected the first Chinese American to represent the Manhattan Chinatown/Lower Manhattan district in 2010—190 years after the first arrival. Can MoCA serve both the historical community defined by the struggle with Exclusion and the post-1968 immigration reform community who have enjoyed a new era of official desegregation?

To add another layer, then, is perhaps the most daunting challenge. The formation of an organization that can juggle these multiple dialogues which also operates in a humble dialogic fashion. The conventional hierarchy of 19th- and 20th-century decision-making, with the curator ruling the collections roost, creating a “permanent” interpreted exhibition, then handing it off to educators to bring in schoolchildren, has long needed upending. In the late 20th and early 21st century, the difficulties of fundraising have forced an additional top-down layer—that of the tyranny of constant fundraising, fundraising boards, and private donors and their explicit and implicit agendas. Can a participatory social history be fostered in this era of flat public-sector support and the growing dependence on benevolent donor wealth?

Unfortunately, the wealth of laundry-worker stories—basic human stories, truly—doesn’t pay the bills. Yet their wealth, now embodied in MoCA’s collections, cannot be simply taken for granted. Both Exclusion-era and post-Exclusion-era stories and dialogues must go on.

**Liz:** One major shift in my own personal understanding of dialogue came from the intense debate among Sites of Conscience in different contexts about the relationship between dialogue and truth-telling. I was trained that there was one liberatory way of dealing with the past, and that was to understand it not as an objective reality that one could apprehend with the right sources, but instead as something that’s continually constructed and reconstructed.

It was very challenging to me to meet people who were struggling so hard to establish objective facts: that someone had been raped, or that thirty thousand people had been disappeared, or that six million people had been killed—and most importantly, by whom.

These were truths that had been denied vigorously by powerful forces for so long that it was critical for people to absolutely understand them as fact, not as a construction of anything. These were museums based on the primacy of truth. Forthems, dialogue meant ensuring that people were talking openly about truths that had been silenced. The idea of opening dialogue from or about different perspectives smacked of moral relativism.

For other Sites of Conscience, dialogue meant debating different perspectives on the past. The foundation of their notion of dialogue was an acceptance of the past as something inherently constructed in the present by different individuals and through different individuals’ experiences.

Both forms had a goal of developing critical thinking about dominant narratives, but one sought to replace a false narrative with a true one, and the other sought to encourage analysis of how narratives are constructed in the first place. I think both forms are equally important in the US and in international contexts, and create a really productive tension. So far the sites have begun to connect about an idea of dialogue that affirms the forensic truths of the past, while opening debate on the implications of those truths for the present and future.

**Jack:** In the US, too, we know that histories are contested, but there are certain realities we’re hoping to document. How many Native Americans were here before European contact? How many died from disease, wars, and violence? How many enslaved Africans died on the ships, from violence on plantations?

How can we honestly look at all that and accept it all? I mean, we read it in the textbooks, but do we really understand the fullness of these interactions in all their human dimensions? Given that it is not in living memory, how can we own that past and recognize it?

**Liz:** And then do something with that recognition. I also feel that asserting a truth that’s been uncovered or demanding a recognition may not always complete what we’re trying to do. The question is, “Why is it so important to recognize what happened, and how can it shape how we go from here?”
A museum could say it's about encouraging that kind of recognition or making it impossible not to recognize something once you've been through the museum. But the opportunities lie in creating space for people to confront the implications of their recognition in their own way, without instrumentalizing that recognition for some narrow lesson that the museum itself determines. And exploring those implications must be done together with people with other perspectives. That's where dialogue comes in for me.

**Jack:** But, in fact, these moments of genuine documentation and genuine truth-telling represent a different kind of dialogue than simply: I can say something, and then it's your turn to say something, and then it's your turn. That's how dialogue is often seen in this culture, right? Everybody has a right to say something. And everybody's right is the same.

**Liz:** Right, and that raises a question we're always wrestling with in the Coalition: in our debates, what's up for debate? Should a museum set limits on what people have a right to say? In other words, what is the moral or political role of museums in dialogue?

When we say "dialogue on contemporary issues" a lot of museum folks hear "the museum taking a stand on a contemporary issue," and say they can't conduct dialogues because the museum can't advocate for a particular position. It's disappointing that so few people can imagine that a museum could raise a question on a current issue and have an open dialogue on that question that invites diverse perspectives—when so many museums are doing so very successfully—which is totally different from a museum taking a stand.

But of course if museums are going to raise sensitive questions, they do have an obligation to protect the visitors they invite into dialogue by creating a safe container. Some museums set boundaries to protect forensic truths—to correct people if they make patently false claims—or to protect people against hurtful comments.

**Jack:** Two quick comments. Did the Nazi exterminations of Jews, Romas ("gypsies"), gays, lesbians, and others happen? Certainly, despite what fringe anti-Semitic Holocaust deniers still maintain. Is anti-Semitism a shifting, constructed racist practice that is a bit different from place to place, and changes over time? Yes. As historians, scholars, and informed publics we have the responsibility to keep both truths alive. A book, an exhibition, a dialogue are always engagements of a present moment with explorations of various understandings of contested pasts—such productions mark a publicized knot of that present-past exploration. And as the present shifts and we gain more visceral distance, we lose certain opportunities of understanding and we also potentially gain greater perspective. In democratic participatory cultures, better, more rigorous interpretations emerge and ideally become widely accepted as more truthful. Yet, the ongoing challenge reemerges: what happens when certain truths are quickly glossed over and yet their ongoing inequitable consequences live on?

**Storytelling and sharing authority in the dialogic museum**

**Jack:** The dialogue-driven museum is not simply a technique, and shared authority is not simply a technique. These practices raise foundational questions of history and also trust. How can we trust what's being written by a historian? What are the sources? Are the sources based in archives that are truly resonant with the lives of people who are victimized by some of these laws or on the other side of power?

I think historians have an important role to play in contextualizing individual stories; in helping to parse out what likely happened, what's the difference between a mythical recounting of an event or a policy and something that is more complex and more accurate. But it's not simply the historians who have the authority here. It's also people who have lived the experience. And what about those communities of people who did not have that power to document and archive their perspectives, to develop historians and institutions that would then represent their point of view?

This is the foundational question of authority and trust: what's the basic stuff that historical explorations and meaning can be made from? And when you have two very different perspectives and two very different parts of the power struggle, how do we, in a dialogic context, sort these questions out? Can there be a trusted public venue? This is particularly challenging online, where anyone can blog about anything. Just like we all need to learn "street smarts," we all need to learn history smarts.

**Liz:** I feel like the most common way museums have worked to become dialogic and share authority is to create a space for people to come and share your story, to have your experience validated, to give people a place in history. This has amazing transformative potential in the context of something like the NYCHP. But based on my experience at the Tenement Museum, I think it's also important to recognize that creating a space for
untold stories does not necessarily challenge existing power structures; in fact, it can reinforce them. Honoring the story of a second-generation Ukrainian who grew up in a tenement and believes Chinese immigrants are un-American may validate working-class struggle but also racism. The conclusions people draw from reading other people’s stories or telling their own can be all over the map. It can confirm their worst prejudices; promote tolerance; or have no effect at all. So what’s a museum’s role here? I think museums have to be very deliberate and reflective about how they are serving as spaces for story exchange, and to what end.

There is definitely the StoryCorps model, which argues that creating an open space for the exchange of stories with absolutely no comment or mediation allows amazing, unpredictable things to happen. But I think museums do have the potential to do more than just validate everyone and everything, and instead to tease out some of the power dimensions or the political questions that people’s stories raise. This is absolutely not to take everyone’s very nuanced experiences and stick them into some teleological narrative. Rather, it’s to respect that complexity by drawing connections and raising questions that help people see something different in the familiar. It’s to link stories together in interesting ways, both ones that are totally different from one another and ones that have amazing resonance that the individuals might not have realized. And then, perhaps most important, just ask the questions of, Why do you think they’re different? Why do you think they’re the same? Why does it matter?

**How has your thinking about “dialogue” and museums evolved? What are the issues you’re struggling with now? Complicating who dialogue is between**

**Jack:** Since my initial ideas of dialogue in museums, the questions for me now are, What kinds of spaces are we creating? How are we curating spaces for people to have more in-depth reflection and deliberation, instead of creating a binary of one stark position versus another and asking people to choose one? We’re talking about a more complex, more internal self-reflection, asking, “Why do I think this way?”

When we think of dialogue between ourselves and others, we should think about how “otherness” is in some ways within ourselves as well. We tend to have surface notions of what kinds of people are like us—whether it’s defined by narrow notions of skin color or hair color or whatever it may be—and then who is outside of that. The more interesting question, in this encounter between the self and the other, is: What’s really going on? Within oneself? Between our notion of the self and an other? But especially across differences and across cultures?

**Liz:** I agree! I think the word dialogue, for most people, connotes an exchange between you as this coherent person and somebody else outside you. But one of the big goals of many Sites of Conscience is to provide a space for each participant to recognize and reflect on their own assumptions. The questions facilitators ask at the sites encourage people to have a dialogue with themselves, to question themselves, as a starting point for having any encounter with others. But it’s a constant dialectic: it’s about what kind of reflections you can have about yourself when you’re confronted with a very different perspective. The facilitator starts by asking each person to share their personal experiences and then reflect on how those experiences shaped the opinions or perspectives they are bringing to the table.

**Dialogue in museums: Is it better to feel strange or familiar?**

**Jack:** How do museum spaces play with those tricky boundaries between self and other? Part of the virtue of a museum is that it’s a contained space—as opposed to other spaces of encounter, like neighborhoods or schools—in which a certain kind of concentration of focus is enabled.

**Liz:** Museums can serve as safe spaces to confront difference. It can be done in a way that cuts off opportunities for real engagement, or in a way that provides possibilities for exchanges that wouldn’t otherwise happen. A museum can sort of neatly label all of the kind of “foreign” things people want to learn from, in a contained environment. Or it can be a place where you would come within your own neighborhood to meet and have discussions with other people that wouldn’t take place in some open-ended kind of space, like out in the street. On the one hand, I think our ultimate goal is to make museum spaces an extension of everyday life—places for ongoing engagement with the concerns of everyday life. But our dialogue facilitation trainer always stressed that dialogue is an incredibly unnatural process; and that actually, that’s a helpful thing. “Artificial” doesn’t have to mean uncomfortable: it can just offer a space for people to explore things in a way they’re not able to in other spaces—where they may have circumscribed roles they feel they can’t break out of—in order to delve into sensitive questions in deeper ways. But at the same time, if you make dialogue into a totally strange experience, then it will feel alienating to people and no one will want to do it, or no one will open up. So it’s a balance between building on the familiar while tapping the possibilities of what’s different about museum dialogue.

**Jack:** Early on at the NYCHP, we seized on the idea that reunions are really great spaces for dialogue. All groups have reunions of different kinds. They are a familiar form of making sense of our experiences. But usually reunions are organized in a very thin way that doesn’t allow for the more meaningful explorations you’re actually seeking at the reunion—to explore those past-present questions that are always there.
At Constitution Hill in Johannesburg, a former apartheid prison has been preserved as a historic site and museum, developed in collaboration with former prisoners and guards. Photo by Oscar G.

Liz: That's a great example: should museums replicate existing forms of dialogue, or create a totally artificial space that taps into familiar vocabularies of dialogue, but structures it differently, to do the things that the organic forms don't?

In Johannesburg, Constitution Hill—a prison museum trying to open new conversations on justice in South Africa today—calls their dialogues lekgotla, a word that recalls Botswana village council deliberations, tapping into a reference to a sort of indigenous form of democracy. When I was still there, the Lower East Side Tenement Museum's dialogues were called "Kitchen Conversations," and were held in a space with mismatched wooden chairs, conjuring images of friendly family exchanges. But both lekgotla and Kitchen Conversations try to open more space for equality and exchange than an all-male village council or a hierarchical family table actually have.

Other sites try to break away from existing spaces for exchange altogether, as part of their effort to subvert what they see as a repressive culture or system: the Liberation War Museum in Bangladesh wanted to teach the founding of the Bangladeshi Constitution and its principles of human rights and democratic engagement to students in rural villages. But the culture of learning and exchange in the classroom was so hierarchical that they would bring a bus with a portable exhibition and set it up in the schoolyard, creating a space for more open exchange among students.

One size does not fit all: Adapting different forms of dialogue for different ends

Jack: Part of the question is, how long are museum tours and how much time do you get to spend with visitors? Can enough trust develop over a short amount of time that they can begin by having identified where they or their own family may fit into a larger story; and also open up to thinking about other people's experiences? Is there a way of bringing them into some kind of sustained dialogue past the one visit, given staffing and other resource constraints?

Liz: I think it's also important for institutions to think about dialogue as a tool that can be used in very different ways for very different ends. There's a whole range of achievable goals from modest yet still very powerful, to more ambitious, that can be sought through the adaptable tool of dialogue. The most successful institution I think is one that integrates dialogue in a whole bunch of different ways and doesn't just have everything be didactic, and then this one little space for dialogue.

For example, traditional interpretive planning for exhibitions is organized around themes, which are usually expressed as a series of factual statements, or learning objectives. The Tenement Museum began developing its interpretive plans around questions—questions rooted in the history being interpreted, but equally urgent today—like Who is American? and How are we responsible to each other?—and organized its tours to raise those questions with visitors, including training educators to pose some of those questions during the tour.

If the principle is to pose questions, to allow visitors space to respond to them and to learn from each other's responses, then this can be achieved in all kinds of ways. Exhibitions can invite visitors to respond to questions in written posts, talk-back booths, or voting mechanisms. Educators can pose questions during tours. Short exercises can be conducted during school programs (the Tenement Museum, for one, has about twenty minutes to spend with each school group). The museum can provide one-time, hour-long, facilitated, face-to-face dialogues for walk-in visitors. And going deeper, it can also offer a six-month or ongoing series of dialogues for community leaders or people sitting on different sides of a significant divide, to explore their histories and the issues before them and actually forge ways to work together. Each of these different forms will have different goals, different audiences, and different expectations for outcomes. But they all complement each other.

Change over time: Adapting different forms of dialogue for different moments

Jack: I just want to point out the work of Eric Yamamoto, a legal scholar at the University of Hawai'i-Manoa. In Interracial Justice, Conflict and Reconciliation in Post-Civil Rights America, he theorizes from efforts people have made to dialogue and communicate across racial divides. He focuses on instances of flashpoints between groups literally at each other's throats.

We tend to think of these flashpoints as exceptional moments; but they embody ongoing simmer-
ing tensions that are happening between these crisis moments. How do we then begin to have dialogues between moments of crises, if we think of crises as not so much some exceptional, rare kind of occurrence but as eruptions of unresolved issues?

Yamamoto talks about four phases: recognition, responsibility, reconstruction, and reparations. Each leads to a deeper stage of trust-building, contributing to a fuller and fuller mutual understanding; but also going from simply strictly recognizing and understanding, empathizing, to actually trying to create concrete ways in which understandings change; real investments begin to happen so change happens.

What’s next?

Liz: It's extremely heartening to reflect back on the time since I first read your essay and to see how much these ideas of dialogue, civic engagement, and sharing authority have taken hold. From my experience working with hundreds of museums trying to implement these ideas, it's clear that there's still an urgent need for diverse tools and training on how. But I think we also need to keep the conversation alive about why. In some cases, I feel like the urge to share authority becomes a little tendentious—"we should engage visitors so that more visitors are more engaged." The moral, ethical, or political dimensions—and potential—of the many very different ways of sharing authority are always there, but are not always confronted or tapped into. What is the larger social goal we have as museums, and how, on our small scale, can we contribute to it? What are the transformative possibilities of dialogue we seek—what are we trying to make happen? How can a change in museum practice actually contribute to social change in society?

This doesn’t require museums to take on changing the world by themselves. Museums can think of themselves in relation to other spaces, institutions, and practices in the wider society. What kinds of exchanges among people in the wider society do we want to reinforce, by replicating them at our museum? What new kinds of exchange do we want to introduce, because they’re not taking place in the wider society? In either case, what are the institutions or spaces we can partner or connect with to give what we do more impact?

Another aspect of dialogue that could provide more support to museums, but also increase their impact, is if sharing authority is reimaged as instilling collective responsibility. Sharing authority doesn't need to mean asking museums to do more with less. If a museum is collaborating with a community on developing an exhibition, then there needs to be both a collective ownership of that exhibition and a collective responsibility for maintaining and promoting it. And creating that sense of collective responsibility could be a powerful catalyst for broader social action.

Jack: So what's next? How can we learn from our various efforts, from our various subject positions, and develop more powerful models to reorganize cultural work, human rights, and knowledge production? High-culture Euro American modes of organizing spaces are too constricting. How can we create much more democratic, participatory research, meaning-making, and cultural productions across local, linguistic, and cultural divides? In person and using new media? The issues of growing inequities in the US and internationally continue to haunt globalization and sustainability. These are the urgent questions.

Our dialogic work, whether in museums, educational institutions, online, or wherever honest curation can happen, is now more important than ever. We have to continue our local/global work, bring together folks doing this work to learn from each other, and democratize conventional top-down practices wherever we are.

I am now most excited about using new social media to create heightened dialogues even as we walk the streets of New York City. At the Asian/Pacific American Institute and with my students, we’re experimenting with “augmented reality” uses of smartphones and GPS tablets. The new MoCA space is located nearby, where Robert Moses sought to build the crosstown expressway that would have wiped out all we love about lower Manhattan—Little Italy, Chinatown, the Jewish Lower East Side, Soho, etc. A coalition of community organizations and individuals such as Jane Jacobs successfully fought Moses’s grandiose plans for “slum clearance.” Today that same neighborhood is confronted with a different kind of displacement—that of urban hipsters and Wall Street brokers seeking to live in what Sharon Zukin refers to as an “authentic” historic inner city. And complicating Chinatown, but also all of Manhattan, is the investment of foreign monies into the NYC real estate market.

The contestation for the rights to the city now and the current moment’s relation to past fights is what New Yorkers don’t yet have the dialogic spaces and context to understand. Do we need brick-and-mortar history organizations to engage with these issues? Perhaps our smartphone and other new technologies are better suited for these new dialogues to come. I believe this is the future form museums will have to take on—a provocative remix of the real and the digital.