Sustaining Cultures in the Face of Globalization
Sustaining Culture in the Face of Globalization

McDonald’s red and yellow ensign is the new version of America’s star-spangled banner. - Le Monde

I. Introduction

Anti-globalization activists argue that globalization poses what is, perhaps, the biggest threat to indigenous knowledge and culture. As more money, goods, and people cross borders, it becomes harder to maintain traditional cultural expressions.

This paper suggests that such anti-globalization activists may be right to worry about globalization’s effect on culture. But that, as some critics point out, the anti-globalization activists’ concern cannot be appropriately captured by the idea that we should preserve culture. The idea of cultural preservation is based on an extremely problematic conception of culture as a fixed entity with an essence. The inadequacy of the essentialist conception has received increasing recognition, but an adequate positive conception has yet to take its place. We propose a new conception of culture as conversation that incorporates the criticisms of the problematic conception. The new conception acknowledges the fluidity and internal contestation that occurs within actual cultures. It acknowledges the agency of its members in creating, transmitting, interpreting and revising a culture. This conception of culture facilitates one of this paper’s key moves – focusing on the value of particular traditional cultural expressions. We make this new conception our basis for proposing that a proper concern for the value of a culture should be realized in enabling its members to sustain it, not to preserve some pre-existing essence. Adopting the more viable notion of culture also changes our conception of what needs to be done to sustain it and allows us to acknowledge and better deal with the complex arguments for and against sustaining culture.

We believe this inquiry is important for several reasons. First, few philosophers have examined the argument for preserving culture in the face of globalization explicitly and the normative foundations of different positions in the literature deserve sustained investigation. Second, we believe that the conception of culture as conversation can help ground some important arguments for sustaining culture in the face of globalization and perhaps stimulate interest in them. For, one way of looking at the paper’s contribution is as posing a friendly amendment to arguments for preserving culture – although anti-globalization activists may
often talk as if cultures depend on some metaphysical essence, their view may be sustainable without this metaphysical baggage.¹ More broadly, we emphasize the importance of having a positive alternative to the essentialist conception of culture. For, even though philosophers such as Anthony Appiah, Seyla Benhabib, and Jeremy Waldron have persuasively criticized the essentialist conception, we know of no plausible alternative conceptions of culture articulated in the literature.² Again, our alternative conception of culture facilitates what we believe is an important step in advancing the debate—considering the value of particular traditional cultural expressions. Finally, although those who want to preserve culture may not be essentialists, they will have to say more about what constitutes the culture they want to preserve and, if there is anything to our conception of culture, there is reason to think that that will be difficult.

II. The Cultural-Preservationist Argument Against Globalization for Preserving Culture

The cultural preservationist argument against globalization is roughly this. With globalization more people, goods, money, and ideas cross borders. Although not unprecedented in human history, globalization is reshaping the world. The impact on communities is staggering. Not only does globalization fail to respect national boundaries but it fails to respect national, regional, and local culture. Pizza Hut should not have been put in front of the Sphinx. American cheese should not replace Roquefort in France. Globalization has a homogenizing effect on different cultures. Small local businesses are replaced by mega-malls and chain stores. The distinct character of different communities is lost. No one needs another McDonald’s or Wal-mart and, irrespective of the potentially devastating political consequences of having only a few global media outlets, it is a shame that only Bollywood seems to be able to compete with Hollywood.³ English should not

¹Anti-globalization activists are not the only ones to talk this way. Even some philosophers have been accused of embracing an essentialist conception of culture. Bonnie Honig in her commentary on Susan Okin’s essay “Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?” suggests, for instance, that Okin may fall prey to this problem. See B. Honig, “A Response to Susan Okin's 'Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women',” In Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?, edited by Joshua Cohen and Matthew Howard (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).
²In personal conversation with one of the authors, Appiah remarked that he had a “nominalist” conception of culture, but acknowledged that he needed to develop it. See also S. Benhabib, “The Claims of Culture Properly Interpreted: Response to Nikolas Kompridis,” Political Theory, Vol. 34 (2006), No. 3: 383-388.
be a universal language. The impact of globalization on indigenous peoples is especially destructive. As televisions and American media images infiltrate cultures so do Western consumerist values. Community members become dissatisfied with traditional ways of life which have an especially hard time competing for the attention of the youth convinced by MTV to consume American blue jeans and music, Big Macs and French fries.

The concern for culture that underlies the anti-globalization activists’ argument appears in its most sophisticated forms in the writings of communitarians and multiculturalists. Philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre, Charles Taylor, Michael Sandel, and Michael Walzer have argued that people find meaning and purpose in traditional cultural expression -- narratives, songs, social structures, and so forth. In the case of Taylor, this theme is linked with a concern for cultures that are endangered by more powerful mainstream cultures surrounding them. Will Kymlicka argues, on the basis of a liberal political philosophy that values individual rights, that we ought to be concerned for endangered minority cultures because their possessors need them in place in order to meaningfully exercise their rights to choose how to live. If one takes these philosophers’ arguments seriously, one has reason to worry about globalization, especially if one takes the view that globalization offers to many people merely the opportunity to be onlookers or at best second-class participants in a materialist, individualist, and hedonistic way of life.

III. The Cosmopolitan Critique of the Communitarian Argument

6 A. MacIntyre, After Virtue (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982) and A. MacIntyre, "Is patriotism a virtue?,” Lindley Lecture (Lawrence, Kan.: University of Kansas, 1984).
8 M. Sandel, Liberalism and the Limits of Justice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).
Defenders of traditional forms of globalization, on the other hand, believe that the destruction globalization brings, if it is destruction at all, is creative destruction. Globalization presents us with a nearly infinite number of cultural options from which to choose. And it is a good thing if everyone can select from amongst a variety of ways of life. Furthermore, they insist, many of the options globalization presents are quite valuable. They are, after all, those that have been selected on the free market of ideas. The critics of globalization forget that no one is forcing anyone to eat French fries, watch Hollywood films, or wear blue jeans. People enjoy doing so. American culture, the primary target of anti-globalization activist’s vitriol, is a local culture too, with its valuable aspects. The world would be less rich without the paintings of Jackson Pollock and Andy Warhol, jazz and blues, and the novels of Philip Roth and Toni Morrison. Casablanca, Citizen Kane, and Lawrence of Arabia are beautiful works of art. It is certainly not fair to blame globalization for poor taste. Perhaps the government of Cairo should have zoned the city differently so that businesses could not operate in front of national treasures and the land owner who contracted with Pizza Hut and KFC should have refused to do so. But it would not have been much better to have the fast food company Mo’men Egypt set up shop in front of the Sphinx. Finally, globalization helps create culture, if not by the competition it encourages amongst different ways of life, at least by the cooperation it permits between them. American culture is often enhanced by other cultures, just as other cultures are enhanced by American culture – Miles Davis, for instance, was inspired by African rhythms.

This defense of globalization might gain support from “cosmopolitans,” who are often responding to communitarians and multiculturalists. Philosophers such as Anthony Kwame Appiah and Jeremy Waldron point out that cultures are internally diverse and constantly changing; they express skepticism as to whether cultures have anything like an “essence” that could be or needs to be preserved. This line of argument might

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12 Some defend alternative forms of globalizations with which this paper is not concerned. See, for instance, Bonnie Honig’s discussion of Slow Food in B. Honig, Emergency Politics: Paradox, Law, Democracy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
be used in reply to the claim the globalization threatens well-defined cultures. Consider that different members of a culture disagree on the content, and desirability of preserving any given cultural expression. Some Americans do not like Hollywood; others do not like jazz or blues. Some probably even deny that jazz and blues are part of true, blue-blooded American culture (which, they might claim, consists primarily of six packs, football, and apple-pie). Furthermore, if Americans did not care about a particular cultural expression – say shotgun weddings – there may not be anything wrong with that expression going out of existence. If the disaffected youth of some East African village prefer not to wear traditional clothing and would like to become businessmen, lawyers, and architects, then perhaps that is best. We should not force people to maintain traditional cultural expressions they do not embrace.

IV. Culture as Conversation: An Alternative to the Essentialist Concept of Culture

We believe that the arguments marshaled for and against globalization have merits that need to be taken into account and eventually reconciled. To make this case, however, we need to adopt a more workable concept of culture.

Cosmopolitans are right to question whether cultures have essences. The essentialist concept of culture (in its clearest and most unrealistic form) dictates that cultural groups universally accept a particular set of beliefs, practices, institutions, artifacts, works of art, values and norms, and that this set forms a consistent, integrated whole. It is consistent in that those items capable of contradiction, such as beliefs, are consistent with each other, and it is integrated in that many of these items imply other items through relations such as implication. Such universal acceptance of a set of consistent and integrated cultural items is the necessary and sufficient condition for the group’s having a particular culture. When taken literally, the essentialist concept probably has no instances whatsoever.17

Communitarians and multiculturalists, if pressed on the question of whether they subscribe to this concept, would probably disavow it, or at least would do so if they knew what was good for them. Surely they would, or should recognize, that there is change, internal diversity, and contradiction within a culture. Surely,

17 See R. Brightman, “Forget culture: replacement, transcendence, relexification.” Critique of Cultural Anthropology 10 (1995): pp. 509-546, for a survey of conceptions of culture that have been called “essentialist” and for critiques of these conceptions within anthropology.
they could argue, one need not subscribe to anything as unrealistic as the essentialist concept in order to recognize that there are local, traditional cultures threatened by a spreading culture of consumerism. And surely, they would go on to argue, the essentialist concept is not needed to recognize the value that traditional cultures can have for their possessors.

We think these replies to the cosmopolitans have weight but, to get any further, we must have a clearer concept of culture that can serve as an alternative to the essentialist concept. It is not sufficient simply to say that there are different cultures that do not fit the essentialist concept, not if we want to go on to argue that cultures can have great value and meaning for their bearers, as the communitarians suggest. And it is not sufficient to say that no cultures fit the essentialist concept, as the cosmopolitans do, but leave unanswered questions about how we can distinguish the cultures that do exist. We need a conception of culture to decide whether it matters that some cultures disappear or are destroyed by globalization.

To see our way clear to a viable alternative concept of culture, we must recognize that not every view of our important concepts fits the classical model of necessary and sufficient conditions. The status of this model has badly eroded, partly because of philosophy’s continuing failures to specify anything remotely resembling necessary and sufficient conditions for the classes and kinds that interest us (e.g., personhood, being the same person over time, knowledge, humor, pornography, and even what it is to be a set of necessary and sufficient conditions!). The concept of culture cannot be spelled out in terms of such a set, but rather

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18 Kymlicka acknowledges in response to Waldron that cultures are constituted from diverse influences, but proposes that cultures are unified by a shared language, in which are embedded shared practices that constitute a meaningful way of life. We think this proposal will not do the job Kymlicka intends for it. It is not at all obvious that a language does embody a unified or coherent set of social practices or a way of life, and if it does not, then it is difficult to see how a language in the much thinner sense could be as important to individuals as Kymlicka asserts it is. If a language does embody a shared set of practices, then it is not obvious that a language in this very thick sense isn’t subject to precisely the same objections that cosmopolitans lodge against the essentialist notion of culture. See W. Kymlicka, Multicultural Citizenship: A Liberal Theory of Minority Rights, pp. 76-88, 103.


Regarding pornography, see Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart’s famous remark of hardcore pornography that it is hard to define but that “I know it when I see it.” P. Stewart (1964). Concurring
covers a diverse array of activities and practices related through "a complicated network of similarities, overlapping and criss-crossing." Following Turiq Modood one might use Wittgenstein’s analogy with a game. There are many characteristics cultures share just like there are many characteristics games share even though neither cultures nor games can be characterized by a single feature. So the critics of the essentialist concept of culture are right to deny that there are necessary and sufficient conditions for something’s being culture. But this does not mean that talk of particular cultures fails to make sense simply because we cannot specify sharp and precise boundaries for them.

But what are these things of which we give examples and have no sharp and precisely boundaries? What concept of culture allows cultures to be identified through examples of things that are internally diverse and contested and fluid? What concept of culture allows cultures to be identified through contrasts with other practices and institutions? We propose a concept of culture modeled after conversation. A conversation has plural voices, each of which may articulate and subscribe to a distinct set of beliefs, practices, values, and norms, each of which may support or appreciate a distinct set of institutions, artifacts, and works of art. The plural voices in a conversation bring internal diversity and the possibility of change, especially when the voices are disagreeing, contesting, and vying for the allegiance of others in the conversation.


21 T. Modood, Multiculturalism: A Civic Idea (Polity Press, 2007, p. 21). The conception of culture we will offer expands on Modood’s characterization of cultures in some important ways. He says that there are differences between groups based on different social features (e.g. religion or race), groups can be groups in different ways, have different ‘priorities’, and group members can also be members in different ways (Modood, p. 119). We also point out, for instance, that cultures change over time and can be changed in many ways.

22 This model was initially developed by one of the authors for a different purpose.
Conversations are processes that change over the course of time: some voices can fall silent; voices that have been dominant can become recessive, and vice versa; new voices can enter and change the character of conversations. We can distinguish one conversation from another even if the two conversations are about many of the same subjects and even if the voices articulate many of the same themes. Conversations can be different despite such similarities because we can hear some of the differing voices differing with each other, i.e., addressing and responding to each other, arguing with each other. Even going through the motions of listening but not taking seriously the positions and reasons of others is a kind of conversational relation. Such a conversational relation may emerge from a power relation in which the one not seriously listening has the upper hand. A great advantage of the conversational model of culture is that it accommodates the cultural phenomena of internal diversity, power relations, and the accompanying changes.

Another advantage of the conversational model of culture is that it points to the possibility of belonging to more than one culture, just as one can participate in more than one conversation. Chinese immigrants to the United States may retain their Chinese cultural heritage even as they start to belong to U.S. culture. The conversational model also allows for different modes of conversation. Cultures are often placed and based in a community that shares a language, but there are other modes of conversation than a shared language. Many Chinese immigrants do not even speak English and share only a Chinese dialect with others who came from the same region of China, but they nevertheless engage in important cultural conversations with other members and groups in their new country. They perform work that connects them with members, practices, and institutions of the larger society, that puts them into cultural conversation with the larger society (some of these conversations are hostile – consider, for instance, the aggressive responsive of white Californians to Chinese miners and plantation workers in the 19th century).23

On the old essentialist conception of culture, members of a culture can only preserve its essence or fail to do so. On the conversational model, people participate in the constitution and ongoing reconstitution of their cultural conversations. People become participants in a conversation by creating, transmitting and receiving beliefs, values, norms, behaviors, artifacts, and by playing roles in or resisting (or both) institutions.

Carol Worthman has observed, “as culture shapes persons, those persons shape culture.” Transmission of beliefs, values, norms, and behavior almost always involves significant variation between what is “received” at one end and what is transmitted on the other end. We teachers know this when we seek to discover what our students have learned from our lectures. Further, given that transmission of cultural items is accomplished very frequently through a kind of observational osmosis—seeing and hearing what other people appear to be doing, believing, and valuing—transmission is always subject to the individual’s interpretation of what is going on. Individual differences in temperament, that can have a basis in genetic inheritance and early experience, are also a primary source of variation in what is received by individuals. The fact that cultural entities are performed and enacted as ongoing conversations makes them subject to change, accidental and intentional permutation. Conceiving cultures as conversations leaves open the degree of logical consistency or integration to be found in a particular culture. Perhaps more importantly, it suggests that there are other kinds of coherence and integration. An argument can of course contain contradictory themes defended by different parties, but it can have a high degree of coherence in the sense that the parties respond to each other and the flow of the conversation has the logic of an evolving response and counter-response. To conceive of coherence and integration solely in terms of logical consistency between themes is to miss important ways in which cultural entities can fit together in a point-counterpoint relation even as they contradict or conflict with each other.

For example, within a culture there can be an argument between those who highly value liberty as freedom from interference with others and those who highly value relationship and membership in community. The valuing of relationship and community, especially in Asian moral traditions, is often linked with valuing harmony. Harmony involves members of a community sharing and striving for common ends in such a way that their personal interests are conciliated with those common ends. Beginning in the 19th century, Chinese interest in the concept of individual rights grew, but often from the perspective that saw rights as a way of fostering individual energies and creativity so that they could be put to use for common

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ends. This does not mean that more individualistic concepts of rights are absent in China. But they take their place in a conversation in which more communally-oriented conceptions of rights have a strong voice and in which skepticism about the ultimate compatibility of individual rights and social harmony is still a significant voice. The argument need not be, and most often is not, between people who uphold one value and fail to recognize the other. The question is about value priorities. Noninterference and community often function as counterpoints to each other in the sense that one value is asserted against the other value because it addresses the liabilities of asserting the other value strongly. Collective responsiveness to individual need can be a great benefit of community, but when that responsiveness turns into oppressive suffocation or an alienating exclusion of those who fall from good standing, noninterference can get asserted against the value of community. On the other side, community gets asserted against barriers to intervention into the affairs of the individual when this benefit blocks responsiveness to the individual’s need. The moral tradition that can be associated with the United States, we believe, exhibits this kind of dynamic between noninterference and community, and compared to many Asian traditions, gives far greater priority to noninterference, but the presence of the value of community is nevertheless real even if relatively recessive. There is an argument within American culture between those who highly value noninterference and those who highly value community, but there is a logic provided by our complex psychologies as to why these sides are in argument. The American argument between noninterference and community takes on a distinctive form given other cultural elements. The noninterference side, for example, is often supported by a robust optimism and hopefulness about the power of the individual to control his fate, combined with pessimism about the competence of governmental structures, especially large ones, to accomplish good intentions.

This distinctive way of construing rights, which is different from seeing them as entitlements of the individual apart from their value for promoting shared ends of the community, is also a fairly typical example of the way that influential concepts migrate across cultures. They not only contribute to transformation of the cultures to which they migrate, but often take on a form that is congenial to those cultures.

V. An Alternative Argument for Constraining Globalization to Sustain Culture

We will write of “sustaining” cultures rather than of “preserving” them because the phrase “cultural preservation” connotes protecting or rescuing something that is fixed and that has an essence. It is possible to sustain a culture, however, by allowing traditional cultural expressions -- practices, norms, and beliefs to change over time and the participants in a culture to control their fate.

Arguments for constraining globalization to sustain culture fall under two broad types. One type proceeds on the premise that cultures have value in themselves—that the values they embody are genuine and important, that their norms, practices, institutions and so forth specify valuable ways of living, and that their artifacts have aesthetic and/or moral value. The other type proceeds on the premise that cultures are important because they are important to individuals—that they form important aspects of their identities or that lack of affirmation or even denigration of their cultures constitutes a lack of affirmation or denigration of them as individuals. We believe that both kinds of argument have force, but they have been vitiated by lack of clarity on what culture is and how a viable concept of culture might affect the form that the arguments should take.

Perhaps this analogy will help. On the first kind of argument for sustaining cultures, cultural conversations have value independent of ways they might benefit participants. They are like plays or artworks that have value even if no one recognizes this value. On the second kind of argument for sustaining culture, cultural conversations have value because they enable them to develop traits and behaviors that are valuable for them. In either case, a culture’s value provides reason to sustain it. And, the second argument suggests that, just as in conversations between two strangers, outsiders should only interfere with these conversations in respectful ways.

Independent Value

First consider the argument from the independent value of ways of life that realize important values. The cultures of indigenous peoples often (but do not always) give expression to values of relationship and community: the individual and her welfare are seen as connected to others and their welfare and to the welfare of the group. Modern Western pluralistic societies also contain these values, but they can be comparatively more recessive and even fading in importance in their cultural conversations. Many Westerners can appreciate the value of ways of life in which relationship and community have a more central role, even if
they would not choose such a way of life for themselves. The cultures of indigenous peoples often give expression to the value of relationship to the natural world, a relationship in which they see that natural world as their home, and in which they have a valued place along with other forms of life. Again, while this value is not absent from modern Western cultures, it is increasingly eclipsed by a view of the natural world as a set of resources to be manipulated for the sake of satisfying human needs. Some Westerners may appreciate the view of nature as a home for humanity, regret its fading importance for their own cultures and may even view other cultures in which such a value as dominant as a source of inspiration. Mb...-gatherers of Central Africa provide a vivid contemporary example of ways of life in which these values are central. They regard the forest as sacred, the source of their existence, of all goodness. They talk, shout, whisper and sing to the forest, addressing it as mother or father or both, referring to its goodness and its ability to cure or "make good." The Mb... also have a way of life in which relationship and community are central. Turnbull tells of several Mb... hunters who were extremely respected for their skill and yet never dominated other hunters in the group, and decisions on hunting strategy were a matter of consensus, which was thought to please the forest.

Other traditional cultural expression have independent value such as their works of literature, their oral traditions, their music, and items with everyday practical uses but made with skill and possessing great beauty. It is important to note that these are components of culture that may possess independent value.

The model of culture as conversation suggests that cultural comparison often makes the most sense at a level that is much more specific than talk about cultures as wholes. After all, why should we want or expect to be able to assign some overall value “rating” to a complex and fluid configuration of beliefs, values, norms, practices, institutions, artifacts and works of art? This may have been what Saul Bellow missed when he suggested that he would only read Zulu literature when the Zulus produced a Tolstoy. Cultures may demonstrate in some areas a degree of logical integration but in other areas a kind of coherence that is better likened to conversational disagreement and conflict.

28 Ibid. p. 180
Value for Participants

The previous section considered an argument for sustaining culture because of traditional cultural expressions’ independent value. Now consider the argument for sustaining culture because of traditional cultural expressions’ value for participants in a cultural conversation. Traditional cultural expressions can have “value for participants” because they value these expressions, but often traditional cultural expressions have this value because they allow people to develop important traits and behaviors. In this paper we focus on the valuable practical identities that cultures make possible for people.

Culture provides the makings for a person’s practical identity in the sense of a practical orientation in the world. Such an orientation consists in a person’s beliefs, behavioral dispositions, and practices with respect to what kinds of lives and activities are worthwhile, what is morally right and wrong, one’s proper place in the social order of one’s society (which need not be conceived as a fixed place), and the place of humanity in the scheme of things (which need not be conceived of as given by a transcendent being or force). We say that culture provides the makings for practical identity, rather than saying that it provides such an identity, in order to acknowledge that individuals need not be the passive recipients of pre-fabricated identities, but rather they can be the active interpreters, transmitters, modifiers and synthesizers of traditional cultural expressions for their practical identities.

Languages can embody or express elements of practical identities such that individuals could lose practical orientation when they lose their languages. Ken Hale points out that some forms of verbal art—verse, song, or chant—depend on morphological, phonological or syntactic properties of the language in which it is formed.30 An example he gives is of an Australian aboriginal people called the Lardil, who developed an auxiliary language called Damin. This language had unique phonological features and a specially invented lexicon used for the ritual initiation of men. When such a language is lost, so are the ritual forms of which it is an integral part. We do not claim that cultural change per se means the destruction of practical identities or that new identities cannot emerge if the old ones are destroyed. Extensive cultural

change or the collapse of a society can, however, make it extremely difficult for people to retain their practical identities. It may take exceptional members of a culture to help forge new practical identities.

This seems to be the lesson of Jonathan Lear’s study of the challenge that members of the Crow Nation faced in the last half of the nineteenth century and well into the 20th. The Crow had a nomadic, hunting, warrior way of life that prized the virtues of warfare, most especially courage. Threats to the Crow ability to wage warfare came from the Sioux and Blackfoot nations, from white settlers, and from the U.S. government. These challenges, Lear argues, even threatened the Crow’s ability to speak meaningfully of living as a Crow. That is, the threats to the Crow way of life were to the meaningfulness of the standards of excellence associated with roles such as warrior and the resulting conception of a worthwhile life of striving to meet those standards. It was possible to ask in this time of crisis whether among the Crows, there was a Crow.

Lear argues that the Crow met this challenge more successfully than other tribal nations in the U.S. His story of how they met this challenge focuses on the extraordinary Plenty-Coups, the last Crow chief, whose dream charted a way to forge new practical identities for the Crow. His dream contained events interpreted by him and by other members of the nation as foretelling the end of Crow way of life. A great storm knocks down all trees in the forest but one, the lodge of the Chickadee. The Chickadee-person is least in strength but greatest in mind. He never misses a chance to learn from others by listening when they talk of their successes and failures. Though the Chickadee had an established position in Crow life, Plenty-Coups’s dream, as interpreted and incorporated into his tribe’s self-understanding, suggested a new excellence that would enable them to survive the coming storm, and this was the wisdom of learning from others. In particular, the new use of the Chickadee consisted in the thought that one cannot know what is to be learned from others, precisely because the time is of extraordinary and radical change in which the established skills and activities are losing their value. Rather, one must ready oneself to recognize the wisdom of others when one encounters it.

32 Ibid. p. 70
Lear’s study also suggests that cultural survival in the face of radical change is a highly uncertain matter. Plenty-Coups’s visionary leadership was rare. That the Crow followed the chickadee’s example showed remarkable flexibility, intelligence, and restraint – few can avoid fighting the onslaught of tragic history. The Crow accommodated the white invaders’ demands and in doing so were at least able to retain the heart of their land. According to Lear, other tribes that tried to fight the onslaught fared much worse.33 “Unlike other tribes, the Crow were not displaced from their lands, they were not put on a forced march, they did not have to walk a ‘trail of tears’ – and they could correctly say of themselves that they were never defeated.”34 To face existential threats in this way, to be ready to abandon traditional virtues and adopt new ones the specific substance of which one does not even know yet, requires courage, but of a different sort than the martial courage that occupied the center of the traditional way of life. Through Plenty-Coups’s leadership, the Crow eventually fleshed out the implications of this new kind of courage as the tribe aligned itself with the U.S. against its traditional enemies, the Sioux and the Blackfoot Nations, and as it negotiated and defended its landholdings against the U.S.

The story of Plenty-Coups and the Crow illustrates several of the main themes we have stressed in this paper: that cultures are not static, that individuals are not the passive recipients of culture but actively transmit, interpret, and revise their culture, and that cultures can be of critical value to their members in providing their practical identities, their conceptions of who they are and what they are about, their criteria for judging whether they have succeeded or failed in living worthwhile lives. Even as members radically revise their practical identities, they draw from traditional cultural expressions in novel ways. The established ideal of the Chickadee person was adapted by Plenty-Coups and the Crow tribe to fashion a new conception of courage that in its specifics differed radically from the traditional virtue of warrior courage.

Traditional cultural expressions Have Both Independent Value and Value for Participants

Consider another example of how traditional cultural expressions can have value both independently and to its participants. In the Guatemalan Highlands Mayan women practice the ancient art of backstrap

33 Ibid. p. 135.
weaving. This art is supposed to have been invented by the goddess Ixchel and many of these weavers make offerings to her before practicing their craft. The amazing designs these women produce help to both unify and distinguish different Mayan villages. "Linguistically differentiated by as many as twenty languages, the Mayans share a common bond through their weaving heritage."35 Making these designs is a labor-, time-, and skill-intensive process. Consider, for instance, the process of making ikat -- a speckled design. To make ikat, the yarn has to be stretched on a special frame and then wrapped with string before being died. The string is then removed and the dyed areas carefully aligned during weaving to create the pattern. The weaving is done on a special loom that is portable and is carried around with a strap (hence the name backstrap weaving). The threads on the loom are lifted and lowered with a heddel rod while the weft is passed between them to create cloth. This cloth is sometimes made into the traditional hupil or tunic for women. Because the looms are portable, backstrap weaving is often a social activity where women share their stories and learn about their art.36 Because of the skill, care, and artistry that go into backstrap weaving, it should be clear that it has great independent value.

The value of blackstrap weaving also resides in part in its value to the Guatemalan people. The weaving helps people maintain their sense of identity against economic, social, and military pressures (some of which are associated with globalization). During the Guatemalan civil war, for instance, when the Guatemalan military destroyed more than 400 villages and killed hundreds of thousands of people, the different designs the villagers wore were used to identify their villages. So, it became very difficult for the villagers to continue wearing traditional clothing.37 Those who migrated because of the war, often in search of better economic prospects, also felt pressure to give up their traditional dress. Finally, evangelicals sometimes discouraged traditional clothing.38 But, weaving helped the Mayans to sustain their traditional cultural expressions and

36 Ibid.
Despite the civil war and poverty that still afflicts much of the Mayan population, “many Maya women continue to wear their traditional dress and to maintain the ancient art of backstrap weaving.” And Mayan weaving remains an essential part of many Mayans’ identities. As one woman put it:

I can't get accustomed to taking off my traditional clothes. I can't adjust to putting on other clothes. I can only wear other clothes for an hour or two. I can't leave my dress, its part of me. Without my dress I don't feel calm inside, I feel like I'm missing something, something from me... (Unidentified Woman, 1980’s cited at Women in World History).

It is not just the number of cultural options or even the quality of options available to people that matters. Rather, traditional cultural expressions are often important to individuals’ very identities. This provides at least a prima facie reason to constrain globalization.

VI. Prescriptions: An Alternative to the Arguments For and Against Preserving Culture

Traditional cultural expressions have value independently and for their members, but the model of culture as conversation highlights the fact that cultures are fluid, continuously interpreted and revised in transmission, internally contested, and sometimes best preserved (as Lear’s study suggests) through fundamental change. Accordingly, it is more appropriate to conclude that there is reason to sustain, rather than to preserve, valuable cultures when globalization threatens. We intend the language of sustaining to indicate that there is nothing in culture that can be assumed to be essential or fixed and that must be preserved. Rather, a culture is more closely linked to the agency of its members. Sustaining a culture is a matter of its members continuing to transmit, interpret, and revise it. Furthermore, in light of viewing culture as a living, changing thing that is internally diverse, the focus of sustaining a culture should be a focus on enabling its members to sustain it. They should be the ones to decide if and how their culture will change.

39 In some parts of Guatemala, even evangelical influences have been tamed by the indigenous response in part via Mayan weavings. For instance, Cofradías who care for the saints’ statues sometimes dress them in indigenous costumes. See BAS, “A Culture Unraveling.”

40 “Weavers tell their stories,” Women in World History.

41 Of course, sustaining culture is not all that matters. The burdens of doing so should be equitably distributed. One must take into account the fact that the burden of sustaining this craft, for instance, falls primarily on women as the weavers are almost all women and weaving can cause eyestrain and back problems. There is even a group that wants to give these women ergonomic chairs to help prevent these problems. This may be a good idea. See discussion below on burden sharing.
Does this mean that a group whose culture is threatened should be let alone, not interfered with? Perhaps, in some cases, it should mean this. However, the general policy of “letting alone” asks too little of those who keep their hands off. When there is disagreement within the group over whether or not to sustain a traditional cultural expression, letting alone may be implicitly favoring one side or another (given the power relationships within the group), and if so, letting alone needs some explicit defense. It may be that letting alone is the most justifiable policy in the case at hand, but we cannot assume that this is generally true. Consider one case in which this strategy is at least morally controversial. In 1975, a mother and daughter, Julia and Audrey Martinez, sued the Santa Clara Pueblo over the tribal rule that denied membership to the children of Pueblo women who married outside the tribe while according membership to the children of Pueblo men who married outside the tribe. On appeal, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that it could not hear the equal protection claim of the Martinez’s on the grounds that it did not have jurisdiction over matters of tribal membership. The Court further commented that if it were to intervene, it would interfere with the “tribe’s ability to maintain itself as a culturally and politically distinct entity.”

In this case, however, one important issue was the course that the tribal identity should take in the future and whether that identity should be compatible with gender equality. The Court of Appeals of the Tenth District (the decision of which was superseded by the Supreme Court) rejected the view of Pueblo culture as homogeneous and patriarchal, and found that the tribal membership rule was not integrally related to tribal culture but based on more economic and pragmatic considerations.

Another feature of the case illustrates a theme brought out earlier in this essay: that a cultural conversation can be nested within a larger conversation. Sarah Song has pointed out that the U.S. government pressured the Pueblo and other tribes to adopt more restrictive membership rules, and it reviewed and approved the Pueblo membership restriction along gender lines in 1939. In fact, the U.S. approval of that gendered restriction must be understood in the context of the majority culture’s own traditions in which a woman’s political membership depended on her husband’s. For example, according to the Cable Act, or Married Women’s Independent Nationality Act of 1922, an American woman who married a foreigner would

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lose her citizenship if she lived in her husband’s country for two years or if she married a man ineligible for citizenship—an Asian, a polygamist, or an anarchist.\textsuperscript{44} Seen in this context, the policy of “letting alone” seems disingenuous. We must decide what constitutes “letting alone” and that may itself constitute a difficult moral decision about what is essential to a culture in the first place.

In place of a blanket policy of “letting alone,” consideration should be given to the reasons both for and against enabling a group to sustain a traditional cultural expression. This would include not only the independent value of the expression and its value for its members, but also reasons that weigh against helping, such as the ideal of gender equality. As Song’s observations about the Santa Clara Pueblo vs. Martinez case also illustrate, those deciding whether to actively intervene in a group’s cultural politics must take into account the past history of their own group’s involvement in those politics, and they should be prepared to take responsibility if that involvement proves to be something of an embarrassment given the reasons they might have for intervening in the present.

In such a case, it may be difficult to avoid doing injustice, no matter how it is decided. Even if we bracket the constitutional question of whether the U.S. had authority to overturn the tribal membership rule, there is a powerful moral reason for the federal government not to overturn the rule. The reason lies in the history of the oppression of indigenous peoples by that government. Furthermore, the pressure the government applied to the Pueblo to adopt such a rule and its explicit acceptance of the rule’s gendered restriction makes the U.S. complicit in the gender injustice of the rule. On the other hand, the conversation within the tribe over tribal membership seems not entirely internal for some of the very same reasons. The Martinez’s appeal to U.S. courts is an acknowledgment of the ways in which the Pueblo conversation over gender and membership was part of and influenced by conversation with the mainstream culture. Furthermore, it is relevant to note that the Pueblo had a traditionally matrilineal structure before the end of the nineteenth century, but in part because of the efforts of Spanish colonists and Franciscan friars, that structure broke down.\textsuperscript{45} Cultures are dynamic in part because they are parts of larger conversations.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid. p. 478.
\textsuperscript{45} S. Song, "Majority Norms, Multiculturalism and Gender Equality" citing M.D. Jacobs, \textit{Engendered Encounters: Feminism and Pueblo Cultures, 1879-1934} (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).
Whether overturning the rule or leaving it constitutes the greater injustice seems a matter of the balance of reasons. Some may hold that the gravity of the rule’s gender injustice ultimately requires its overturning. Others may hold that the history of oppression of the Pueblo by the U.S. and its own role and complicity in the genesis and adoption of the rule require at this point an affirmation of the tribe’s self governance. Our conception of culture suggests a new way of responding to the case. We believe that if the correct decision was to affirm the tribe’s self governance, the U.S. should have at least taken responsibility for providing to women in the position of Audrey Martinez the material benefits that would have come with tribal membership: health care, education, and housing assistance. This is akin to someone noticing that they have rudely broken up a conversation and apologizing to those hurt by the interruption. We also believe that there is merit in Jeff Spinner-Halev’s proposal that while the federal government should not decide the content of the membership rules, it should insist that the task of deciding such personal rules be given to “democratically accountable officials” within the tribe (accountable, therefore, to both female and male members) and not just traditional religious leaders.46

One benefit of the concept of culture as conversation, then, is that it allows us to better identify and consider the reasons for and against sustaining a culture: reasons for enabling those who have had the most at stake in a cultural conversation that is under threat; but also reasons why others with less of a stake should take part. These others may, for instance, have been part of larger cultural conversations in the past that have included and will include members of the threatened culture.

Understanding culture as a conversation may not ameliorate all conflicts. The imperative to sustain culture may come into tension with other important moral imperatives. Some argue that cultural transformation may be important to reducing poverty. David Miller, for instance, argues that the source of wealth lies in part on a protestant work ethic not all cultures share.47 Instituting a protestant work ethic may be incompatible with sustaining some cultures. If that is the case, then we may have to weigh and balance the importance of sustaining culture and reducing poverty. That said, we are not convinced that Miller is right. Adam K. Webb has proposed some intriguing strategies for integrating development efforts with sustaining

the traditions of poor communities. He points out that a Peru-based NGO, PRATEC, has launched efforts to revive traditional Andean terracing and cultivation techniques on the grounds that they are both culturally authentic and ecologically better suited to the terrain and soils. The future survival of developing communities, however, will depend on their building new and diversified economic activities. One possibility compatible with sustaining culture is craft production, but encouraging diversification, suggests Webb, will require the formation of new cooperative and community-based enterprises. He suggests that they might follow the example of Spain’s Mondragón cooperatives, which make many of Spain’s radiators and washing machines. Mondragón accepts no outside capital and reinvests its profits. Over the course of their employment, workers build up retirement accounts that collectively provide a large pool of long-term investment capital. Mondragón keeps the capital in the community’s hands so that it is responsive not only to demands of efficiency but to the community’s economy of values. Mondragón can, for instance, pay its workers enough to encourage effort but preserve a spirit of equality. Other communities, as in Peru, possess in village-owned lands a significant reserve of collectively owned capital that could be leased to farmers willing to try experimental agricultural methods or specialty crops. Rent or profit sharing on that land could give the community a revenue stream that could flow in other kinds of small enterprises.

Alternately, one might argue that sustaining culture and preserving natural environments may be in tension. Traditional farming practices, for instance, may threaten agricultural lands. It may be necessary to transform these cultures’ farming practices to avoid this destruction but this may be incompatible with sustaining these cultures. If so, then we may have to weigh and balance the importance of preserving natural environments and sustaining culture. But conflict is by no means guaranteed. Allowing or helping a people sustain their culture themselves can bring concrete environmental and economic benefits. Environmentalists worry that cattle farming competes with wildlife for land in parts of Kenya. Nevertheless, cattle are central to Masai culture – young men must have cattle to marry and their legends say that the cattle are a gift from God.

49 Ibid. p. 164.
50 Ibid. p. 172.
If, however, the Masai can make their livelihoods through tourism, they may decide to maintain smaller cattle herds.

To sustain a culture many policies may be appropriate. Sometimes outsiders may just have to let participants in a cultural conversation be. If, for example, outsiders have much less at stake in the sustenance of a traditional cultural expression than others, and if participants indeed seem capable of sustaining that component if outsiders refrain from policies that undermine it, letting alone seems appropriate. But other times, outsiders may do better to actively help sustain a culture.

Lise Dobrin and Jeff Good’s paper “Endangered Language Linguistics: Whose Mission” provides a compelling example of the complex interaction between the consideration of the value of a traditional cultural expression, in this case language, and respect for a people’s control over it. As the Linguistic Society of America advocates, organizations aiming to preserve language have started training local people in places like Papua New Guinea, Cameroon and the Philippines to document and help sustain endangered languages. They worry, however, that the locals are not doing what is necessary to sustain these languages. They are not creating “the kind of extensive language documentation that is most useful for cultural preservation.” If this is right, then it seems that in some cases, it may not help to just let the speakers determine the fate of the language. Rather, linguists can provide them with tools for sustaining their language. Sometimes this interaction might even encourage them to think better of their language, and “leaving them alone” might result in their thinking the worse. If the languages at issue have value, there may even be an obligation to initiate this interaction.

In “From linguistic elicitation to eliciting the linguist: Lessons in community empowerment from Melanesia,” Dobrin tells a complex, fascinating story about how the mismatch between insiders’ and outsiders’ perception of traditional cultural expressions can transform cultures in valuable ways. According to Dobrin, linguistic anthropologists tend to apply their own values of autonomy and self-determination to people who do not necessarily share those values. The anthropologists often believe that it is up to a

community to sustain or not sustain its language. Communities’ attitudes, on the other hand, are often more complex and can be effected by anthropologists’ intervention. Many villagers feel ambivalent about their own vernacular. They associate it with being in a subordinate, less powerful position, especially in relation to Westerners who colonized the islands. At the same time, they are highly interested in establishing relationships with powerful outsiders, and this is understood in the cultural context of gift exchange, but the interest is not solely or even perhaps primarily material. It increases the status of villagers in their own eyes that a linguistic anthropologist finds their language to be of value and interest and worth preservation. One consequence is that the anthropologist’s leaving, once her work is done is fraught with the possibility of disappointment on the part of the villagers. Dobrin concludes with an acknowledgment of the need for anthropologists to recognize their ethical role in encouraging people to sustain (or discouraging people from sustaining) their languages. And, though she does not draw this conclusion, it seems fair to say that cultures interact and may be transformed when anthropologists embark on the project of helping others to sustain and document their language. In this particular case, it (again) seems that indigenous peoples place great value on a certain kind of relationship and that outsiders, in the course of cooperation, might gain a renewed appreciation for such values and perhaps the place they might play in their own lives.

In another paper, “Dying to be Counted: The Commodification of Endangered Languages in Documentary Linguistics,” Lise Dobrin, Peter Austin, and David Nathan point out that non-indigenous peoples may be able to bear the burden of sustaining some traditional cultural expressions – e.g. language – if, for instance, that is what indigenous peoples want. Non-native speakers can learn indigenous languages, thereby preserving at least some of their value, and leaving open the possibility that people (indigenous or not) in future generations can learn those languages.53

The burden of maintaining a culture or a component of a culture (if it is a burden) need not fall exclusively on its original participants.54 Others may even have an obligation to assist. Those of us who

54 Consider an instance in which outsiders helped sustain a cultural practice for a while. For a while the Crow gave up their Sun Dance because they did not think it had a point. In 1941, however, the Crow saw again that the Sun Dance might have a point and they reintroduced it. None of the Crow could remember the steps but they had been practiced by the Shoshone tribe a traditional Crow enemy. See Lear, Radical Hope: Ethics.
benefit from Guatemalan weavings, for instance, may have an obligation to lighten the burden on the women who do the weaving. Backstrap weaving takes a heavy toll on these women’s bodies and can cause eyestrain. There are organizations to which any of us might contribute that try to provide ergonomic chairs to these women. At the same time, however, we must try to respect participants’ control over their traditional cultural expressions.

Perhaps the value of a traditional cultural expression and letting a group control their culture can come into conflict. Suppose, for instance, that a group of indigenous peoples in the Brazilian Amazon has just recently come into contact with the larger Brazilian culture. Suppose further that the group is inclined to drop valuable traditional cultural expressions as they come into contact with the outside world even though they are the only ones who can sustain these expressions. The group might not want, for instance, to continue practicing a beautiful ritual that requires a great deal of preparation because they do not feel that outsiders will respect the cultural expression (and, for that reason, do not want to show outsiders how to do those preparations). Alternately, the ritual might simply lose its significance or beauty if performed by an outsider. In these cases we believe that it may be best to err on the side of respecting the right of bearers of a traditional cultural expression to let it die, perhaps for the sake of keeping it from being debased. But, the important point for our purpose here is only that there are sometimes compelling reasons to sustain a traditional cultural expression.

VII. Conclusion

Anti-globalization activists are correct in holding that a group’s culture can have the kind of value, independently and for its members, that can justify efforts to sustain it against threats. Defenders of globalization, however, are correct in pointing to the internal diversity and fluidity of culture—that its members can disagree and that the very disagreement can be part of their common culture, that the boundaries and the content of culture can and do change over time. Recognition of what these opponents get right has motivated us to propose a new conception of culture in this paper. Relying on this conception, this paper has considered when the balance of reasons supports efforts to sustain a culture in the sense that its members should be allowed and sometime enabled to carry on their cultural conversation. This does not necessarily mean, as we have argued, that a cultures’ participants should be left alone to carry on that conversation. In many cases, such a proposal fails to recognize that that conversation has nested within larger conversations.
Moreover, sustaining the group’s culture or helping them maintain traditional cultural expressions may require active aid and encouragement from people outside that particular group who are part of that larger conversation.

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