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**Kim Yantis Reflexive Essay: Belize 2022**

The main commonalities between my own culture and that of the host country Belize that I observed and experienced, were through family/community structures and personal gatherings. Being a northern-born US citizen, Jewish-diasporic Ashkenazi person, without Caribbean, Latinx or African Diasporic roots, Caribbean cultural practices and religious belief systems are newer to my life experience. The commonalities were felt on a personal level, centered around gatherings of conversation, meals, and often music. As a group, we were most often among our artists and curatorial peers, where there was an understanding, honesty, and trust to be ourselves, sharing information about our artforms, laughing and enjoying each other’s company. With my family-focused upbringing where education and the arts were valued, this was a familiar, familial place.

The main cultural differences I observed and experienced were in the pace of processes, services, and responses by participating organizations. Rosie Gordon-Wallace explained a similar experience on the previous visit, that building trust took several visits and ongoing work to communicate over time. The differences stemmed from complex intersectional issues paired with Colonialism that created ongoing political, social race-based, economic and environmental issues. Factors that may have contributed to some of the differences described are: Geographic isolation from a governing body in Jamaica; a national history of people who are still affected by a living Colonialism with Royals visiting occasionally; where indigenous peoples were supplanted; where educational and governmental resources are limited; whose exploitative early colonial trading was supported by a slave labor force, that weakened the environment, depleting wealth and local resources. The economic and social mindsets of those we encountered felt lack-related, a need for resources daily, affecting the time and materials to explore their practices. There were stronger divides in the cities where areas were known for severe gang violence and control, that exists in only certain areas of the US. I observed a lack of infrastructure for cultural organizations and city infrastructures, where roads were crumbling in neighborhood with comparative wealth.

One personal encounter that did challenge me was a brief visit from a Belizean artist “K” who was in deep emotional pain, feeling unsupported in their local arts community, and fearing the intentions of outsiders such as me. They yearned to have a voice and were reactionary to dialog. Although I felt frustration at this person’s words and behavior, it did spark many group dialogs on empathy and trauma. I was able to use my artistic knowledge to grasp the importance of their artwork. I expressed my lack of understanding about their local cultural and economic situation and used empathy to move forward. I learned in an environment such as this, my privilege is viewed differently from my self-perception of not being wealthy in the United States. To improve my intercultural knowledge and competency, I know that I must continue to travel, investigate and connect with artists through artwork, and eventually languages.

In my interactions with art and culture stakeholders of the host country, I learned that advanced art education is limited. There are just a few organizations that show contemporary artwork. As recounted in my exchange journal, a conversation with curators from the Museum of Belize, where two individuals handled too much, they were frustrated by leadership who valued the pull of tourism and the history of slavery and oppression more than contemporary conversations on the effects of slavery on the community.

I learned that artists in Belize are well regarded yet have limited resources and patronage. Their access to studio space was sparse. We visited one wealthy artist who had a full studio space in a dedicated home structure, while other artists worked at home or in one known coop space. Each found solutions to endure; full time jobs inside and outside of the arts sector, or a deep dependance on the cruise tourism industry, devastated by the pandemic. Sustaining an art practice in Belize seems challenging. Those who are lucky have outsource selling to Jamaica and other locales. It was hard to gauge art consumption in the host country due to the pandemic.

Discovering the Bliss Center for The Arts and many of the affiliated artists was powerful. I feel an affinity with performing artists as I have collaborated with them on specific projects for 20 years. I imagine collaborations with Indo-Caribbean dancer Dwayne Murillo and spoken word artist K, with fabrics and movement. Each artist could activate my set design-like artwork, focused on the environmental exploitation of Belizean waters (the endangered barrier reef) and land (the historic Mahogany industry); Artists could respond to the set through their individual artforms, wearing garments I designed, during a fully paid US-Belizean residency that culminated art the Bliss Center Belize and National Performance Network annual conference in the US.

The International Cultural Exchange to Belize immediately changed my practice by allowing me to reboot and look with fresh eyes at the direction of my work. This occurred through presentations to the group and the public. On day two, I decided to focus on capturing texture and patterns with photography, that I would then develop into wearable artworks and adaptive garments. I began to use collage as a tool to create very powerful images, a new direction for my artwork. In Belize, I learned from others that I often undervalue my efforts, regardless of master’s degree training and a great eye for art and design. I was reminded that regular studio practice is a commitment that I need to uphold. The journal collages that I created made me see how I’m drawn to and connected to sacred spaces, where patterns and textures abound.

My knowledge of art and culture in Belize has grown exponentially, from ignorance to deep interest in its people, indigenous and contemporary histories, and a connection to its artists and curators. As a not-necessarily diasporic artist living in North America, this new knowledge, individual connection with artists and institutions, builds a better appreciation and understanding of life and art in the Caribbean and in Belize.