

## Episode 4

# Foregrounding Central American Contemporary Art, with Marton Robinson

Voice Over: This is a UAL Decolonising Arts Institute podcast.

Ileana L. Selejan: Welcome to the Foregrounding Central American Art podcast. My name is Ileana Selejan and I'm your host on the programme. My guest for today is Costa Rican artist, Marton Robinson. Some notes on the artworks and references mentioned in our conversation are included with the episode description.

Ileana L. Selejan: I'm here with Marton Robinson, my guest on today's podcast. Hello, Marton.

Marton Robinson: Hi, Ileana.

Ileana L. Selejan: Great to have you. Thank you for accepting my invitation.

Marton: More than welcome to have the invitation. It's really a pleasure to speak with you and talk about Latin American art.

Ileana L. Selejan: To start, I'd love to talk to you a bit about your practice and some of your most recent work, and one of the pieces that I've been very interested in is your performance "No le digas a mi mano derecha lo que hace la izquierda" from 2019 which powerfully speaks to black identities in Costa Rica, placing inherited narratives of the nation into critical perspective. So could you describe the piece and talk a bit about the implications?

Marton Robinson: Sure. So the piece is actually – I call it a video installation performance so it's a three-part project. The first part is based on a mural. It's a mural that I draw – let's say the first part of the piece starts with a mural which I start drawing during the process of installing the show.

The second part of it is an event that I produce which is the performance, and in this

performance I literally erase the drawing that I did on the mural. The mural is done with chalk over blackboard so it's kind of mimicking this idea of a class situation or a blackboard you would draw in terms of having, teaching or being a student. And the last part of the three-part project is the installation. And the installation is the projection of the performance over the wall so it's kind of create this looping of creation and erasure in a way.

So the implication of this project I will say it's, have like a multiple layer that you could go from biblical references – the first one would be the title, the title reference – to this idea of Jesus giving bread to the poor with his right hand and not letting his left hand know what it's doing.

So this idea of kind of the hidden and prohibited at the same time. You don't – I would put it in a simple way like you don't do activism and promote yourself that you're an activist; you do activism because it's what you have to do. You don't need to promote it in a way so I think that's a little idea that comes with the title, the reference and the title.

The other idea is the characters are the, let's say objects or iconography that I use in the project. Like for example, the main figure is the Virgin Mary which is Costa Rica's saint patron, and this is an image that was found in the first black settlement in Costa Rica around 1630, 1650s. So for me using this image have a lot of history and a lot of personal context or connection with it, first, in the sense that people in Costa Rica call it La Negrita. So La Negrita in English means sort of like the little black or – Costa Rica have this idea of diminishing words.

Every word you kind of give it the "ito" which "ito" is kind of like little thing and it's kind of way that we express ourselves. And I find it that it have two ideas or two meanings towards it – one the idea that everything is small in Costa Rica, that we're small country, small population so everything have to be with "pequeñito," "bonitito," "deliciosito." There is always that ending of the word.

And then the other one have to do with the problem of Costa Ricans to call people black, so they find it offensive to call you a black person but they don't find it offensive to call you a "negrito." For them calling you a "negrito" is kind of like a more personal statement that they love your culture or they appreciate your culture. So that's kind of something that I like to play with this. And also the idea that the show is syncretising not only black culture with religion to be able to cater to this population that probably have more belief in terms of their African roots.

So bringing this image together I also bring another image that is quite important in Costa Rica which is Cocori. Cocori is a character based on a storybook that is

written all the national educational system. I read this book when I was a kid and the first time I read the book I actually feel weird. I didn't know why I feel weird reading the book. I didn't feel connected to the book.

It was offensive about the things I read and I still remember my first impression was a paragraph that says something like "the little black kid saw his reflection on the water and figured out he was black." So this is a story about a 10-year-old kid that lived on the Caribbean coast doing let's say this got to be like the 1940s, 1930s in Limón, the Caribbean Coast of Limón.

So let's put this in perspective. The story is talking about a fictional character which is based in this region and it's charged with a lot of stereotypes. One, the character looks like a Sambo. The illustration look like a Sambo. The other one is that the way he dress is always like without a shirt, bare feet, kind of like emphasising the idea that he's a poor kid.

And the other one, and the one that hit me the most, is that the perpetuated story of this kid as an ignorant kid. And I like to refuse the idea of this kid being ignorant, this kid being poor, in the sense that if you live on the Caribbean Coast you probably have tons of ways to sustain yourself informally, either that you're growing your own products close to your house or you have ways to exchange, either going to fish or moving from Panama to Costa Rica, Costa Rica to Panama, Nicaragua to Costa Rica.

And that idea that when in this region there's not much this idea of borders and the borders are kind of like illusive or they are almost never there. And that idea that this place can be so charged with so much history, and not only history, but so much influence from different countries and that is one of the first places in which people speak English in Costa Rica.

So the people who came to Costa Rica during that time were well educated. They not only speak Spanish but also speak Spanish [sic]. They had their own newspapers. They had their own kind of survival skills so this book portrayed this kid totally completely out of the reality of that time and that region.

And for me to blend those two images is to put in an – confront Costa Rican because they love the Virgin, the idea of the Virgin being black. And they in love with the character, Cocori because for them, Cocori represents the real black people of Costa Rica, the real black people of Caribbean Coast.

So in this image I'm trying to play with those stuff. How easy it is to make history by

the idea that if you have a myth or a fiction, and if that myth and fiction is repeated constantly it becomes history, and how history then becomes reality. And that's the reality of Costa Rica, right? The idea, as you mentioned, the idea of the Creole, this idea that we live within a colony that perpetrated the idea of cast, that if you're white you're on the top of the ladder. If you're Mulatto or Creole – and you go down, down, down, down, down.

In my case I like to play with this idea that I'm a “torna atrás.” So “torna atrás” in English mean like going back. My father is Mulatto, my grandmother's white, my grandfather is black, my father is Mulatto, my mother is black on both sides so they come together, they had me. So instead of going forward and lightening, let's say, my DNA, I went back and instead of turning white I turned black again.

So it plays along with ideas of how you would whiten a family during Colonial time. They say it takes like three or four generations to whiten a family. So if the family goes through a process of mixing, mixing, mixing, eventually you're a white family. And again you could pay your way going to church and having the priest say, “Oh, yeah, they're a white family,” so blah, blah, blah, blah.

So Costa Ricans being whitened by what I would say are “decretos” or government statutes or just like the idea of reading information of 1700, 1800, 1900, that will say Costa Rica is a country mostly white and white European descendants.

So all of that plays a lot in Costa Rica psyche of whiteness and how to relate with whiteness. So I think that that this piece deals with that idea – the body, the black body as always performing in different environment, and in this specific case, performing in a museum in the gallery.

And this, the 2019 piece was done in Brazil which I think it's very powerful because of all the history of slavery and all the history of racism in Brazil.

I recently did the same piece at the Contemporary Museum in Costa Rica which for me was quite powerful because this was the first time I actually could engage with the idea of race and the idea of performance in Costa Rica specifically. And I think it was powerful in that sense because at the end I create an installation in which people could reflect and see themselves and how this looping of erasing and creation constantly plays and how easily it is to somehow intervene in those process.

Ileana L. Selejan: It's absolutely fascinating. Thank you for that. I was thinking also how to me one of the most powerful moments in the performance is this incredibly delicate and painstakingly made drawing in chalk, how you go with your whole body, with your face too, and kind of the chalk, it sticks to your body. And the sweat and all

of that and how that gesture of erasing that incredibly painstaking work but you taking that upon you, the power of erasing that incredibly delicate, again, drawing that you've made.

And to me it's a very powerful gesture of taking over your own history and taking charge of your own history. And also obviously the contrast of the black skin and the black board and then this white powder that just vanishes, it's like dust, it turns into dust. So I found that moment, that particular moment when you return to nothing the canvas, you return it to nothing, incredibly powerful.

And thinking about visibility and invisibility, I'd be really interested in speaking about the position of Afro-Latino artists within the greater field of Latin American art but maybe for us it will be more interesting to stick to thinking of it in particular, to Central America. And I'm thinking how historically the practices of artists of African descent have absolutely been marginalised.

Is this situation changing? Has the decolonial term made an impact? And I know you actually have several series of work that address decoloniality directly and I'm thinking here of the very pun-titled "Tecnologías Deculoniales," which articulates a very poised but absolutely trenchant critique of the nation. So would you like to talk to me about that?

Marton Robinson: Sure, maybe we'll start defining "Tecnologías Deculoniales." And let me try to emphasise it's not – "de-co-lo-niales", it's "de-cu-lo-niales." I'm not emphasising it for you. I'm just repeat it for people to kind of get an idea where we're going. So when I start travelling or let's say working more broadly in the US and also studying in the US, people start thinking about my practice in terms of decolonial.

And I'm not going to say that I haven't thought about it and I haven't thought about my practice in terms of decolonial. But I think the problem is that I understand decolonial differently, positioning myself in Costa Rica, in Central America and talking about decolonial in terms of the US and Europe and I think it's two different perspectives right there.

For me decolonial or the idea of decolonial has to do with process. It has to do with process, how I engage with my materials, how I engaged with the way I am able to produce my work and navigate my work and survive my work.

When I started my art practice my first intention was to get included within the discourse of the art scene in Costa Rica. That was my main intention, like how do I find myself within an institution and that institution validating my work somehow.

And as you say, yeah, it's always been, whenever you think about black art you always think about it – not only black art, black music, black art, black science or even black medicine – you always think about it in terms of a pseudo-science or something that it's not scientific but it's more related to this magical or ethereal or fantasy. It's never considered a real pure science by itself.

So I'm always going back to that and I think that the idea of owning my own term or creating my own term and my own theory in terms of decolonial was to understand it from my own perspective. So I started talking about this and it started, and I'm going to be honest, this started out as a mockery and I was just mocking the American scene because I was doing my master's degree and I was like, "OK, so I'm going to do an entire project named decolonial" and most people not even know what the term "deculo" means. I'm just going to make fun of this and how they just digest all this stuff.

And they did. The project was well-accepted. It started making me feel like – I'm not going to say better but it gave me more ideas and I realised that I was creating a platform in which I could talk about a bunch of stuff. So "Tecnologías Deculoniales" for me is kind of like three parts. One of the parts is I work a lot with archival and archival material.

So most of my practice is embedded in that idea of reading archive and creating archive, and interpreting archive from another perspective so that's the main, one of the main issues of "Tecnologías Deculoniales" – to create an archive, and to be able to speculate with that archive and create a new history with that archive.

The other one have to do with economy and knowledge, that I call, and this idea of economy and knowledge is related that when I went to the US I found it problematic to have a scholarship that covered all my studies and the amount that that scholarship could cover the study of maybe 20, 30 Costa Rican artists. You know, like they're complete master degrees or even the bachelor programme – could cover 30 students with my scholarship.

So I find that problematic and that's the reason I talk a lot about process and how the idea of decolonial is not about aesthetics but it's about process. And that's when I started understanding more deeply my practice. So when you say that the idea of black art is changing, I was saying, yes, it's changing but it's changing not because – I'm not going to say good reason, but it changed I would say mainly because of two situations.

One is the more broadly and let's say the Black Lives Matter; let's put this way – Black Lives Matter and how Black Lives Matter in the last 3-4 years literally became a worldwide political/I don't know. It's hard to define it, and at times it's also even scary to define, because I will say right now is the biggest political movement in the world. And how powerful it is that it's the biggest political movement, right? And how countries like Costa Rica, Panama, Nicaragua are adhering themselves or validating this idea of Black Lives Matter in their countries.

So I think that have a lot to do with institutions wanting to visibilise black people in their institutions because there is a, let's say there is a demand of it by the society, there is a demand of it by the media. If you're not doing something related to black people or black communities you are out of the spectrum.

The other one is I think, and I think this is the one that is the – yeah, I think it's the main one, and the reason why you're seeing more work from black Afro-Latinos or Latin, Latino, black Latinos in the area, and it's related to the idea of the international decade for people of African descent, which is what the United National declared since 2015 till 2024.

So what it means? It means that there is a lot of, not a lot of money but there is money or people willing to put money to create projects within this idea of the international decade of people of black descent or African descendants.

So, for example, since 2015-16, I have been invited to at least 4-6 curatorial projects that are related to specifically the region either Latin American, black Afro descendants or Afro descendants in Central America. And I'm very suspicious about these projects in the sense that most of them the curators are not from the region. I haven't met any curator that specialised in black artists of the region or any institution that specialised in this.

But now you see a proliferation of curators dealing with the subject. So I was invited to a project that was created by a curator based in Spain who came through the Americas and then this sort of retrospective of artists that were working with the black subject. So that's another interesting stuff – artists working with the black subject.

I didn't realise that until I was at the exhibition and I was eager to like oh, finally I'm going to be part of a collective of black artists. When I got there I was disappointed because more than 70% of the artists that took part of the exhibition were either white people or people who considered themselves, let's say white in a way or at the same time, people who might have Afro descendency but it doesn't show through their phenotype.

So I started thinking about this and how problematic it was that they were taking imagery of black people, put it in the museum, getting paid for it and the whole discourse of the exhibition was oh, we're empowering these communities. So for me it was no, the only way to empower communities is to return and give them back and these artists are giving them money out of the money they make? Are the institutions that are presenting their work giving them money or are the institutions taking the exhibition to this community? So I find that really problematic.

Another one was also an invitation specifically based in Central America, and I think this one was more problematic in the sense that it came from an organisation based in El Salvador. The organisation is based in Salvador but it's a German organisation working in the Salvador, that have this project within the region and they want to talk about blackness.

I really find it offensive because El Salvador had, let's say they purposely eliminated blackness out of their nation. If you're a black person in El Salvador even though you're born in El Salvador you might not be a citizen, you're not considered a citizen. So for me it was like how this institution based in Germany, wants to do an exhibition about blackness coming from El Salvador when they're not addressing that El Salvador not even recognise their own people, black people as Salvadorians.

And then the other problem was that the person who was doing the curatorial programme was from Chile. Knowing Chile also had big immigration issues with Haitian people, with people from the Caribbean and they're very vocal about it and really nationalist about it, I find it really disturbing.

So I actually refused to take part of that exhibition but at the same time I felt that by not taking part I was making a position, but I don't think I was effective in terms of maybe putting it out there and have people question this kind of stuff. But at the end it's kind of hard to get that kind of critique when you're talking about race. That was kind of like a limbo in that area.

So, yes, so I think there's representation, but I don't think it's going in the right direction. I think that there's still a weird thing going on in terms of representation in that sense.

Ileana L. Selejan: It's very interesting what you say because I think it very clearly highlights how these processes are just never straightforward and very, very complex and complicated, and there's a very particular history to Central America. So the way that decolonising is understood in the US or in the West is just very hard

to apply to the Latin American context as a whole but maybe even more so in Central America where, as you very well say, citizens of African descent were denied citizenship. Costa Rica's one of the countries that had that in law until what was it, the 1950s, very late, right?

Marton Robinson: Yeah, like this law, there is this law through which they prohibited Afro descendants to move into the capital. So this was like their way to, let's say, contain the population and how the population mixed and have them segregated. And in a systematic way to just control them and just diminish them and have them under control.

Ileana L. Selejan: Yeah, it's state racism. But also the other thing that I was thinking while you were talking is how a lot of Central American nations, even countries that had very progressive politics, whether they be revolutionary or not, created this kind of identity as a mestizo nation so nations of mixing, nonetheless by excluding indigenous and Afro descendant population so it's a huge contradiction there.

And also I'm thinking a lot about how, on a second level to that, how artists like, I'm thinking this amazing painter, June Beer from Nicaragua, Afro Nicaraguan from the Caribbean, she was for a very long time considered a naïve, quote-unquote naïve outsider artist. So the difficulty too I think for a lot of identifying black artists and even indigenous artists I think for a long time has also been this very clear kind of cultural politics of signalling their practices as: this is naïve, or even the word that's used a lot in Central America is "primitive," like primitivism.

"Pintura primitivista," primitive painting, just to contextualize it for the English-speaking audience. And so I just am thinking when you're talking about this we're also talking about a very long history of marginalising practices and putting them under this label of "this is not really art, it's naïve art. It's made by untrained ..."

Marton Robinson: Folkloric.

Ileana L. Selejan: Folkloric! That was the word I was looking for. But then at the same time many countries in Central America have kind of built their identity again on cultural production that comes from black communities and I'm thinking music especially, calypso. Oh my God, right? I mean there so much – poetry, poetry.

Marton Robinson: Food. Let's consider the simple things.

Ileana L. Selejan: Food. Yes!

Marton Robinson: There is a battle between Nicaragua and Costa Rica about who invented Gallo Pinto. I have this joke like oh, for people who doesn't know what's Gallo Pinto, Gallo Pinto is the typical breakfast in Costa Rica and Nicaragua. And for years they've been fighting over who owns the right to say that is the national plate.

So it's funny because when people ask me if I'm Costa Rican my answer is I'm more Costa Rican than Gallo Pinto. And they're like, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, what do you mean more Costa Rican than Gallo Pinto?" And then I'm like, "Well, let me explain it to you. People claim that Gallo Pinto came from Nicaragua, Costa Rica. No. Gallo Pinto came from all the Caribbeans. You have Gallo Pinto in Jamaica. You have Gallo Pinto in Cuba. You have Gallo Pinto in Puerto Rico.

So it's a black influence that got into the capital of Costa Rica and what's the difference – that maybe the Gallo Pinto that we eat in the Caribbean Coast we don't call it Gallo Pinto, we call it rice and beans. And rice and beans have like coconut, have chile panameño have so much ingredients that are very peculiar from the Caribbean.

Ileana L. Selejan: Flavour, yes.

Marton Robinson: Flavour, exactly, and when it get to the capital most of these people don't eat coconut because their digestion couldn't take coconut so they take it out. So, oh, we can't have pepper, we don't like that much condiments, oh, so let's take this out, and it becomes a plain Gallo Pinto, so Gallo Pinto is just a simplification of rice and beans.

So, yeah, as you say, there's this discussion about the heritage and just white-washing that heritage to make it more related to themselves. It's a very Eurocentric perspective of trying to diminish all the indigenous part or the black part, but try to position your whiteness at the front.

Like there is this Guatemalan writer Emma Chirix who say that part of the decolonial, or part of the colonial idea or accomplice is to take the indigenous out of you, and I had to bring myself, take the blackness out of me, refuse all my blackness, all my indigenous part and just go ahead and think in terms of whiteness as the pure, the best, the ideal.

Ileana L. Selejan: I am wondering, because this, I think is brings us to a really interesting aspect which has to do with how black communities in the Caribbean of Central America are actually very connected to the Caribbean in general, and across

the Caribbean to global diasporic networks.

So I'm wondering if we could now shift a little bit in our position and for this positionality, through this angle, and to think about – so again, Afro-Latino communities flourished within this broader context which is also bilingual – you mentioned English before – and actually in most cases it's also multilingual. We're talking not just about Spanish and English; we're talking about other languages.

And also in terms of culture production and we should include music, literature, even food; this meant a tremendous variety of practices and forms that are nonetheless not properly recognised. So I'm curious – how do you see this relation to the greater Caribbean and to the greater African diasporic networks from Costa Rica and Central America, and have you dealt with these broader trans-national connection so leaving the continent, leaving the isthmus in your own work.

Marton Robinson: Yeah. I definitely work a lot with language. Let's say my first language is Costa Rican, what we call a live language, so I grew up speaking what we would call Mekatellyu. So Mekatellyu is kind of like a Jamaican, broken English and it's kind of like very specific of the Costa Rican Caribbean region.

Like let's say I haven't been out there fully, positioned my body out there for more than three months or four months in a couple of years, so if I go out there now I will still understand like 87% of what they're talking, but I may not understand 30% of it because it shifts so fast and it shifts every day.

Like maybe a term that I learn when I was a kid, it's shifted meaning right now because it's so alive that people just constantly keep shifting it and it's based on, as you see, Nicaragua, that is so many slangs going on that at times it's kind of hard to keep up when you're not sure what people are talking about. It's the same with this language.

So, yeah, so I think language plays a lot in my practice because of that, because I start speaking Mekatellyu, then when I started school I started speaking Spanish. Then I have to go to English school and Spanish school because if you're Jamaican in Costa Rica or you're from a family of Jamaicans you have to go to English school. You have to perpetrate the idea of speaking English. That's your legacy. That's something that you have to do. That's almost like it's the only thing that you could hold on to.

Ileana L. Selejan: You mean as from your family and your community you have to?

Marton Robinson: Right. That's because we don't have a history of blackness in Costa Rica. The only book that talks about the history of blackness in Costa Rica is not even part of the educational system. So the oral stories and this idea of telling the oral story through this broken English or this Mekatelyu language make it so powerful in that sense.

And, yeah, so it plays a lot, so I could also explain or think about this idea of transnational or how we move around regions. As I mentioned before there's, for me growing up there was no border between – I didn't need a passport to get into Nicaragua. I didn't need a passport to get into Panama. We would just take a boat and cross to Panama or just walk through a river and get to Panama.

It's the same in Nicaragua, so my family grew up in both borders, south, the South Caribbean and North Caribbean. They have land in both places so I'm always connected with these two countries.

I don't see a distinction between being Costa Rican or Nicaraguan at times because my family, part of my family grew up in Nicaragua. They live in Nicaragua part of their life. We still have family out there and it's the same in Panama. So for me all the Central America region is the same. It's hard to call it.

There is actually this idea of the Mosquito land. Mosquito land is a territory that extended from Honduras, the Miskitos and all this, population of Miskitos in Honduras, all the way to Panama. So it is believed that this was a region in which a lot of enslaved people managed to escape and live there.

And the people, the natives of this region accept them and they become a community. Like if you go towards the South Caribbean you will have what we call the Coolies. So Coolies is like this mixture between indigenous and black, and it's so natural to see that going on there. So for me that's it. I don't see a difference in much of this region and also could explain it in terms of this idea of the Panama man.

The Panama man is – oh, I've forgotten the name of the person which I learned the term from and I'm sorry about this. I should know better. But the Panama man, it's – I was reading – I was part of the conversation with this theorist that write a lot about Central America in terms of literature. She's mostly interested in literature and how the diasporic literature in terms of the stories and also the music that people were writing or were telling.

And this idea of the Panama man is that during the construction of the Panama

canal, first they brought in people from France to build it, which they left it because of all the – not environment, mostly the weather problem. They couldn't resist the jungle and the weather, the mosquitos and all that so they left the project. Then United States came in and they took over the project.

So one of the mission they had when they took over the project was that they want to hire mostly people who speak English because they were having problems with the people from the regions that they couldn't understand each other so their decision was, OK, so we're going to hire people from the Caribbean.

A lot of people from West Indies came to Panama, a lot of people from Jamaica, so all this region came all the way to Panama to work, and it created this character which is the Panama man. So the Panama man is this character that travelled to work in the canal, the Panama Canal, went out there with this idea of making money and taking that money back to their countries.

Most of these people never got the money that they were promised and they got trapped in the system which is an enclave system, which is still perpetrated to the banana plantation, the pineapple plantation so it's this system in which they got trapped.

And I think this system replicates all the way to these days. I like to believe that we went from this idea of making money from the Panama Canal, to the idea that we start making money through cruises. All the people in the Caribbean that speak English, most of them work for some cruise line because again they speak the language and you could manage yourself.

And then I think it's more recently I see it in terms of the drug lord, the drug dealing. Everybody in – most of the kids in Central America, there's no job, there's no opportunity to grow in, so they have this idea of "coronar." "Coronar" is a term that you use in Costa Rica which means like crowning, so you crown yourself when you're able to go to the ocean and let's say stole package of cocaine, so and I'm not going to say you've stolen. But this is the situation – there are areas in Costa Rica, because it's like the route for taking the drug all the way north, so there's specific spots in which sometimes they have to throw away their stuff.

And they know that the current that will take them to the coast so a lot of locals find these packages and they start commercialising with them. So that's what people call "coronar," you find a way to make money fast and then you got trapped in that way.

So I think this kind of like the idea of surviving in the Caribbean have a lot to do with

mobility. There's always an association with mobility. I can put it from my personal experience with my family. Most of my family live in New York or in the US. They came from Jamaica to Costa Rica, stay in Costa Rica for a couple of years. But the main idea was to move north.

So I think there's always an idea of movement in the Caribbean diaspora. There is always this idea of moving somewhere else to get a better option, a better way of living. And I think there is a romantic side to it that you always want to return, or you have the yearn that you want to return. But returning is more complex because you get trapped in the moneymaking and how to sustain yourself and be part of that diaspora at the same time.

Ileana L. Selejan: I hear you. It's very, it's super-complex and the intergenerational aspect of it too is utterly fascinating, and as you say, there's this very strong tie to the United States. I saw this very clearly in Nicaragua Caribbean, particularly there's Garifuna town that I was invited to go to a music festival there. And I was like, wow, everybody spoke with an American accent and everybody was wearing, very clearly, American fashion.

And they were telling me, like we move in-between the US and here frequently, regularly. That's an open connection and I guess this is another thing I wanted to talk a little bit about because you work in-between Costa Rica and the United States. So I was curious if we could talk about that a little bit. And the thing is right now in the US I can't even imagine how difficult it is to work and to live there with the current political climate but I'm wondering your perspective, do you feel like Afro Latinos are recognised as a community in the US or is it more of a divide between African American, Latino.

And I'm also wondering how you feel about how the extent to which Afro Latino, specifically Afro Latino artists are represented within the art world. Would you say that, and again I return to this decolonial turn, has this made an impact? Are we noticing that there's efforts towards more inclusion of Afro Latino artists or – and anyhow, I just wonder how this all affects your career and how your career has moved with these changes and shifts and if we could talk a bit about that.

Marton Robinson: Sure. Let me start with the idea of Latino or Latinoamericano, I think in terms of Central America it's kind of hard to hear someone express or define themselves as Latino. You go to Costa Rica we would never use the term "Latino" you'd say I'm Costa Rican, Tico or the most would say Centroamericano.

Ileana L. Selejan: Yeah. I even heard people say, oh, Anglo-Sajon to describe, instead of Yankee or gringo or whatever – Anglo-Sajon, I was like what are you

talking about? Anglo-Saxon. OK so it's obviously a very different kind of terminology. Sorry to interrupt.

Marton Robinson: No, beautiful. No, and exactly, that's where I was going and that's the reason we play a lot with language because I think definition and language is really powerful. Like for me using the term "Latino" I understand it like something specifically of the US, someone living, working, producing, born in the US.

And again I don't think I share the ideals of American Latinos, putting it that way, or people who are Latino descendants in the US. I don't think we share the same values. My perspective living out here and working out here is that yes, seems that we're the same community but at the same time we're not. And I think it's the same with the Afro-Latino and the Afro descendent community.

I find myself out here in Los Angeles and sometimes I have to struggle to be recognised as a Spanish speaker. I would go to Mexican places, or places in which people speak Spanish and I would speak Spanish normally, and they would refuse to speak back to me in Spanish.

And I started understanding that maybe the reason is they thought I was trying to speak Spanish and I was trying to practice my Spanish. They never validate me as a Spanish speaker so they refused to speak to me in Spanish. And at the same time at times I thought maybe it was an issue that maybe they didn't speak Spanish that well and they feel offended that a person who looks black speaks Spanish better than they do.

So it was kind of complicated in that sense and that's when it came more clear to me that we're not sharing the same idea. There is – you're mentioning going to Nicaragua and how the influence of the US in Nicaragua and I feel the same in Costa Rica.

Most of [the] history known about blackness comes from the US. How problematic is that? I know few about blackness in terms of Central America. All I know is through, right now, through Black Lives Matter. So the idea of a shared black experience is a lie because not everybody has been enslaved. Not all black people are being – share a family history of being a slave. So that's one thing. Not every black person living in imperial system or colonial system. The psyche living in those two environments is way different.

So I think it's important for me at least in my work to understand that and to not fit again within those terms. And that's the reason again I want to stress that idea of

decolonial, because I'm trying not to adhere to those terms which I think are embedded within the institution and that's where they become weird and so diffused I'd rather not take part of it.

I'm trying to define myself – if someone asks, “Oh, are you a black Latino,” “No, no, no. I'm a black person. Not black. I'm a black person.” “Una persona negra.” I like to define myself that way because I think it's more valid because when I go on the street no-one “Are you Latino?” “I'm not African American, I'm not African Latino, so no, I'm a black person.”

I feel more honesty in defining myself that way because, yeah, I have a shared experience but my experience is unique. The imagery I put in context and I put out there should be read from my experience, not your experience. So when I start, I bring out the idea a lot of the mask or using the Sambo mask, but the Sambo mask I'm using is not based in the US.

It's Memín Pinguín, a character that was produced in Mexico during the era in which the United States was bringing money to Mexico to create movies, to create art, to create books. So again the diasporic of that imagery and how it shift when it come from the US, produced in Mexico and Mexico is the biggest producer of Spanish content to the Americas. You mentioned that you've got telenovelas out there.

Ileana L. Selejan: In Romania, yeah.

Marton Robinson: Yeah, so this idea that it's Pan[-African, -American, etc.] and what you're seeing is the reality of that country. So for me questioning those ideas and how they play out, first my own experience, locality Costa Rica, and how they expand through the continent or the world. That's what I'm interested in, stressing out the idea that there is blackness beyond the south borders of the US. All the way down there's blackness and the way we live blackness in these areas is way different from how we live blackness in the US.

So, yeah, no, there's a struggle for Latinos to understand blackness. There's a struggle for African Americans to understand that. There is Afro-Caribbean or Afro-Central American people out there. They're still dealing with the idea that, no, we are the real South and the others are just Third World, or... So that's why – I'm not going to say, well, that's kind of what I think is going on, like Black Lives Matter I think is a great stuff to happen. But at the same time it could be a trap for a lot of countries that are basing their ideas within the Black Lives Matter idea.

Black Lives Matter started as a policing start, a break in policing and I don't have

those kinds of issues in Costa Rica. Yeah, I'm stopped by police. Yeah, I'm asked all the time if I'm Costa Rican because of the way I look but it's not the same system that take part in the US.

My fight is to be recognised, be recognised in the museum, create institutions that support my art. That's my fight – to get the people on the Caribbean side a museum, an institution that they can talk about their art. So I think it's a different struggle and we have to be clear of that, that, yeah, we share a common experience of black people, of segregation, racism, yeah. But each one of our experience is way different.

And I think that's what is needed to be stressed, not only in the US but in all the continent, or Europe because we always seen the US as the base of information and we valuing art from that experience and not from people own experience.

Ileana L. Selejan: Brilliant. I feel like what you're trying to do is just constantly adding more and more nuances, almost like you're adding more layers. While you're deconstructing –

Marton Robinson: Complicating it.

Ileana L. Selejan: You're complicating it and it's like you're deconstructing these notions by making them, furthermore, adding more complexity and I find that it's a fascinating process. And I'm not confident that the art world at the moment is capable of comprehending that level of complicatedness.

Marton Robinson: Yeah, and I know that for myself because sometimes I find myself and wish people would say, "Oh, you write about your work," and I'm like, "Why not?" And just that idea that they're surprised that I'm writing about my work and that it's that complex and simple imagery could talk so much about the region or so much about myself that it's just like whoa something they don't even know how to digest it.

And I think that confronted a way that they're not expecting, because they're expecting me to just be the passive artist that just want to show his work and have them take the discourse and talk about it? No, I like to control the discourse on my work, control the way I want to show it, the way I want it to be shown, and the way I want people to talk about it. I'm in control of that and I think that's kind of what I'm trying to fight I guess.

Ileana L. Selejan: That's real power.

Marton Robinson: Thank you.

Ileana L. Selejan: Thank you so much, Marton. This has been an amazing pleasure and thank you so, so much for the conversation today.

Marton Robinson: No, thank you for the invitation. I really appreciate this kind of conversation. They just give me new ideas [laughs]. New places to go to, so I really appreciate that. Thank you so much for the invitation.

Ileana L. Selejan: Thank you so much.

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