

Black Banana: Exhibitions of Absence - the paper

Introduction

Black Banana is a brief examination of structural racism in art curation and its effects on descendants of Africa living in Latin America. Acting as a metaphor, it sheds light on the absence of those of the African Diaspora in the workforce, and as a part of the overall Latin American cultural project. What are the histories of these erasures, and how does this history prove the existence of a racist hegemony that results in cultural exclusion? When did the whitening of Latin America begin and how does this whitening affect the economy of the black populations as well as their integration into Latin American society? Ultimately, is the lack of Black Latino representation proof of racist curatorial practices in the Latin American contemporary art world? The *Black Banana* focus is to create awareness around the possible *denial* of racism and how that *denial* affects who and what is curated. Ultimately the goal is to provoke an open dialog about identity, hybridity, and access.

The Question of Racism

Most will say that issues of race are complex, and to some, nonexistent in Latin America. This was my experience in the New School media studies class, Art, Media, and Conflict: Guatemala Post-Genocide. While attending, I observed a distinct lack of representation of Black Latinos in the curation of art in Guatemala, and in Latin America in general. Each passing class revealed, what I considered conflict; cultural exclusion. Though the underrepresentation was evident, I was met with initial resistance from classmates from Latin America, when mentioning that the lack of representation seemed an obvious racial issue. Common thought, in Latin America, is that issues of racism are specific to African Americans in the United States, as they are coming from a different societal experience. Accepted contested space is generally around issues of class and not race. Though the reality of class structures may be true, observed issues of cultural exclusion, poverty, lack of political power and access seem to weigh more heavily in

black communities.(2) These observed inherent realities run counter to strict class assertions. To understand the resistance around issues of race in Latin America, it's important to look at the history of colonialism and it's effects on the region. Further investigation will reveal obvious similarities between the United States and Latin America with regard to racism and cultural inclusion.

The History

Issues of race and ethnic hierarchy have been prominent for hundreds of years, largely due to the advent of Europeans who colonized the Americas. In the late 1400's the Spanish and the Portuguese laid waste to the native populations who inhabited the Americas through war and disease. As this affected the labor force, and because there were prohibitions around enslaving the indigenous, millions of Africans were enslaved and brought to the Americas. The number of Africans brought to Latin America far surpassed the number brought to the United States, particularly in Brazil. (1) Extensive mixing of Africans, Indians and Europeans resulted in a racial hierarchy that put the Europeans on the top and the Blacks and Indigenous on the bottom. Despite hierarchical notions, the fact remained that the population of nonwhite was extremely large in the nineteenth century. This concerned the power elite so they sought ways to whiten the population. However, by the mid twenty century racists societies were discredited and a new ideology that extolled the virtues of the mixture of races prevailed. This Ideology was called *Mestizaje*. Though it was established that this was now the norm, social hierarchies based on race and color persisted. These hierarchical structures are central, in my opinion, and feed the issues of access and the exclusion of Black Latinos in the overall cultural conversation.

Black as Latin Identity

The idea of identity is a huge subject that in itself has brokered many books. Research and work regarding black identity in Latin America, though notable, can be considered open territory. Exploration of the topic would no doubt fill volumes, however my brief perspective will mostly be specific to Guatemala, as this was the focus of my class. There are only a small percentage of the Guatemalan population considered to be black, a mere 2%. As a point of comparison though, there are an estimated 150 million African descendants in Latin America, according to the World Bank in 2006, which makes blacks the largest marginalized racial or ethnic group. In contrast, there are approximately 28 million indigenous peoples in Latin America, according to 2007 estimates, also from the World Bank. This makes the African descendant population five times larger than the indigenous population. But with respect to the region of Guatemala the Garifuna, descendants of West Africa, Central Africa, Caribbean and the Arawak, mostly live in Livingston and Puerto Barrios, and make up the larger part of this community. Afro-Caribbean and mulattoes living in Puerto Barrios and Morales make up the balance. Lack of economic opportunity forced many Garifuna to relocate to neighboring Belize and the U.S. Extended communities of Blacks are located in pockets across the country of Guatemala. Jutiapa, San Jeronimo and Amatitlan have populations of blacks who interestingly don't identify as black and therefore have no relationship with what is thought to be black culture. We can speculate that the lack of self identification can skew the hard data of census taking, which in a real sense impact communities with regard to who receive government funding. (2.) This brings us to the question of the Mestizo identity, and if it's helped or hindered Black Latinos?

1. Identity lower levels for blacks
(pg. 293 par.2. - 294 par.1,2)

Mestizo: Identity/Hybridity

You would think that the homogenization of race and culture would provide the antidote for racism, poverty, problems of access, and issues of class. Unfortunately the opposite has proven true. What is the Mestizo Ideal, (mixed Spanish and Indigenous) and what does this construct mean to those Indigenous Mayans and Black Latinos of Guatemala and greater Latin America? There is evidence that a number of Latin Americans readily define themselves as Mestizo. But what, if any, hierarchical relationships exist between Mestizo, Indigenous Mayans and the Afro-Latinos of the region? Do these relational and societal hierarchies prove a racism and discrimination akin to what is experienced in the United States? According to the online publication, *Minority Rights Group International*, the majority of the indigenous Mayan peoples and minority cultures, which includes those mixed African-Indigenous, experience disrespect, violence, and

negative treatment in the media and society as a whole. Identifying as Mestizo negates, on some level independent and individual cultural experience. This would explain the recent switch and rejection of the mestizo idea and the acceptance of the more contemporary multicultural latin world view.(pg.83) This view reportedly incorporates more tolerance for the variety of cultures that make up Latin American society. Unfortunately this general acceptance has done little to change the overall reality of the Black Latino experience as we still see evidence of inequalities. (1.)

1. pyramids of color pg. 85, pigmentocracies

The greater question is that of *access* as it relates to what is considered curatable and marketable. This is a challenge most poor and disadvantaged people experience worldwide when it comes to cultural and artistic expression within the contemporary art world. When considering the question of how one's culture should be defined, with regard to poor folk, what often seems absent from the equation is how *they* define themselves. With respect to the Guatemalan/Mayan and the Afro-Latino cultures, there seems to be no exception to this dilemma, particularly with regard to it's art and culture.

In *Contemporary Art in Latin America*, a collection of essays and relevant research , are themes which support the assertions of this paper. In the current globalized art scene we find eurocentric notions and stereotypes that relate to identity and intercultural dynamics. Speaking to this are the writings of Gerardo Mosquera. In *Against Latin American Art*, Mosquera talks about the Latin American predicament. He speaks of hegemonic western metaculture,internationalisation and embracing of the 'non-west' versus personalities of singular contexts, and local traditions. His text, in my opinion, makes the case for a society's willingness to be short sold by the *idea* modernity. Oswald de Andrade coined the the term anthropophagy in 1928, which deals with the idea of cultural appropriation or the inverse. His words were 'it only interested him what was not his'. What came from this sentiment was an apparent reversing of the fundamentalist politics of authenticity. Instead of being imposed on by colonialism, *anthropophagy* voluntarily swallows dominant culture to it's on benefit. I found this concept problematic as it seemed, in my opinion, to play into the acceptance of the annihilation of cultures indigenous to the region and a decimation of it's inherent voice. In support of this Heloisa Buarque De Hollanda warned that anthropophagy can stereotype a problematic concept of a carnivalizing identity that processes beneficial

everything that is not its own. This comparison makes the case that what was considered beneficial and valuable to Latin culture, was European identity. Value was not placed on the African diaspora experience or the Indigenous experience. The trickle down for those populations to this day, are a lack of social, economic and political standing. This "concept" could be said to influence what is considered curatable and more importantly, how Latin America represents it's so called *minority* populations.

Why Black Banana?

There's a history connected to the banana industry in Latin America and race relations which support my use of it as metaphor. In the early twenty century the banana was a favored commercial commodity in Latin America particularly in places like Costa Rica. Racial tensions between those who immigrated from the West Indies to work the plantations and the existing Hispanic population already existed. We can speculate that the presence of the United Fruit Company and its monopoly of production and exportation of banana had a large play in this scenario. To support their expansion in the Atlantic Coast regions the need to expand the labor force to meet demands. This encouraged the import of foreign workers most of which were black. The UFC were said to have given no preference to West Indian workers over the Hispanic however having had experience with the commodity and with a better grasp of English the West Indians had an advantage. This stoked the embers of racial discrimination that was passed off as nationalism. We find the banana in the works of Karlo Andrei Ibarra (GENEALOGÍA DEL RITMO) and Miky Fabrega (BANANA REPUBLIC). Both exposing the injustices of the United Fruit company, yet with either piece the inference to Black Latinos is nonexistent though history proves that they were there. This example of erasure must be considered when looking at the overall Latin American sociological picture. It is a reflection, intentional or non, of the infectious racism that affects the psyche of those producing art and those curating it.

Conclusion

This much is sure, Afro-Latinos are underrepresented or absent from the world of Latin American curation and what is contextualized as contemporary art. The denial of racism as the impetus of the problem is damaging and unproductive. To completely unpack the truths of racism and its effects on art curation is beyond the scope of a single essay. However what is certain is that it requires a willingness to ask uncomfortable questions which will undoubtedly expose societal weakness along with deep fissures in the Latin American cultural plan. However the benefits far outweigh the cost as it will also open a needed dialogue. This dialogue will go a long way toward encouraging balanced equitable curation of the rich and fertile culture of Black Latin America.



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****Afro Latinos and Indians in Latin America suffer disproportionately from poverty, lack of access to basic social services such as education and health, unemployment and labour market discrimination. In Guatemala 66 percent of population is poor...87 percent of indigenous live below poverty line. (Harry Anthony Patrinos, 'The Cost of Discrimination in Latin America,' *Studies in Comparative International Development* 35, No. 2 (Summer 2000), p.4) (pg.296)

****These high levels of poverty among indigenous and black Latin Americans reflect lower levels of educational attainment and less access to basic social services.
(Hopenhayn and Bello, *Discriminacion ethico racials*, p. 20.)

***Hooker, Juliet: 'Race, Ethnicity and Multicultural Citizenship in Latin America',
J. Lat. Amer. Stud. 37, 285-310 2005 Cambridge University Press.

****Identity lower levels for blacks
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