

***Black Banana: Exhibitions of Absence - the paper***  
**by Novel 'Idea' Sholars and Maira Nolasco**

**Introduction**

*Black Banana* is the 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? Is the lack of Black Latino representation proof of racist curatorial practices in the Latin American contemporary art world? These are the questions this project hopes to explore. 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 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 our opinion, and feed the issues of access and the exclusion of Black Latinos in the overall cultural conversation.

### **Why Black Banana?**

There's a history connected to the banana industry in Latin America and race relations which support our 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 and the need to expand the labor force to meet demands, 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 a clear 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 expose the injustices of the United Fruit company, yet the inference to Black Latinos is nonexistent though history proves that they were central to the work force. 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.

### **Guatemala → Belize connection → afro art community**

Our recent findings have led us to the works of Belizean artists, a part of a community we plan to learn more about through *Black Banana*.

- Originally part of the British Empire, it shares a common colonial history with other Anglophone Caribbean countries. Belize has a diverse society, with many cultures and languages.
- Approximately 50% of Belizeans self-identify as Mestizo, Latino, or Hispanic and 30% speak Spanish as a native language. When Belize was a British colony, Spanish was banned in schools but today it is widely taught as a second language.
- The Garinagu (singular Garifuna), at around 4.5% of the population, are a mix of West/Central African, Arawak, and Island Carib ancestry.
- In the early 19th century, the British sought greater control over the settlers, threatening to suspend the Public Meeting unless it observed the government's instructions to eliminate slavery in whole.
- Slavery was abolished in the British Empire in 1838, but this did little to change working conditions for labourers in the Belize settlement.
- Slaves of the colony were valued for their potentially superior abilities in the work of mahogany extraction.
- Progress toward independence, however, was hampered by a Guatemalan claim to sovereignty over the territory of Belize. While Belize finally attained independence on 21 September 1981, about 1,500 British troops remained in Belize, the declared purpose being to provide protection from a Guatemalan threat.
- Guatemala's president formally recognised Belize's independence in 1992.

### **More about the project**

*Black Banana* is not a rotten fruit, it's not something to abandon or throw away. It is a rich sweetness that is worthy of consumption and we believe, the perfect metaphor for black contemporary art and its artists. This project's mission is not only to uncover the structural bias regarding the work of Black Latino artists, but also to provide an opportunity for collaborative effort and self determination. *Black Banana* offers up the sweetness that is the rich tradition of the world of black contemporary art through the humor of the metaphor, with full awareness of the seriousness of the issues at hand. Through the forum process, *Black Banana* will offer an opportunity for reflexivity and transparency to those in positions of power in contemporary art curation. It will challenge the power brokers of contemporary art to come from under the veil of denial through mutual dialogue and exchange. Each forum will be videotaped and will be included in our future exhibitions and on our website.

***Black Banana: Exhibitions of Absence*** exhibition platform is as follows;

1. Website which features curation of black artists and their work in specific regions of focus, along with a call to action
2. A video documented forum for discussion dealing with racism and its effect on curatorial practice.
3. An exhibition of curated art which represents black artists in a contemporary context.
4. Interviews of artists and curators giving their perspective on Black Banana and its mission
5. 3D printed bananas with call to action web address in a black burlap constructed bag. Presented as an installation on a featured black platform.




**black banana**  
exhibitions of absence

## Collaborators


black banana

exhibitions of absence


### Collaborators




**The Afro Latino Project**  
Facilitating awareness about and promoting the digital curation of the [Afrolatin@Afrodescendant](#) experience.  
**Amilcar Maceo Priestley** - on the board of A.L.P.




**Leonard Daniels Jr.**  
3-D artist and founder of [CCDDNYC](#). Art Director [1NMediasalon](#)




**Mai-Elka Prado Gil**  
Afropanamanian lead singer of [Delsonido](#) as well as the co-founder of the [Afrolatino Festival](#) of New York



**Jamaul Roots**  
Owner of "Roots, Wraps & Smoothies" in San Ignacio, Belize.



**Katie Numi Usher**  
a Belizean artist



**Yasser Musa**  
Belizean visual artist, teacher, poet and publisher.

### Look and Feel of black banana: exhibition of absence

black banana

exhibitions of absence



black room

1 large projection screen for featured art

7 monitors for interviews

2 black benches

a black platform for our bag of call to action 3 D printed bananas

pamphlets and printed materials

along with ...

1. An online site with our mission, tracking of project and resources
2. A documentary of the process and interviews with artists
3. An interactive map of art exhibitions around Latin America that focus on afro-latinidad
4. Call to action black banana in a bag



## Links to work

<http://blackbananaproject.tumblr.com/>

## Video link

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CpR9SqmnX\\_g](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CpR9SqmnX_g)

## Conclusion

Most will say that issues of race are complex, and to some, nonexistent in Latin America. This was our experience in the New School media studies class, Art, Media, and Conflict: Guatemala Post-Genocide. While attending, we 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 we considered conflict; cultural exclusion. Though the underrepresentation was evident, when mentioning that the lack of representation seemed an obvious racial issue, we were met with initial resistance from Latin American classmates. Common thought, in Latin America, is that issues of racism are specific to African Americans in the United States. 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.

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. 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. The benefits however, far outweigh the cost as it will also open a needed dialogue. The *Black Banana* dialogue will go a long way toward encouraging balanced equitable curation of the rich and fertile culture of Black Latin America and beyond.

## **Bio**

*Novel 'Idea' Sholars - director/producer/curator*

*Novel 'Idea' Sholars* started her own media production company, 1Nmediasalon, in 2004 which began her trajectory as a producer of new media projects. Her independent arts curation site 1Nmediasalon curation rebranded as 1Ncuration, houses interviews from some of Brooklyn New York's most provocative independent artists. Novel's recent work includes the transmedia project *Naked Layers*, which explores themes related to black women and the body, and *Black Banana: Exhibitions of Absence*, which investigates the denial of racism that impacts curatorial practice in art curation in Latin America and beyond. 1Nmediasalon has nurtured many over the years, thus fortifying her overall objective to advocate for independent art and those who make it. Novel Idea is currently pursuing her masters in media at The New School For Public Engagement in New York City.

<http://1novelidea.com/>

<http://1nmediasalon.com/>

<http://1ncuration.com/>

*Maira Nolasco - documentary filmmaker*

Maira Nolasco is a documentary filmmaker from NY. She recently produced a short documentary, "El Equipo Humilde," about a Latin American futbol team from Brooklyn who have formed a makeshift family through their similarities as undocumented men and their love of the sport. Her current work includes a web series, "border/culture," which explores the boundaries that exist between cultural identity, both real and imagined and *Black Banana: Exhibitions of Absence*, which investigates the denial of racism in Latin American curatorial practices. In addition to completing the documentary studies program, she will be receiving her Masters in Media Studies from The New School for Public Engagement by next year.

<http://borderculture.tumblr.com>

[https://twitter.com/Border\\_Culture](https://twitter.com/Border_Culture)

## Bibliography

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### more

\*\*\*\*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  
(pg. 293 par.2. - 294 par.1,2)

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