



ČEŽNJA: BORN LONGING BY ABENA KOOMSON & KRISTINA LEKO, JULY 5, 2012, THE KITCHEN, NEW YORK

## ČEŽNJA: BORN LONGING

by Abena Koomson and Kristina Leko

a multimedia oral history performance/happening

The Kitchen, 2012

a CEC ArtsLink's project

Featuring:

Hettie Barnhill

Elana Bell

Zeljka Blaksic

Marcella Bonich

Mirjam Busanich

Rachel Busanich

Sarah Dahnke

Ivica Gasparic

Ivica Gasparic, Jun.

Arijana Gasparic

Karma Mayet Johnson

Dara Lazar

Adam Matta

Syreeta McFadden

Caits Meissner

Lynne Procope

Kate Quarfordt

Allison Schlegel

Margaret Zgombic

Nori Boni Zorovich



Photo credits. The group photo and video stills from the performance: David Smithson.  
Photos of our community meetings: Kristina Leko. The bus ride: Zeljka Blaksic.



Song-circles and meetings in the Croatian community in Astoria, Queens, and in New Jersey.



## Facilitate the Relationship to Others

To say that New Yorkers are already accustomed to the type of exchange between cultures, races, and classes that CEC ArtsLink's One Big City initiative supports may be giving us too much credit. The program brings together New York-based artists in all disciplines with international artists to create, after a short period of residency, a performance or exhibition to be presented throughout the five boroughs. And while citizens of all backgrounds may be pressed up next to each other on the subway, share an office, or eat at each other's restaurants, the tight-knit ethnic communities that together have created the singular character of contemporary New York City can still feel absolutely impenetrable.

The partnership between Croatian-born, Berlin-based artist Kristina Leko and Brooklyn-based writer, educator and performer, Abena Koomson, for *Čežnja: Born Longing* was an attempt to bring outsiders into the Croatian community in the Astoria neighborhood of Queens (and vice versa), and to manage it in a way that went beyond superficial encounters or well-worn ideas of "cultural exchange." The idea of being "born longing," as the title suggests, is one which is utterly familiar in this city; a place where many displaced populations have come for refuge, often only to be forced out again by a more dominant group, real estate developers, or new industry, instilling a cycle of rapid reinvention of the ethnic or racial make-up of neighborhoods from generation to generation. The idea of a homeland or mother tongue becomes increasingly mythical as the years pass; geography and language that was once highly specific becomes fluid and hybrid. Subjective histories are transferred, translated, and repeated between families, students and teachers, religious congregations, and friends at bars. For those from the former Yugoslavia, this longing is amplified from the tumultuous history and eventual dissolution of the country which took place during most of the twentieth-century; they belong to an ever-growing international community of those who leave their homeland never to return, because it no longer exists. But, as *Čežnja: Born Longing* proved, the longing or nostalgia is not limited to those who may be first or second generation immigrants. It resides in us all for a connection to cultures that have preceded us, whether we are genealogically linked or not.

During a residency at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center in Queens in 2002-03, Leko first entered the Croatian community in Astoria as a volunteer at a Sunday school, building relationships that would form the basis of *Amerika*, an ambitious exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Zagreb in 2005. While this installation presented video and ephemera in what Leko describes as "expanded documentary cinema," the evening at The Kitchen presented the opportunity to bring in four out of five women that Leko had met a decade earlier—Marcella Bonich, Miriam Busanich, Margaret Zgombic, and Nori Boni Zorovich—all of whom fled from Communist Yugoslavia in the 1950s and 1960s. By allowing them the opportunity to share their personal history with a live audience, there was an undeniable weight to the evening that can be lacking in an exhibition context. In an exhibition, one passes through space and chooses what to look at and what to overlook; in performance, we were here, together, seated, absorbing the information as it was delivered to us. Rather than being represented through documentation, the physical presence of the women (now ranging in age from 76 to 87), created a stronger bond between the younger artists, writers, dancers, and singers who shared the stage.

This live, communal experience highlighted the importance of the collaboration between Leko and Koomson, who had invited the New York-based guest artists to perform. The meeting point for the seemingly disparate cultures was the song as a social tool. Koomson, who often works with a cappella song circles based on the exchange and learning of traditional music, lent the evening some of the most poignant moments, as when Elana Bell, Karma Mayet Johnson, and Kate Quarfordt joined her onstage singing in Croatian, with many audience members adding their own voices. As part of the development of the performance, the four of them had been running song circles in the Croatian community centers in Queens, singing together and spending time with the four women and the

community. And coming full circle, they also performed at this year's Croatian Children's Festival, an event that had great presence in Čežnja : Born Longing. The presentation of two songs written for the festival by song writer Ivica Gasparic engaged the audience deeply, through two videos of his son and daughter translating songs Gasparic had written specifically for them. While his son refers to the sadness of the "big white bird" that has taken him from his homeland, his daughter touches on the more specific problem of ancestral homes being sold, like much of the real estate in Croatia, to foreign developers as the value of land has skyrocketed in recent years. In this situation, the homeland is not left behind as by those who emigrated; instead, it is taken out from under them, as economic pressures grow in tandem. As his daughter struggles to hold back tears, so did many in the audience, from Croatia and beyond, in this time of global foreclosure and financial instability.

As Leko had done in Amerika, a number of strategies were used to communicate the subjects' stories. Not only would the five women appear on stage, but also in video; not only song was used, but dance and poetry. The impossible task of "accurately" reporting personal histories was attempted by each vignette; instead of a single narrative voice, the past was enacted as multifaceted and ongoing— a process. The connections drawn were often startlingly direct, as in "The Crossing" with Zorovich, the writer Syreeta McFadden, and the dancer Hettie Barnhill, drawing upon parallels between Zorovich's journey to the U.S., which was an act of escape from communism, and McFadden's ancestors, brought over in the slave trade, an act of forced removal. McFadden begins her text, "Stories like ours always begins with a boat"; the "ours" here can refer to those on stage, as well as all of the others who have made a journey not knowing what lies on the other side. "Your" and "our" became weighted words in their repetition throughout the reading, as well as "home." None of these words were ever concrete in their meanings. Their stories are told separately at first, and then became intertwined by the end, another form of literal "crossing." Another strong bond was formed in the last scene of the performance, in which Busanic and poet Lynne Procope read poems describing the islands where they born; Busanic from Ilovik, and Procope from Ieri, Trinidad. Procope's poem centers around the bountiful, natural forms her god—a woman—takes. As she reads, images of a Catholic Madonna procession from Ilovik in 1958 (one of the last years the island was populated before a mass exodus in 1962) were projected, conveying a deep sense of nostalgia and tradition. The Madonna becomes an important link between these two women, born decades, miles, and cultures apart. She is a figure of borderless faith, a maternal protector whom they carry in their heart no matter how far they have travelled. The initial insider/outsider binary was magnified by Leko's acknowledgement that apparent racism within the Croatian community was an impetus to work with an African-American collaborator; to that end, the diversity portrayed on stage did not feel at all forced, but completely natural— completely representative of New York. Additionally, the palpable female presence—almost all the guest artists were women— was another aspect which may have been deliberate, but rather than being a quality to be remarked at, felt inherent to the project.

Čežnja : Born Longing ends with a "family portrait", in which the camera is placed on stage and faces the audience, all of which have taken part in this singular event. It is a full house of strangers, friends, and family; children, senior citizens, and everyone in between. Though many of these audience members had never met before, and may never meet, the gesture of inclusion here is very much in line with idea of community that The Kitchen has sought to build through their support of artists, and artistic experimentation in all disciplines, since its inception in 1971. Like many productions at The Kitchen, the separation between audience and performer became minimal; rather than facing each other in opposition, we existed on a single plane, just for an evening. The individual and collaborative work of artists such as Leko and Koomson demonstrates that the role of the artist is not as an individual autonomous to the world at large, but one which uses the capabilities of art to facilitate the relationship to others. For what better excuse than art is there for allowing 155 rapt listeners to share your history, to inspire communication between generations, races, classes, and neighborhoods—essentially, to not be forgotten?



Zeljka Blaksic, Allison Schlegel, a special bus ride from Queens to the theater was part of the Ceznja:Born Longing performance.

participating artists  
 hetlie barnhill, elana bell, zeljka blaksic,  
 marcella bonich, mirjam busanich,  
 rachel busanich, sarah dahnke,  
 ivica gasparic, kama mayet johnson,  
 syreeta mcladden, dara lazar, adam matta,  
 callin meissner, lynne procopie,  
 kate quarfordt, allison schlegel, margaret  
 zgombic, nori boni zorovich



Adam Matta



A soup pot belonging to Mirjam Busanich's family, bought in the refugee camp in Latina, Italy in 1962. The neighboring family had a stew pot. The two families exchanged the pots on a regular basis, since neither could afford a complete set on their own.



Zeljka Blaksic, Allison Schlegel



When we came to NY, a furnished apartment waited for us. My younger brother was already here. My aunt as well. She set up kitchen for me. I still have these things. (M.B.)





Marcella Bonich, Karma Mayet Johnson



Nori Boni Zorovich, Syreeta McFadden, Hettie Barnhill





Ivica Gasparic, Jun., Arijana Gasparic, Adam Matta, Abema Koomson, Elana Bell, Karma Mayet Johnson



Elana Bell, Abema Koomson, Kate Quarfordt, Karma Mayet Johnson



Mirjam Busanich, Lynne Procope





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In the African American context, the tradition of group singing is not only a cultural tradition, but a political one. From the history of slavery where gathering and unified activities beyond slave work were seen as dangerous acts, to the advent of hip-hop and the beats of urban commentary, the call and response among voices and rhythms has been our history book. Group singing is a chronicle and a preserving agent, but it also initiates community. Once we sing together, our breath is woven into an entity that exists with the potential to breathe life into our intents and purposes. Songs like the gospel "Stay On the Battlefield," James Brown's funky shout out "Black and Proud," and the civil rights anthem "We Shall Overcome" transmit emotions and cultural experiences when embraced by a chorus of voices. In the African American context, even the soloist invokes this tradition when the handclaps, mmhms, head nods and commentary of the listeners are welcomed, invoked and celebrated. It is from this context that I approach singing in community. I welcome witnesses rather than spectators, participants rather than audiences, movement, resonance and vibration rather than polite stiffness. Singing, by its very nature, which requires speakers and listeners, is a birthplace for community building.

Abena Koomson

Without knowing about each other, Abena Koomson and I wrote very similar project proposals. I wanted to continue my research from 2002 about the topic of nostalgia in the Croatian community songs in Astoria, and suggested collaboration with an African American artist in order to (additionally) try to influence the racism that I had spotted in the community back then. Abena, belonging to the NY Ghanaian community, wanted to research songs in a community that she had not had any access to beforehand. Being an African-American musician and educator, a teacher, Abena's background is (political) empowerment through music. She organises song circles on a regular basis.

The story line of our theatre performance was based on my Amerika exhibition (2005) and the Čežnja performance featured four elderly Croatian immigrant women from Astoria, Queens, and their life stories. Aside from them, a diverse assembly of New York-based artists invited by Abena was involved in the performance. On stage, the two groups/communities encounter one another physically and symbolically in a mixture of documentary video, live performance, poetry, beat boxing and a cappella singing. We filmed interviews related to our theme of longing, prepared the elderly ladies for their act on the stage, established contact between them and three female writers, two of them African American, who, in response to the 'Croatian' stories, wrote their personal stories. (Texts enclosed.)

The performance involved lots of singing with and among the audience. All the songs were telling about the old country and were extremely sad. Many people cried during the show. The audience was mixed and approximately one third of it were members of the Croatian community. The day after, we received an invitation to perform in a hall in New Jersey, which we were unable to accept. Finally, an additional credit to our project was the fact that Abena and her a cappella friends opened and then sang at the Croatian children's festival in New York 2012, one of the most important cultural events of the US Croatian community.

Kristina Leko

## **Ilovik**

by Caitis Meissner

this line that crosses the distance  
between pinky and thumb is the mainland  
if you were to place a penny  
in the corner of my palm, there is my island  
these two hands are maps

these hands are currency  
the men have gone to the government  
we have kept the winter's bounty  
in the attic to keep us all until spring  
there is you and I  
and 1,500 bodies on this island  
to keep alive

these hands are a calendar  
they mark the seasons  
they have grown browner than  
the skin I was born in  
the sun tags along into the fields  
where I pick the fruit  
bring a basket to their leaves  
and put my palm around  
the small weight of  
oranges and lemons  
bite into their thick jackets  
and let the juice flood my tongue,  
these hands bring gifts

they stack the sardines like bricks  
belly to back to belly to back  
rub them with salt until we sting  
back bent round over the barrel  
these hands will carry the smell of fish  
through summer, until they are rubbed  
with the blood of ripe tomatoes  
then wrung to dry, their shells  
hung in the window wrapped in cotton

I have in my hands all I can hold  
there is a song to this work  
the thin drum of the roof as it gathers  
rain into the pot to boil  
I stir the Polenta,  
I squeeze the wine from the grapes  
I bottle up the olives to keep for many  
moons  
the children hold the press like the steer  
of a ship  
and run 'round and 'round

I know each stitch that binds the mattress  
I have cut the thread on my teeth  
and stuffed their bellies with wool

I slip my work into the dreams of my people  
my people, who sit at the feet of the Lord on  
Sundays  
my people, Sundays, we dance in the hall,  
where the town gathers  
my people, we jump in the water to swim  
home in the dresses our mother made us,  
pink as the sun as it descends into water

we are a people of water  
I wonder what is on the other side  
but if I were to leave  
who would milk the goats in the morning?  
who would stoke the fire until it dances  
or mop the floor of the school house so clean  
the children could see their teeth in its  
shine?

come morning we'll throw in the lambs in the  
water  
to soak them, tie down their limbs in the  
grass  
when we'll take off their coats, one side at  
a time  
they'll become bare as the dirt

in the morning, where we take the sheep  
we will find five skulls buried under the sand  
no other bones for the dog's to chew on  
where we swim from our mother's home to the  
fields,  
they will discover a bronze statue beneath  
the water  
time will have taken its head from its body  
and they'll pull it out onto a big boat and  
try  
to sell it for more money than we've ever  
seen

in the morning, one day, a ship wrecked in  
storm  
will wash a body onto our shores  
we'll see the girl's body round with salt  
and turn black under the sun  
and we'll know not where she came from  
or where she was trying to go

these hands are memory  
do not forget, they tell us, you are, too  
earth and water  
you came from this rain and rich soil  
and, too, you will on day, return

## ZORA

by Syreeta McFadden

Stories like ours always begins with a boat.

The ocean, the same. Salty indigo dark. That depths and depths and depths. Momma used to say that the buoys along the coast echo the moans of our forebearers crossing. She used to say that odd quiet of rushing water and the quiet clap, clap against the pier was an old mothers moan. A woman desperate enough for escape she'd hurl her own body overboard surrender to the dark. My people come by way of Portsmouth by way of a long ride from some black African coast we've never been able to name. Any attempt is bastardization. How we ended up here, on a stoop in Queens, with our neighbors Puerto Rican and Croatian, is what one would call, a lovely urban coincidence.

We've come this far by faith, is what my mother's mother would say.

Queens, too, is an island, a regional conglomerate of three islands that we call New York. If we're to be honest here, most of us came here by boat. Everyone in America is from somewhere else. South of where we sit now, tourists from some state west of here are on a boat to Ellis to find their fathers names on its rolls. These folks were privilege with the choice of choosing their crossing. I've been there once. Chaperoned my eldest's on a school fieldtrip. She asked if we could find our name on that long registry, in a time period that followed our ancestor's arrival. Broke my heart a little to tell her she'd find no evidence of black Transors on those scrolls. Our story began before they kept records like these. She ran off to watch her friends light bright discoveries. The names. The boats. The possibilities. The legacies. Coveting their stories of seeking home and opportunity to the land of milk and honey, land that seemed to welcome them and their skin..

Ours, too, is a story of crossing, Nori says.

She tells me this. My neighbor. Her English is music. Snaps me back to the iced lemonade in my hand, its cold is remarkable and comforting in this heat. My kids mock my mason jar. That' so country, they say. But I don't care, to drink from it is a kinda of homecoming I can't articulate for them. The act connects me back to something I'll never be able to describe without an ache. She tells me of their crossing. A lazy midsummer afternoon, our children and children's children long somewhere off, scattered off in archipelago of New York and America, for that matter. The particulars differ my own story but I do recognize it. I tell her how my youngest Zora is headed to college. She smiles a knowing wink. I recognize that too, how women have a twinkle in their eyes holding onto a pearl of a private memory, but she still looks distant.

That was the name of our boat, she smiles. For a time it was home. She continues. The boat, 18 meters, so, 60 feet, it was our boat we fished with, with which we made our escape.

For two years the sea was our home. I can't tell you that this is home. In my dreams I see aquamarine ribbons rivulets a vast openness, a threadbare line between sky and sea. I can tell you that my dreams were tranquil. It was not all beautiful. We encountered tempests and maelstroms, times when the sea provided to little food, but we hard our faith. We imagined a home not unlike the one we left on the coast of your land.

Easy Nori, I say. I shake the ice against jar's walls. I feel my stomach shift into a tight ball around two innocuous words: your, land.

I was born here, but I'm never so sure that those words belong to me. You know, four years ago, they mauled Michelle Obama for saying that it was the first time she was proud of her country. Everyone wanted to sweep under a rug our complicated legacy. She is by definition the product of that legacy. It doesn't make it any less true. This is all to really say: I'm courting the idea of mouthing the words my land belongs to me. They're just words you say. Maybe, I think. I've seen many crossings into this land of milk and honey. Stories passed down to me in hushed tones, quiet like river water lapping against rocks and stones.

My people moved west and south, under a slavemaster's lash, fire at their heels. I don't know this first hand. I know the photos that survived the burning. The erasure of court records of birth and death, towns burned to ground because they'd grown more prosperous than white ones. A blink from a century past. I know this to be true.

Nori looks off, her eye a hard stare at everything and nothing. She fans herself with a flattened newspaper. A signal to the absent summer breeze to return to work. A dog barks in some unknowable distance.

When they came to our island, she says, they banned our language. When she says this, music of home still lingers, I can almost see her island home. She continues, There were choices to be made. We had to disappear, to die.

Here, her story becomes mine:

We were little snails carrying on ourselves all our little possessions, and walking and walking without knowing where we were headed. We were not emigrants with wishes and hopes. We were refugees without any hope. The only important thing was to leave.

Leaving, remarkably, is equally hard as staying, she adds. What I learned from the sea is that you can't dream freedom as much as you dream home.

I think about that some. I imagine when all my family left the plantations over generations that each move, the wandering, the walking, the dark in some part of their dreams.

What is freedom anyway? I add.

What is home? She says.

I cannot say we are Americans. We live here, respect the laws, we are content, but with our hearts we are always there. But you, here is your home. No matter the story, here is your home. You are American as pie.

I accept this. Offer her an empty glass. We make lemonade from lemons, I say. She says she never understood this.

I say that's what freedom is.

I ache, she says. Wish you could have seen my home.

We watch the sun yellow to tangerine. A maroon impala passes by, windows down, and music briefly fills our block with a forgotten melody from yesterday.

Did I ever tell you Zora means in my tongue? She asks.

No, I say.

Like you daughter's name... It means dawn.

## **Longing for Ieri**

by Lynne Procope

Trinidad, is the southernmost island of the  
Caribbean.  
The native people, the Arawaks, called my country  
Ieri,  
Land of the Humming Bird. Columbus called it La  
ysla de la Trinidad,  
in honor of the Holy Trinity. We call it paradise.  
We believe  
no matter how far we travel, no matter how far our  
hungers drives us,  
we can never leave Ieri.

In my country we call god  
by her many names. We name her  
bois mabi, she of the bitter bark  
hibiscus, she of the humming bird belly  
breadfruit, she of the poor man's pot  
and sapodilla, she of the sweetest milk  
We name her guava and passion fruit,  
pommecythere and poui. She the blossom,  
the burst fruit. She- the first garden  
and the fall.

We name her every flowering  
rush of this three mountain island.  
We name her lover, sister and mother too.

Now to sing our hosannas and beg her  
forgive us our leaving. Now to wreath Trinidad  
in our small pride, culled in these cold places.  
Now to survive surviving,  
without her sun drugged breezes. Now  
to forgive ourselves any year we do not return  
to Trinidad. Any of our fathers' sailor dances  
or their robber songs which we can no longer re-  
call.

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I'm a girl-child born of a smooth blade  
machete, of the dark blood and fearless prayer  
of mosquito. I broke open  
the year the mountain tumbled down,  
the year the bulldozers leveled god  
at the ankles. When I learned to dance again;  
It was the calinda of cold, sinking asphalt,  
The heel and toe hallelujahs of underground  
trains.  
I learned to let my hips sing  
till the knot slipped my heart.

I was raised in a soca wild music in tassa and  
the smooth sway of shanti, in the rolling Oshun of the Orinoco,  
in the hunger Caribbean Sea, but I found here America;  
another country, cold oceans to house my deep,  
my ever longing. This longing true as a bell rung  
and wailing in the belly. My belly is a house of hunger,  
a wilder humming, this far from home, this far  
from all the god I've known and named and praised  
for what I've owed.

for the red dirt of the belmont hills,  
always a sweet rain damped scent in my nose.  
The song of the guitar pan like a string  
dragging your navel. My chest always a cathedral  
for my love, for my longing, my hands wringing out  
that one song, Ieri. It is a psalm of me and all who came  
before me. Psalm of the hummingbird. It is the thousand  
glories my godbody can be named Ieri,  
Still the one truth I know.

[lynneprocope.com](http://lynneprocope.com)