

# TRANSCOMMUNALITY: A CONCEPT THAT ENCOURAGES ENCOUNTERS AND EXCHANGES

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In a world that is continually subjected to a violence that has led to social fragmentation, it is more important than ever to bring about new forms of social engagement that can exemplify a model for interaction and community building. These must be capable of maintaining a sense of possibility in the construction of a future that upholds human dignity and respect at its core value.

I am a transdisciplinary artist born and raised in Mexico. I have developed collaborative art based projects in the Amazon of Venezuela, Mexico, Norway, Trinidad and Tobago and the United States. These projects have been developed and sustained through the building of relationships between individuals in communities in a process that involves exchange of knowledge and reciprocity. My methodology has always been to work with what I have immediately available, without disrupting traditional practices and traditions, to bring to light and elevate cultural expressions through a reciprocal exchange of knowledge capable of achieving mutually agreed results that are beneficial to all parts.

## 2. TANGIBLE AND INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE CONSERVATION

This work addresses tangible and intangible cultural heritage conservation.

According to UNESCO: "The term 'cultural heritage' has changed content considerably in recent decades, partially owing to the instruments developed by UNESCO. Cultural heritage does not end at monuments and collections of objects. It also includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts.

While fragile, intangible cultural heritage is an important factor in maintaining cultural diversity in the face of these homogenizing times. An understanding of the intangible cultural heritage of different communities helps with intercultural dialogue, and encourages mutual respect for other ways of life." <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003> (accessed 11/12/15)

## 3. TRANSCOMMUNALITY

I would like to share with you one particular project: TRANSCOMMUNALITY is an ongoing initiative that began in Trinidad and Tobago in the year 2000. I wanted to learn from traditional carnival design and practice from Peter Minshall and his Callaloo Company, but circumstances took me in a totally different and unexpected direction. While I was in Port of Spain waiting for a position as a volunteer in Minshall's Callaloo Company --where I was told I would most likely spend 10 hours a day gluing sequins, I was introduced to a community center that operates solely with the participation and support of neighbors of Cocorite, an impoverished neighborhood of the city. Their sole mission was to actively engage the local youth in healthy extracurricular activities through the practice of traditional West African stilt dancing. The person responsible for these efforts was Dragon Keylemanjahro, who focused his efforts on training youth to dance on stilts and keep the kids off the streets and out of trouble by motivating them to take part in the annual Junior Carnival Parade. Upon meeting him and learning about the group and their mission I asked if he would accept me as a volunteer. I felt that this was an opportunity in which we could mutually learn and enrich our work and practice. He accepted my offer and I began working for him as a seamstress, photographer and whatever help they needed. While learning about each other's talents, capacities, potential and limitations, it became very clear to me that this was an opportunity to further challenge and enrich the presentations of their group. I felt that West African stilt dancing was also a perfect platform for education of participants, audiences and me through design, thematic development and construction, and simultaneously strengthen the kids' connection to their ancestral practice, provide opportunities for competition into categories, and activate a stronger community participation. In the past, most of the group's presentations had been in full body paint. This is certainly a powerful and striking vision, but one that could not be sustained for many reasons. To start, the paint utilized was house vinyl paint and dangerous to the kids' health, but also it excluded them from costumed competitions in which they could win important awards and money. So we began to work with limited funds and materials to create narratives with themes such as national symbols. Here we see a group of girls portraying Scarlet Ibis, the National bird of Trinidad, the rich diverse natural environment, insects or bats for example, and palms. I had much to learn, for the amount of stress the costumes must withstand, up to 12 hours of constant movement and elements is extreme. In a very short time however, we were presenting full ensembles created with purely discarded materials that also promote the importance of intangible cultural heritage. This is our presentation titled Dancing to Africa, which by the way, the theme I owe to my mother's exhaustive research. Resulting from these experiences the group won awards in numerous categories, received recognition on a national and international level, were the subject of two European documentaries, and were featured in books and press. Through this exchange, most importantly, the members of the group received public recognition, which reaffirmed their own connection and responsibility to conserve the legacy of their ancestral practice. In this way they became active cultural promoters of

their communities, their traditions and their country.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zRzYfaUCCXI> (accessed 11/12/15)

After 5 years of work with Keylemanjahro in Trinidad and Tobago, it became evident to me that I needed to expand this work to include groups closer to my home and studio in New York. So I began my quest to find the Brooklyn Jumbies, a group I had heard about who shared many of the same social and cultural values that I believe in. The Brooklyn Jumbies are a group of stilt dancers whose founders Najja Codrington and Ali Sylvester were initiated in their tradition in Senegal (Najja) and Trinidad and Tobago (Ali). We began to work following the same principals that I was working with and presented our work in various formats and spaces: We performed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, in Chinatown and Wall Street. I began to see that this work and the collaboration with stilt dancers builds bridges and shares and promotes knowledge, thus I wanted to expand it further to integrate other traditions into a collective and celebratory visual expression. I wanted to imagine -and create-- our work with the inclusion of traditional artisans in the fields of textiles, wood carving, painting, etc. I also wanted to continue building bridges between traditional stilt dancing communities. So I returned to my country--to Mexico--to begin an exchange between stilt dancers: the Zancudos de Zaachila of Oaxaca and the Brooklyn Jumbies, and to work with master crafts artisans of Oaxaca in the creation of stilts and textiles to be worn by both groups during the Zancudos de Zaachila's annual processions and presentations.

The Zancudos de Zaachila stilt dancers practice year round in preparation for ceremonies that take place annually to honor their patron Saints, San Pedro and San Pablo, and have done so for many generations. Interest in the tradition, however, was clearly diminishing by both the stilt dancers and audiences; they were abandoning traditional dress and utilizing their casual street wear (t-shirts and jeans) on many occasions. When we met Don José Mendoza, the Captain of the Zancudos de Zaachila, and his group, we shared with them work I had been doing in Trinidad and Tobago and in New York with the Brooklyn Jumbies. There was an immediate connection among all of the groups because of their emphasis on honoring the cultural traditions of their communities. These groups were previously unaware of each other's existence. In fact, the Zancudos did not know that stilt dancing was practiced in New York, Trinidad or West Africa, and the Brooklyn Jumbies and Keylemanjahro were not aware of the practice in Mexico. Learning of the existence of stilt dancing practiced in other countries not only expanded their knowledge but also created an immediate and strong kinship. Eager to learn from each other, of the roots and significance of each one's practice, of the technical solutions applied to the construction and use of the stilts, and of the cultural importance of their tradition, strengthened their personal commitment to their own legacy and promoted respect for the tradition and culture of the other. An international, transnational community of stilt dancers with strong bonds was activated.

We noticed an increased interest in stilt dancing with more people joining the group as both performers and audience members.

I met with the village leaders of Zaachila to share with them my interest in working with the Zancudos and the Jumbies and with traditional artisans for their annual festivities. They accepted and supported the idea. For over almost 5 years I worked with both the Zancudos de Zaachila and the Brooklyn Jumbies to participate in exchanges of knowledge and traditions. Being in Oaxaca, it was also imperative for me to expand the project to include the rich arts that are practiced there. I received a grant from the National Fund for Culture of Mexico to work with traditional artisans and also presented my project proposal to the Museo Textil de Oaxaca with the intent of having the results of this work, including its antecedents in Trinidad and Tobago and New York, in an exhibition. The Museum accepted the proposal and introduced me to many of the textile masters who ultimately became important contributors to the project. I proposed that we meet with traditional master crafts persons to first share with them the precedents of our work and then invite them to enrich the presentations with their talents. Textile weavers, embroiderers, wood carvers, gourd carvers, colonial altar conservators, *alebrije* masters and basket weavers were offered the opportunity to create and decorate stilts and to weave and embroider fabrics that would be utilized in costuming for the processions. I was fortunate to work with some of the greatest master weavers and artisans of Mexico and Jalisco: Francisca Palafox, Jesús Sosa Calvo, Olegario Hernández, Paula Sánchez, Florencio Fuentes, Oscar Vázquez, Alhelí Hernández and Remigio Mestas to name a few-- all masters in their own right and featured in many important collections with highly specialized audiences and followers. This collaborative project also offered these artisans an opportunity to present their work in other contexts: a traditional cultural expression with new collaborators and new objectives, as well as a contemporary platform capable of expanding both the range of their work and their publics. The master crafts persons, the Zancudos and the Brooklyn Jumbies not only brought their unique talents to the project, they also united their diverse audiences. Interested in textile arts, crafts, dance, folk arts, music, contemporary art, stilt dancing, processional festivities, photography along with the local community, they came together to experience and create a transcommunal expression.

#### 4. CONSERVATION AND EXHIBITION

In this project and its process it is also very important to mention the role and impact that the Textile Museum had on my work and efforts. The creation of works to be used by stilt dancers for their annual festivities and then exhibited in a museum setting presented a new problem, one that contemporary artists rarely ever have to address so quickly after the work is completed: Conservation.

Furthermore, the spirit of the work, which is deeply rooted in movement, traditions, flexibility, community participation and interactions, are concepts that should be taken into consideration not only when conserving, but when exhibiting the works. This was a magnificent opportunity for me, one that opened up my work to a whole new way of seeing it, handling it and even creating it-- all thanks to the museum staff's highly specialized knowledge and collaboration.

The impact that each of the pieces suffered during the festivities was significant. Here is one example from my presentation *Dancing to Africa* in Trinidad and Tobago: Before we finished crossing the main and final stage I was met with this. I learned an important lesson and in the future would coach the performers on the handling of their costumes after their presentation. For the project in Oaxaca, the works were much more valuable and fragile. All pieces had to be evaluated with the participation of the museum to determine what should be conserved, what should be treated, and to what extent. I was asked by the museum a question I had never been asked before: "What is important to conserve in your work?". The answer was different for each piece. What was most important for me was that the work be able to keep traces of what they had been a part of. Without the memory held within the material, the pieces would be lacking in what gave them life and meaning, and the spectator would not be able to experience it. Of course, some of the most fragile pieces were in a state of disarray and urgently needed a conservation treatment. These stilts for example, lost all their wax flowers --a problem I anticipated because of their fragility, and thus had additional flowers to replace them. The crackling in the center core was left intact, with the traces --and memory-- of the stress it experienced while dancing.

This example raises the following questions and also invites us to have a dialog.

What is the meaning of substituting these flowers? Will there always be extra flowers? Is it valid for these flowers to be lost while in use, but not once the stilts enter a museum? If, within a museum context the flowers are lost, then what is the decision to be made? Should there be a guideline that rules cases such as these: size, color combination, form, number of petals, etc. even after the artist is gone? Or should conservators try to conserve every bit of material, possibly using similar materials to the originals, but with something that can differentiate them to avoid "historical falsehoods" in order to preserve the original concept instead of the original material?

Having this dialog we can think of conservation more intimately tied to the artistic process. And look to ways in which established norms can integrate the views of artists for future conservation of their works.

To present the work that had been worn in processions, the museum team made ethafoam figures, designed stands for the stilts, created installation manuals and

instructions, boxes for storage, crates for stilts. I watched how they cleaned, strengthened the pieces, how they handled the work, I was fascinated by their materials and installation solutions and eager to learn from them so I could integrate some of their techniques into my own production. Today, I am making ethafoam and fosshape bodies for my pieces, in fact I am still excited about the workshop I took yesterday: Making Mannequins with Fosshape with Shelly Uhlir. I am using archival materials for storage and transportation, using tiny pins like the ones you use to adjust my pieces for installation, but I still have so much more to learn. This new found knowledge inspires me tremendously, what all of you do teaches us artists how to care for our work, and I see your labor as a beautiful and generous expression, an expression of love, respect and beauty. Thank you!

The whole body of work making up the exhibition TRANSCOMMUNALITY, after closing at the Museo Textil de Oaxaca has now been exhibited in Museums in Mexico City, Monterrey, Mexico; Brooklyn, New York and will open at the Cornell Fine Arts Museum in Florida in January of 2016.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

"Trans" refers to the blurring of borders. Therefore, it is understood that TRANSCOMMUNALITY is an invitation to dialogue with our local reality, which retains many traditions that co-exist with the development of urban space and modern ideologies. It is a reflection of forms of collaboration and exchanges that value skills, talents, practices, traditions and diverse ways of knowing. The objects and images resulting from the experience of TRANSCOMMUNALITY are an example of bridges created between practices, crafts, cultures and traditions that represent the multicultural and dynamic expressions that make up our surroundings. TRANSCOMMUNALITY, is an invitation to blur boundaries that divide cities, states regions, cultures and institutions which hinder the meeting and exchange among creative communities, other disciplines and their audiences. Simultaneously, it erases the borders that divide artists and artisans, offering the opportunity to expand the possibilities for interaction through a transdisciplinary collaborative work. Thus, TRANSCOMMUNALITY enables a dialogue that integrates traditional and urban manifestations to participate in the various concrete artistic expressions and in doing so expands to new audiences. This transdisciplinary-transnational exercise of exchange and reciprocity, promotes the appreciation of multiple and diverse traditions and the communities, individuals and institutions that preserve them, enriching each of the participants and their audiences. I propose we make more work together, artists and conservators, in collaboration, and activate a TRANSCOMMUNAL spirit.

Before we end this talk, I would like to share with you INTERVENTION: INDIGO, a recent project created in collaboration with the Brooklyn Jumbies, Jarana Beat, the

choreographer and dancer Chris Walker and dancers Jessi Lanay, Augusta Brulla and Orlando Hunter.

We brought to Brooklyn a worldwide practice to remind viewers of the global resonance of the crisis impacting the lives of people of color living in this country. There is an obligation for a public call to action – one that draws attention to the urgent need to elevate and change the values and practices of the police and the systems that support these views.

Indigo is a color that historically represents absolute truth, wisdom, justice, and responsibility. We employed textiles hand woven and dyed in Burkina Faso, Guatemala and the United States.

The traditional function of the *Moko Jumbie* stilt dancers is to serve and protect their communities. In Western Africa, *Moko Jumbie* is a spirit who watches over a village, and due to its towering height, is able to foresee danger and evil. The *Moko Jumbie* is traditionally called in to cleanse and ward off evil spirits that have brought with them disease and misfortune to a village.

Music and character design was inspired by the *Danza de los Diablos* (dance of the devils) portrayed by Jarana Beat. In the African-Mexican coast of Guerrero, the *danza de los diablos* is performed to remember all African descendants and to claim their place in society. It is a dance of resistance and rebellion against discrimination, exclusion, and segregation.

The *Rolling Calf*, portrayed by Orlando Hunter and Cheikh Gueye is a mythical character represented in Jamaican duppy 'tory (ghost stories). There are many origin narratives including the untimely death of a runaway slave boy whose restless spirit now roams. This portrayal presents the mythical as purposeful. The character reimagines what is possible for a black body attempting to find liberation and to create a better space in this moment and in this land. It is a way to make and claim space, empowered by the collective and shared moment of the Intervention.

Thank you.