



Who?

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# CULTURAL COALESCENCE:

Does it Mean to belong to a Community?

BY HIND BERJI



Moko Jumbies performing at Rollins College, Photography by Scott Cook

The name says it all. *Transcommunitality: Laura Anderson Barbata, Collaboration Beyond Borders*, an exhibition featured at the Cornell Fine Arts Museum, merges cultural integration with social intervention. Describing herself as a transnational, transdisciplinary, and bicultural artist, Laura Anderson Barbata develops collaborative, participatory projects that form a sense of social cohesion among various communities.

As an artist, Barbata is “interested in the language of art to facilitate and bring about and inspire exchanges between groups of people. What I call it is an exchange of knowledge. Through my work as an artist, I look in ways in which all of us can build and construct these relationships. And it’s all built on reciprocity. If you see my other projects, they also have to do with the exchange of knowledge and reciprocity; promoting respect and cultural values. And all of this is done in dialogue with everybody around you.”

In *Transcommunitality*, her pieces incorporate stilt-walking communities who use the practice as a way of preserving historic customs. With the aid of traditional craftspeople and artisans who contribute not just their skills but years of tradition and experience, Barbata’s work features vibrant, embroidered textiles and meticulously sculpted woodwork.

Her work suggests that the past, present, and future of cultural traditions can flourish with the right kind of support. Barbata’s transdisciplinary approach incorporates design, textile use,

movement, dance, and music, allowing the works to come to life in the form of a procession. Barbata’s role as artist, creator, participator, and observer during these processions helps move her overall collaborative exchange of knowledge.

One of Barbata’s most prominent and longest-running projects is with the African diasporic performance group the Brooklyn Jumbies. Najja Codrington, Ali Sylvester, and Kiel (Keys) Curlan Alibocas bring a modern spin to the Moko Jumbie, a West African figure that Barbata first encountered in 2000 when she began working with the Keylemanjahro Moko Jumbies of Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago. Moko Jumbies originated in West Africa as spiritual deities and are used in celebratory processions such as Carnival.

Similarly, working with the Zaachila community within the Mexican state of Oaxaca, Barbata created costumes and, with the Brooklyn Jumbies, performed for the stilt-walking group Los Zancudos de Zaachila in their annual celebration of patron saints San Pedro and San Pablo.

“We really focused on building bridges and connections with other traditional stilt dance groups,” Barbata said. “For example, the Los

Zancudos de Zaachila in Oaxaca, they did not know about the practice in West Africa, or in Trinidad and Tobago, or in New York. And people in Mexico City don’t know about the Zancudos de Zaachila.”

Barbata’s collaborations don’t just bring together different communities; they bring together different individuals within a

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single community. Under any other circumstances, these individuals may not have the opportunity to congregate, each adhering to what Barbata and Najja Codrington, one of the previously mentioned founders of the Brooklyn Jumbies, call their “circles.” Codrington refers mostly to the inner city communities the Jumbies work with in New York City: “Most people, especially inner city youth, are not fortunate enough to even move outside their own circle. We teach them about their culture and about other people’s cultures. We’re an active learning experience.”

Thus, the Moko Jumbie continues as community guardian, never ceasing to honor a legacy of evoking an ancestral spirit. There are no hierarchies between Barbata, the Jumbies, and the groups they work with; everyone is on equal ground (unless you happen to be on stilts, of course).

“With the stilts, it actually helps them a lot because whereas before they had to physically look up to adults, now the adults are looking up at them. Symbolically, it’s the same. It’s the difference between Superman and Clark Kent; when they’re walking around the street, nobody notices them, but when they have the stilts on, everybody wants to take a picture. It gives them a sense of self worth.”

Sometimes, looking at society from an elevated perspective also allows us to see the rough patches within our own communities. While Barbata strives for transcultural integration with various communities, she understands the importance of holding a mirror up to society’s faults. In other words, the fundamentally important value of unity is often marred by injustice, and Barbata calls attention to it.

*Intervention: Wall Street* is one example. As a response to the economic crisis of 2008, amidst the Occupy Wall Street movement of 2011, Barbata and the Brooklyn Jumbies invaded the iconic Financial District. Traditionally, the Moko Jumbies ward off evil, misfortune, and disease. The Zancudos, too, ask their beloved saints for blessings, protection, and miracles. What better place to ask for such healing?

Donning men’s business suits, Barbata and the Jumbies walked from Zancutti Park to the New York Stock Exchange. They handed out gold chocolate coins to everyone as a symbolic gesture of sharing

their wealth with the public. Barbata herself wore an oversized suit—sans stilts—to represent women’s significantly smaller presence in the corporate world.

During the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade in November 2015, Barbata and the Jumbies revealed the project, *Intervention: Indigo*. Using elements from Mexico, Guatemala, Asia, and West Africa, it was “also a response—just like *Intervention: Wall Street*—to the violence that is continually perpetuated against people of color in this country and all around the world.”

“It is a piece that brings together several layers of interpretation, and several cultures’ value of the color indigo,” Barbata said. “The color indigo symbolizes royalty; it’s a sacred color in many cultures; it’s a color of protection; it’s a color of healing; it is a natural plant dye that is used all over the world. So it also symbolically has the concept of unity.”

Barbata continues, “It is common in West Africa, for example, for cloths of indigo that are dyed repeatedly to be used to wrap newborn babies in order to protect them. In West Africa, the Moko Jumbie is the protector of a village who is there to serve and protect, and the police are here to serve and protect. So it is about reminding ourselves what it is to be of service. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that people in hierarchies or in positions of power are using that color.”

They started in a police precinct in Brooklyn, a wave of indigo Jumbies and musicians on the ground dressed as Oaxacan “blue devils” and wearing police hats.

According to Codrington, they were the only culturally significant group in an otherwise commercial parade, yet they only received approximately two seconds of airtime. However, Barbata and the Jumbies realized their mission, stating that the procession

had its “originating moment” in Brooklyn and evoked that moment throughout the course of the parade.

“One of the most important things is for things to be documented,” Codrington said, “Because a lot of important things are missed or rewritten because it hasn’t been documented by the right people and has been re-documented by others. We always say, ‘you need to tell your own history, or else it can get lost.’” ■

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Celebrating CFAMILY Day outside of Cornell Fine Arts Museum at Rollins College.