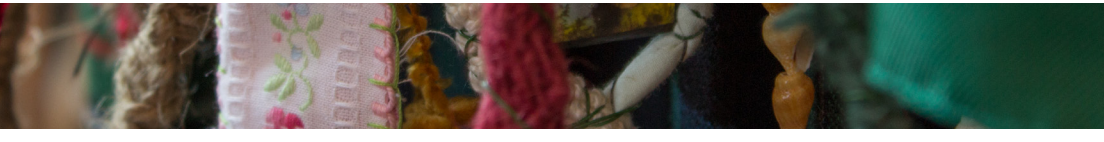
Native Immigrant Dress

Carolina Echeverría



by Taís Costa

Dedicated to my second family, an infinite source of inspiration and beauty.

- Taís





Carolina Echeverría



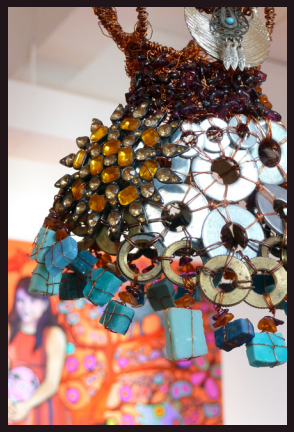
I am an artist, a storyteller and the creator of a powerful relationship with my words. My art is an authentic portrait of what surrounds me. When I stand in front of an empty space it appears before me in all its unreasonable possibilities. Fears aside, integrity, compassion and inspiration allow me to play in a constant dance with color, visions and the threads that connect them.

I left Santiago de Chile in 1986. I left my family
I left Santiago de Chile in 1986. I left my family and friends; I left my language, my mountains and my political struggles. I left school—the Pontificia Universidad Catolica de Chile—where I had been studying design since 1983.

I arrived in Montréal, Canada in May 1986 when spring was hiding what was to come. I completed a BFA in 1993 at Concordia University where I graduated with Distinction; I graduated with a minor in Textile Arts and two children. Thanks to my friend Gabriel's great patience—both for my very long sentences and for my Frida Kahlo obsession, I passed all my ESL courses. I had thought of continuing with a Master's degree, but decided to let go of the notions of being perfectly ready and set myself to create without compromise.

This was the time when I found my roots in Canada. I gave birth to our third child with the man who had brought me to this country. We found a place to live up in the mountains an hour from Montreal. Living there we also found a deep connection with nature and I fell in love with the land. I started to write, published a short story, did national radio for two years (CBC) and realized I'd gotten my voice back! I have my own personal accent in English and French, but it seems to suit me and I get by just fine.

Carolina's work is exhibited in galleries in Montreal, Chicago, Miami, New York, Paris as well as in museums in Chile, Haiti and Québec. She was a panelist on the CBC radio show "Thursday Think Tank, Sounds like Canada."



Native Immigrant

The Immigrant Dress—an interactive and collective dress-making activity—took place over a period of three weeks during the Native Immigrant Exhibit.

On display from October 23rd to November 3rd, 2013, Native Immigrant aimed to present an inclusive vision in the face of the exclusion that some see as a force dividing Québec society. I saw it as a fantastic opportunity to finally include immigrants in the dialogue.

I invited the public to take part in a collective work of art based on my own and others' experiences as newcomers to Canada. We are all immigrants like it or not. We just have different arrival dates.

The Native Immigrant exhibit was framed by a collection of thirty paintings bringing together the influence of Norval Morrisseau—Algonquin artist and creator of the Woodland School of Art—and Brigada Ramona Parra, a 1970's leftist muralist movement inspired by the aesthetics of the indigenous peoples of Chile.

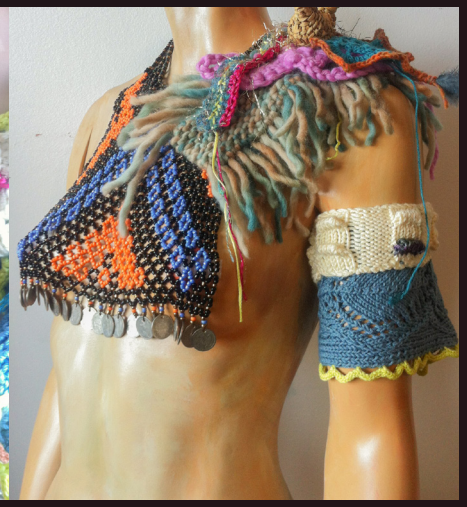








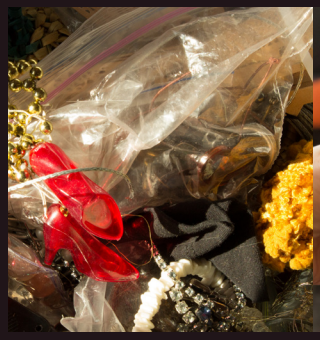






Montreal,
November 26th, 2013

This idea came to me as an opportunity to co-create. We are all threads in the fabric of this culture. Was I capable of sharing my artistic creation? Allow my own cultural appropriation? So many young artists are frozen by the intellectual fear of being perceived as culturally appropriating other cultures. Yet, as an artist born in Chile, living in Canada for over 27 years and with an DNA that includes 87% basque blood, 10% native and the rest, Berber, Ashkenazim and Asian, which culture is truly mine? The adopted one, the inherited one? The one that raped the other? All inside of me?









Antes nuestros ojos, en el presente,
todos vivimos el hecho que nos dio a luz.
Somos los eternos testigos de nuestra propia creacion.
Y nos repetimos las preguntas de esa creacion:
Cual es nuestro lugar en el Mundo?
A quien debemos lealtad?
A nuestros padres espanoles?
A nuestras madres aztecas, mayas, quechuas, araucanas?
A quien debemos hablarle ahora: a los antiguos dioses, o alos nuevos?
Que lengua debemos hablar ahora, la de los conquistados o la de los conquistadores?

- Carlos Fuentes





As an artist, I decided to allow my art to mesh with the work of others. My garments for survival, the narration of my own immigrant struggles, my sense of esthetics, my taste, my control: I surrendered all of these.

I placed a naked mannequin inside a large tin laundry tub, and like a plant, I covered its base with earth and stones. I added a few Echeverria plants because they are the only time my name has meant anything outside of Chile.

The first object on the dress was a Mapuche necklace. I bought this necklace in Valparaiso, Chile in April of 2013. I am not certain whether it is really Mapuche since it was made by a woman who recreates traditional Mapuche ornaments that no longer exist. Was this appropriation? I will take that risk.

The necklace covered the entire chest of the mannequin, and it stayed like that in my studio for a while. But one morning I arrived and found that one of my studio mates, Julia Pomeroy, had organized a knitting gathering with her friends to collaborate on my project. These young Canadian women knitted an assortment of woolen pieces and put them on the dress. It looked beautiful. What I had given up in control came back tenfold with the genuine surprise I felt as the piece evolved. After all, I had publicly stated that "preserving culture" is not possible, as culture is not dead: Culture is alive and organic.





There is an old brass heart, given to me, years ago by my friend Susan L. Scott from Waterloo, Ontario. She got it in Santa Fe, New Mexico and told me that one day I would know where it belonged. Now I did know.

To delineate the waistline of the dress I added a silver bracelet with three large roses that my friend Pina Sorbara had given me. Most of my close friends know that inevitably their gifts to me will end up in a dress. Pina's immigration story is about her mother Lina leaving Saint Giorgio, Italy, at the age of 16. She traveled by ship for two weeks across the Atlantic and arrived in St. John, Newfoundland. I think of her mother, only sixteen, filled with immigrant courage. Lina took the train to Toronto.

Janelle Gauthier—born in Matane, Quebec—loved the idea of an immigrant dress that could illustrate who we are as a culture today. She is married to a Moroccan Jewish immigrant. Janelle crocheted hundreds of galvanized wire circles, after my style, while waiting for her husband to receive cancer treatment at the Jewish General Hospital in Montreal. Her circles were attached by Agata Kozanecka, dressmaker in chief, as a surface with which to cover the mannequin's body.

My sister in law, Anita Astudillo brought me some 'pajaritos de Chiloe' from an island in the south of Chile where I lived as a young child. I placed a 'pajarito' over Julia Pomeroy's knits, right over the left shoulder.













I also added a large handmade copper African ring that I found at a flea market in Lisbon, Portugal years ago. It caught my attention because it was so clear in its shape; it must have had a very specific use. I imagine some African immigrant arriving here, losing it, selling it, who knows.....All I know is that it fits perfectly in front of the mannequin's genital area, the African circle where all of us are born.

The two straps behind the dress were made in Mexico and they represent Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Vanessa comes from Puebla Mexico. She brought a little green turtle and her daughter Violeta brought a little earring.



Janelle Gauthier wanted to be more involved. She seemed to be integrating what the dress meant as a means towards co-creating culture. She brought me the brooch her late mother Antonia Bérubé embroidered, a darling little flower done in petit point style. It sits inside a tiny brass frame. She also gave me her most precious memory, a little chunk of her grandmother Leontine Imbault's hand-made soap, important because little remains and she still wanted to leave some for her two daughters. Both her mother and grandmother come from Saint-Luc-de-Matane, near Rimouski, Quebec. She tells me that Matane is a Mi'kmaq word: mtctan, meaning "beaver pond".

The little tin pull tabs are added as a means of constructing texture with the introduction of 'arte povera': We can make art with anything.

Agata brought a little folk-art Polish bird. She had bought a bunch at an arts and crafts fair when she went to visit her friends from Karzimiez, Poland. Agata loves birds because they remind her of migration and energy. Agata also brought a broken wooden fan that might serve as an armature for attaching other pieces. She brought dried roses: Past beauty...preservation of the past. "The way they look is not the same. The smell and color are gone but they are still themselves."

Amaia and Kyla are two young ladies I met thanks to this activity. I met Amaia at an Idle No More protest. I had not protested since I left Chile while Pinochet was in power; somehow I felt like I had done my part. Now, it's time for others to protest, I thought, at least until Idle No More came to be. Was I idling too? Not any more.

I met Amaia Orbe at that first protest, a small gathering on Ste. Catherine Street, an ageless and radiant young woman with a familiar air. I heard her speak Spanish, I turned and spoke to her and gave her an invitation to Native Immigrant. She saw my name and asked" "eres vasca? (are you Basque?)" And there at a protest about First Nations and land protection, I was confronted with yet another source of identity for my immigrant puzzle.

Amaia visited a few times. I introduced her to Kyla Winter, an adorable and beautiful young artist, born here, of parents who were Irish and South-African. They became friends as they wove a common culture around the Immigrant dress. Kyla brought her aunt Peggy's white and green scarf and Amaia brought a typical white and blue Basque sailor handkerchief. I showed them how to make little branches with wire and coral beads.

Vanessa comes from Puebla, Mexico. She brought a little green turtle and her daughter Violeta brought a little earring.





Then there's my friend Marci Babineau. In an ironic twist of fate, Marci is the daughter of a Babineau from Quebec who immigrated to California. Her father's parents chose to speak only English so he might better integrate with California culture. After the birth of Marie Marceline, or Marci, they moved to Georgia, where she met and married, in her second nuptials, a British immigrant with whom she gave birth to a son. They then all immigrated back Quebec, to Montreal, where her son, at age fourteen was not allowed to study in English thanks to Bill 101, the Quebec language law. In my view, language is a primal emotion, something as personal as a sexual preference. It cannot be forced; one falls in love with it. Bilingualism is a highly erotic and sensual experience. Her son, forced to learn in a language he did not choose, closed off his mind, soul and tongue. He completely disconnected from learning, indirectly pushing my friend to leave her life here, where she had become the force behind many environmental endeavors, and, to many of us, the inspiration for learning about permaculture.

Marci moved to England a few months ago. I live with the constant heartache of falling in love with people who leave. I think she left her grandmother's bracelet by accident. I don't want to give it back, so I put it in the dress. I want her to miss it as much as I miss her.

The kilt was donated by Lesley Campbell. It belonged to her mother:

"The kilt belonged to my mother Mary Ferguson (always called Marjorie). The hardest part by far about leaving Scotland in 2000 was leaving my mum. I felt like we were abandoning her although it was the last thing she wanted me to feel and she was really encouraging of us giving Canada a go. I had always hoped she would eventually join us in Canada in the years to come. The first Christmas and New Years we spent in Canada was really hard for us both as we had never been apart from her at that time of year. My mum managed to come over and visit us in the Spring of 2001 and when it was time to say goodbyes all over again at the airport it was very hard and I almost knew somehow I wouldn't be seeing her again. She died September 9th 2001 of advanced metastasized breast cancer. She had only been complaining of a sore leg for a few months and went downhill so fast that she died while we were still on the plane coming home to be with her. I didn't realize I was going home for her funeral. She was 58 years old. After the funeral we had to go through her belongings and the kilt is one of the few things that I was able to keep and bring back in my suitcase to Canada. My mum loved that kilt and she wore it often to go into town and always wore it during New Year's. It still smelled of her for many years and my children both dressed up in it frequently to play "Braveheart" and dress up as "Fat Bastard" for halloween. It made me so happy that both my son and my daughter could get so much fun from this item and I felt her presence every time. I miss her everyday and donated the kilt to honour my beloved mother who left us too soon."







Agata and I struggled where to place Julia Milz's hair. An immigrant from Germany, Julia gave me the beautiful red hair she cut off while we were in the process of creating the event. Amaia and Kyla commented on how "Irish" it looked.

Habiba from Madagascar told us her story of immigration, her first experience in France as the child of immigrants and here, as an adult immigrant. She brought a piece of a sari: "Someone gave me the piece of a sari, I lost all my saris when I immigrated, I was not able to bring them. This piece was the rest of a costume. It became my first sari here. For me it was not a costume, it represents a culture, my culture, my origins. When I wear a sari I feel my roots. I put a piece of my roots in the Immigrant Dress." She continues, "I am not wearing this sari, I am cutting it and making art with it. It is not about wearing it, but about what it represents and it represents my culture. When you wear it, you are that woman, in all her femininity, in all her power."

Taion'wesenhta:ne hails from Kahnawake. Her dad Philip brought her work: a raised bead flower.

Carolina Murillo brought a piece of cloth made by her at Concordia University. With the 'devore' technique, she chose an image of herself with her friend Felipe in Orlando Florida. She was working on the subject of memories, how we recollect them, what we keep and what we forget. "Memories are our ammunition," she says.

Paulina came by with her grandfather Gordon. She is eight years old and brought a Mexican bill: "My dad is an immigrant from Chiapas, Mexico. He finds it cold, here, and more expensive with fewer colours. My dad's father just died and he couldn't go to the funeral. He speaks both English and French with a really strong accent. I'm the only one in my class with an immigrant dad. I think so. The best part of having an immigrant dad is that you get to speak a different language than your mother tongue and you get to experience a different culture. One thing I like about Mexico: it's very colorful and there is more life. They do very nice weddings; they do nice sewing. About Canada: there are more schools, I guess. Here they speak English and French. My object is a twenty pesos bill. At the airport we changed a hundred dollars into pesos and my parents gave me a 20. I want it in the dress because it represents money in Mexico. I wouldn't mind moving back to Mexico but only in sixth grade because the sixth grade teacher in my school is not great."



Judith Brisson brought an embroidery she made while living in Quintana Roo, Mexico. While working on her own art, she also taught batik there, and learned from Mayan women embroiderers. A Montrealer by birth, Judith is an artist who works with war veterans, creating portraits and plays that engage with their personal stories.

Sonya Girard comes from the land. A global citizen, unattached to boundaries. She does not love flags. Une vrai bilingue. Acadienne de mère et père québécois.

Marilyn Patricia Gabriel was born here, of a Lebanese father and an English-Irish mother. She brings a shamrock, a souvenir from her childhood, when she would look for clover.



Taís comes from Brazil. She immigrated with her family when she was 12. When asked where she comes from, she answers: "I come from Canada and from Brazil... you can decide." She finds it odd how subjective it is to claim cultural appartenance. Like when she says she is Brazilian, she is seen as 'exotic', while in South America and describing herself as being from Canada, others' perception changes. Oddly, while in Brazil, she is perceived as Italian because of her ancestors' origin. Her object is handmade. She is an artist and brought two pictures which represent a good moment and a bad moment. While dressmaking she made an origami crane, which she learned to make in Argentina: A Brazilian coming from Canada to Argentina to learn Japanese art. "The crane carries memories around," she says.

Jaime Lara de Chile. Aqui since 1974, he brings a Chilean souvenir: con rupestre symbols. He continues to define himself as Chilean after 39 years. His wife, Francine Burnonville, from Belgium, brought lace made by her mother.

Tomasz from Poland came as a teenager with his parents. When asked where he's from he answers: "from Gdańsk, and then, I've been living in Montreal for fifteen years." Tomasz wanted to participate so much he went back home to get an immigrant object. He brought a stone from the Świętokrzyskie mountains in Poland. It is a jeweler's stone that gives good energy.

Janet Lumb is a daughter of Chinese immigrants who worked hard to make a life here in Canada. She brings a small white cotton piece of T-shirt, dotted with the holes of garment that is truly worn out. Janet tells me it reminds her of her dad, how hard he worked and how his clothes always had holes.



Weeks after the exhibition, some of the participants met at my studio for a potluck. We miss each other; we've all become friends. We talk about the experience, and about what might come next. Habiba mentions how the dress looks like a plant that grew inside that pot. I mention that I am writing a methodology of this activity, and it is not possible, this chapter has not happened. We all agree the dress has stopped, anything else would only be adornment. We agree we don't know the outcome, not yet. I tell them I want the dress to go to Kahnawake and to propose that this community—which existed centuries before the Europeans settled North America—should get to practice its own cultural appropriation.

Judith tells me that these cultures I am "appropriating", Brigada Ramona Parra and Norval Morrisseau, they are my cultural references. They inspired me, and that inspiration gave way to this: this exhibition and this Immigrant Dress. My experience has been a good one. It did not rob me of my artistic creations, instead it actually expanded my work.
My vision now is to find a final home for the Immigrant Dress at a large airport where it will honour and greet all new immigrants as they deserve to be recognized, honouring and validating their incredible act of faith and courage.

- Carolina





"No quiero decir que cada uno deba quedarse en lo suyo para siempre, no no. Pero que nos dejen ser lo que somos para poder abrirnos al mundo. Por eso me encanta tu idea; una exposición que una a autóctonos e indigenas, y crear un mundo de conexion en común.
Un mundo en común pero desde las raizes."

"I do not mean that everyone should stay in his own forever, no no. But let us be what we are to open to the world. That's why I love your idea, an exhibition that brings together native and immigrant, and creates a world of common connections.
A common world but from the roots."

- Amaia



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