Last June, Professor Anita Gonzalez led a group of GIEU students across the pond to Liverpool, where they put together and performed an original stage show. In 2015, she’ll be taking students across the border to explore historical and modern art forms with Mexican artists in Oaxaca.
Could you tell me about the GIEU Liverpool program that just returned?

Students worked with six different charity organizations in the Liverpool area for about two and a half weeks. Because it’s an international exchange program, they were also learning about themselves and how they felt as Americans in a different culture.

At the end of the internship and residency in Liverpool, the students did a show called ‘Framing Liverpool Through Michigan Eyes’ where they were able to talk about their experiences, thank the institutions responsible, and reflect upon what it was like to try live in a different country and with a different set of goals. Of course, a lot of their reflections were on their own background here in the States and whether or not they came from places of privilege.

At first, they were scared to death! They were like—“How are we going to do a show? We don’t know how to do theatre!” But during the process of writing it, they came to understand that this show was going to be about them more than about Liverpool. After one month, you can’t reflect upon a whole town that the reflection would be through the performance!

You’ll be leading another GIEU group to Oaxaca, Mexico next year, focusing on how cultural histories are expressed and promoted through the arts—what prompted you to choose that topic?

What’s amazing about the Oaxaca region and about Mexican folklore in general is that it’s a way of telling stories. Dancing doesn’t mean you’re just doing a cute dance, you’re telling the history of a community and working on a dialogue between different ethnic groups. And there are many different ethnic communities in Oaxaca, so people speak their own languages, the market is an amazing place there...they’re big on traditions in Oaxaca.

There’s a space in Oaxaca, a church that a friend of mine runs. She has kids learn about eggshell tempera painting and they use that to paint the façade of a church, but they also sell mirrors as a way to raise money to paint the façade. There’s a music group that does jarocho, which is a music and dance tradition from the east coast of Mexico. There’s an African dancer I know named Lamine Thiam who teaches African dance workshops there in Oaxaca, and then of course the weaving tradition is huge in Oaxaca as well as visual arts, like painting. There’s a Oaxaca group that’s doing a Oaxaca jarocho version that they promote and I would like to see the students work with that group.

It’s those kinds of projects that I’m interested in interacting with. I’ve written a couple books about Black and indigenous communities in the Oaxaca region, and right now I’m thinking that the students will work with local artists—fabric artists, like weavers, visual artists, music artists with jarocho or one of the local music forms, and dance artists. I would like to have the students sit side by side with an artist and learn about their work. and what the folklore means.

I’m hoping that that’s the kind of art form that will reach a larger audience, because ultimately I was thinking: why should the people in Oaxaca want to work with us? They have to find a way of generating income. I mean, we can pay them to do workshops, but then after that, then what? Where does that take them?

I keep trying to think about ongoing and sustainable linkages to programs, and making sure that the projects are not just exploitative, they’re not just taking away. I think that the thing that Michigan students can give back to the communities would be a wider exposure of their work. Instead of doing a show, what I would like them to do is to work with each art group on promoting their work in the United States.

Web pages, obviously, but some of them may want to have a brochure about a particular event or some of them may want to develop a CD.
How would you describe the role of performance in creating community?

It's really important! All of my work is based on this idea of working-class people having art forms that are not necessarily what you would call high art. But even though they're not described as high art, the art form is used as a way of creating a dialogue between people who may speak different languages or have different cultural practices.

What defines folk art is that it represents the people of a particular region and their ongoing heritage traditions, their ongoing way of making art. For some of the indigenous people like the Mixtecs it might be pottery; for others it could be a particular dance form—in one region, the 'Devil Dance' is passed down from generation to generation as a way of telling cultural history and cementing community.

I once taught a course called Latin America Through the Arts where students went to Costa Rica and experienced the different folk traditions of the area. They studied everything from the Catholic Church to how to make tortillas, because all of those have artistry in them. It's so funny how things that we once thought were just everyday things are now high art, like making books by hand.

Oaxaca is pretty well steeped in that consciousness. The tourism business is huge in Oaxaca because they have a lot of student learning programs, and then they have the Guelaguetza which is this huge international festival which brings in thousands of people just to see Mexican dance from the different regions of Oaxaca. There's a huge amount of money pumped into the Guelaguetza, so they're already very aware of an international audience for folk arts.

Mexico is a place where they have a lot of festivals. These festivals provide an opportunity for all the local communities to come together and perform things or demonstrate things. They may create flower garlands, they may put sawdust patterns in the street, they may create crèches during Christmastime, but each time it's done in a particular way of a particular community. And dances especially: so they bring out a dance for a festival, meaning that they arrange to have it performed; they find a dance maestro to re-teach the dance to people from the community who are going to perform it and represent a particular borough or community.

The Theatre department has a new minor called Global Theatre and Ethnic Studies, which you’re in charge of. Can you tell me how that came about?

I was hired by the university to transform what was once a minor in African American theatre into something broader. I have an ongoing interest in global performance traditions, and I changed the seven courses that are required for the African American Theatre minor into a Global Theatre and Ethnic Studies minor.

Everyone in the minor is required to have an intercultural experience, either domestic or foreign; they have to be involved in some kind of performance work that's done in a multicultural community. Anyone who went to Liverpool would already have fulfilled that requirement.

The intercultural experience can be fed by many different parts of the university. Ashley Lucas—from the Prison Creative Arts Project—is taking people to Brazil, and Janet Shier in the Residential College is taking people to Germany, and Emily Wilcox will take people to China. Students just need to do something with performance overseas.

It's important to me that the students who take the minor are able to make up work. I know that in Liverpool that the students were really surprised that it was so easy to make up a show, because it's just based on them, and they did some brilliant work. They really did.

But the previous minor and existing minor do studio practice, so students actually learn how to create shows and make work. In other...
A theatre text is not complete until it’s performed.

words, they involve performance training as well as an understanding of the literature that underlie the field.

Performance is about embodied practice on the stage, and then the literature is to provide a context and history for why people do that. But I don’t just want people to read about it. I want people to make work. I’m committed to performance practice.

All my scholarship comes from performance. When I want to write a book, I have to do a play first in order to explore the subject matter, and then I can write the book. After I’ve made enough shows, then I have enough information to be able to write a scholarly tome.

Theatre used to be in the English departments, where people just read the plays and studied them as literature. But the literature is only written to be performed. It’s what you call an allographic art form: as literature. But the literature is only written to be

A MIX OF CULTURES

by Kashira Patterson

My understanding of multiculturalism in Britain has been an ever-changing one. Every time I found myself comfortable with the definition I had created, it was challenged, forcing me to re-explore and revise.

After visiting Rich Mix, an organization offering live music, film, dance, theatre, spoken word, and other creative activities in London, I decided to treat multiculturalism like a word that has multiple definitions. I kept my definition that centered around identity, balance, and resistance, and I added a new definition that spoke to the significance of space.

Rich Mix catered to their community without being a center labeled after the makeup of their community. They were able to foster a sense of community for all ethnicities while catering to art in its many forms. Multiculturalism requires spaces like this one: somewhere that people can fully embrace the diversity of their cultures in a safe space. With that point, my understanding of multiculturalism had two intersecting definitions, a discussion of identity, balance and resistance and the spaces that allowed that discussion to happen comfortably.