

Marton Robinson's Un Lugar Para Enterrarla - A Place to Bury

**Curated by soJin Chun
Carpentry by James (H.K. Contracting)**

Audio collaboration (COCO FM) with Vanessa John

Voices by:

Chris Handfield - Big Bob's Hidden Gems New and Used Auto

Samantha Wyss - My Little Secret Tampons

Faith Leleu - Toilet L'eau de Toilette

Daniel Childress - Banana Crop Report (Announcer)

Kat To - Banana Crop Report (Reporter)

Mark Davy - Raw Cocoman's Anal Lube

music: FarAwayGirls as performed by Alexandra Suisham, Paul Kolinski and Vanessa John

Curatorial Essay by soJin Chun

Marton Robinson's exhibition, *Un Lugar Para Enterrarla - A Place to Bury* is inspired by the hidden and explicit codes inscribed into landscapes, also visible through highway billboards that implicate cities and towns within global capitalist economies. As artistic collaborators, Marton Robinson and I, soJin Chun, have travelled together to Santiago de Chile; Rio de Janeiro, Brazil; London, England; Mexico City; and various locations in Canada and the United States. It is crucial to note that our physical presence within these places creates an unspoken tension based on historical and colonial narratives that determine who is visibly present or absent. How do we exist in colonial landscapes as colonized subjects, whether we like it or not? How are landscapes constructed? Who do landscapes serve and who do they benefit? How do we disrupt hegemonic notions of space, place and belonging? While pondering this line of questioning and through our lived experience in the Americas, we have come to a consensus that landscapes are never neutral or unbiased.

The title of the exhibition, *Un Lugar Para Enterrarla - A Place to bury*, comes from a vernacular phrase with a double meaning as known in Costa Rica. The first meaning is in relation to death and rituals, referring to sacred sites for honouring ancestors and/or non-official sites where dead bodies are buried and hidden. The second meaning contains a sexual connotation as a slang term for burying one's phallus, a tongue-in-cheek statement that hints to the artist's Queerness and contributes to his notion of landscapes in relation to Afro-diasporic identities. The exhibition is centred around Ethnopornographic discourses that allows us to interpret contemporary images in relation to colonial conquests and processes that created the notion of the Other in the West. (Mireille-Young)

In the first interpretation of the exhibition's title, Robinson provides a reading of Costa Rican landscapes through his familiar connection as a Jamaican descendant and the history of the Black population in his country of birth. Through the exhibition, he continues to explore imagery from his collection of archives containing various representations of Afro-Diasporic identities in Costa Rica and worldwide. The presence of Costa Rica's Afro-diasporic

population and their indentured service to this nation is a historical fact that is often forgotten or dismissed. For instance, Jamaican political and labour activist, Marcus Garvey (1887 - 1940), lived in the city of Limón where he worked in a banana plantation for the United Fruit Company, a US led transnational corporation. (Elaneim, 2021) In 1984, this company was named, Chiquita, a recognized household brand today.

The politics of international imports and exports is a reality perpetuated in the smallest rural areas to the most cosmopolitan cities. While walking the streets of North Bay, we encountered a black ripened banana spread across the sidewalk. On another instance, we found a brown spotted banana hidden inside a flower pot. Both bananas were branded with the Chiquita logo, formerly the United Fruit Company.

Returning to the history of banana production, in 1910, Garvey started working as a timekeeper in the banana plantation and witnessed labour and racial inequities that mirrored his experiences in Jamaica, the rest of Central America and the United States. Appalled by the unfair and inhumane conditions for Black workers in Puerto Limón, he spread his ideas, deemed controversial, as the editor of *The Nation*. Upon his return to Jamaica, he founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Community League, an instrumental organization that furthered ideas on Black liberation worldwide. His working experience in Costa Rica is one of many examples that connects colonization and diasporic narratives to current day global capitalism. (Elnei, 2021)

In *Un Lugar Para Enterrarla*, the textual and visual references to bananas are entry points to consider the myriad of interpretations associated with this phallic fruit while linking it to the histories of exportation and perhaps exploitation of Costa Rica's natural resources. For instance, we see the repetition of the banana/s drawn in many styles, taken from inaccurate Victorian depictions of gravity defying bananas through illustrations and the iconic image of a single banana as seen in popular culture. Text-based billboards hang high on the walls with humorous, blatant and at the same time ambiguous statements in relation to the fruit and its global economic relations as well as the sexual connotations attached to its phallic form. The exhibition takes us through a journey that narrates a story while navigating a landscape of massive wooden structures.

In this exhibition, Robinson conceptually mimics a billboard shop where large-scale skeletons made of barn wood stand magnificent. This wood was sourced by our North Bay collaborator, James from H.K. Contracting, a key collaboration that brought to life this exhibition. These beautifully raw structures are strategically placed to envision a landscape seen on Highway 11 to North Bay. Included in this exhibition are reimagined drawings that reference Peter Popoff, an Evangelical paid programming in television, synchronistic depictions of religious figures presented in *La Coronación de La Negrita - The Coronation of the Little Black Girl* holding a black baby Jesus with the face of Cocori, a problematic children's book that constructed colonial notion of Black identity in Costa Rica's Caribbean coast. This artistic interpretation of landscapes is destabilising as he confronts histories that are hidden and unspoken through the use of images that are part of the global narrative of Black identities.

It may not come as a surprise that the contributions of the Black population through their labour in plantations and in railway infrastructure building are dismissed by the mainstream

national narrative of Costa Rica. In contrast, this country's beautiful and "natural" landscapes are portrayed as idyllic through the marketing tactics of the tourist economy. Robinson examines the colonial process of conquest and land distribution by drawing in white chalk fictional and real Afro-Diasporic persons that visually repeat in the imagined landscape and accompanying narrative. Robinson works with his personal archives of Black representation as raw material, oversaturating them on black canvases in the black gallery space. Through the use of billboard structures and a repetition of familiar and somewhat ambiguous iconography and symbols, he takes archival images out of their original context to create a cacophony of images that can be unsettling, complimentary as well as contradictory.

Though the tropical and coastal city of Limón is nearly 6500 kilometres south of North Bay, they share similar narratives as places that once benefitted from an economic boom. North Bay was incorporated as a town in 1891 and developed as a railroad centre. Once upon a time, the railroad transported raw material extracted from the mines in the Northern part of the province. The landscape of the downtown core reveals empty storefronts, decaying buildings and the stillness often present in small Canadian towns. In contrast, its idyllic representations often reveal its strategic location in the northern shore of Lake Nipissing marketing the city as cottage country through provincial attempts to put North Bay within the provincial tourist economy. Both Limón and North Bay share similar histories in their former participation within a booming economy. What is left behind are evidence of industrious dreams of a forgotten past.

To return to the second interpretation of the exhibition's title, *Un Lugar Para Enterrarla - A Place to Bury*, Robinson plays with the idea of penetration interpreted literally as well as geo-politically continuing the ideas in his previous work titled *Tecnologías Deculoniales - Deculonial Technologies*. The Spanish word *Deculoniales* as coined by Robinson, not only refers to "de culo", which translates to "from the anus" but is also a play on the popularization of the term "decolonizar" or "to decolonize" in English. Through a series of posters with statements reflecting his experiences as a Black person in Costa Rica, he is poking fun while acknowledging the proliferation of the so-called decolonizing language and strategies often used in academia, museums, artistic and government institutions that give lip service to diversity and equity work. Through his artistic interventions, Marton Robinson references historical moments, popular culture as well as archives of black representation in Costa Rica among other contexts, pointing to the myriad of problems in representation.

Furthermore, these mainstream depictions of Othered or non-White bodies are in context to the history of European colonization of the Americas and other parts of the world. We can refer back to the ethnographic projects in the late 19th century that gave birth to human zoos and freak shows that displayed racialized bodies as animal specimens to be studied. The concepts presented in *Ethno-Pornography: Sexuality, Colonialism, and Archival Knowledge* resonate in Robinson's work as he considers "ethnopornography as a conceptual apparatus" (Miller-Young, 43). Ethnopornographic interpretations provide the political and historical context for the exhibition, taking into serious consideration the erasure of Indigenous cultures in the town and in Canada that paved the way for its economic development in relation to labour and transportation.

In parallel, Costa Rica hides alternate histories behind its national narrative of whiteness. What is ironic is the country's popular notion of mestizaje (mixed race identities) which

speaks to the process of whitening one's blood to improve one's social status disregarding the other non-white, Indigenous and Black lineages. This also demonstrates the hierarchical systems of colonial power that shamed colonized subjects into submission. This idea also manifests in Robinson's project, *Money Talk*, in which he readapts the beautiful idyllic coastal scene depicted in the 5 colones banknote. This bill, considered the most beautiful currency in the world, inaccurately portrays a group of White European females working in the Banana export economy along the coast. This historical inaccuracy is reversed by Robinson to reflect a more accurate vision of the Caribbean coast while replacing the white figures with photographs of black figurines from his archival collection. Through this strategy, he allows viewers to rethink depictions of his country seen through the lens of economic progress at the back of West Indian indentured labour. It furthers the idea of ethnopornography in relation to strategies of shaming.

Ethnopornographic discourses help us examine the ways in which the disciplines of anthropology, and later ethnography has its roots in colonial times while European countries discovered "new" lands and committed genocide of Indigenous and Black people. The ways in which Othered identities are consumed through capitalism and mass media have their lineage to the gaze imposed on racialized bodies in early stages of the colonial process. Thus, we consider ethnography to be a type of pornography and pornography to be a type of ethnography. Ethnography paved the way to conceive racialized bodies as "Other" which used a similar process to create a narrative of hypersexualized black bodies in late 19th-century pornography. These processes were colonial tools to create a dynamic of power and control upon Othered identities. Robinson's exhibition brings this narrative into the 21st century to expose the deeply embedded histories of colonization and subjugation in our contemporary times.

Robinson's ethnopornographic strategy is to interpret contemporary landscapes in relation to the gaze and desire. To think back on the idea of *decolonization*, he points to this perverse desire, however unquestioned or blindly taken for granted. He references historical methods to penetrate landscapes and cultures of colonies. He turns the gaze and desire on their heads by forcing audiences to confront their perceptions and to become hyper aware of the subtle ways that racism has penetrated our Canadian and global context through visual representations, however politically correct and "woke" the national narrative may attempt to be.

Through our journey driving to North Bay for site visits, we witnessed colonial ideologies deeply embedded within its landscapes. We engaged with the landscape of Northern Ontario creating parallels between colonial histories in the Americas. On the other hand, our collaboration with White Water Gallery's Executive Director, Alex Maeve Campbell, proved to be collaborative and fruitful as she whole-heartedly supported the ideas and visuals represented in the exhibition that some may deem to be controversial and irreverent. As one of the oldest artist-run centres in Canada, WWG still promotes early day ideas of artist-run centres as artistic spaces for experimentation and risk-taking.

While engaging with North Bay's landscape, we also collaborated with friends, new and old, to truly reflect how there are many different perspectives and interpretations of one idea or representation. The gallery space feels epic through the use of massive wooden structures that we only imagined through a small scale model prior to the installation. Our Guyanese

Canadian friend, Vanessa John created a soundscape that mimics a fake radio station, COCO FM installed in the office area of our fake billboard shop. Ads such as Raw Coco Man anal lube, Big Bob's Hidden Gems, New & Used Autos and My Little Secret Tampons along with North Bay's banana report play in loop. These quirky ads reference North Bay's local radio station, Moose 106.3 FM just across the street from the gallery space that also happens to be the previous exhibition space for WWG. The dust, debris and noise from the road construction on Main Street added to our ideas on how landscapes are constructed through the national narrative.

Somewhat coincidentally, through chance and a desire to continue my working relationship with WWG, I returned to North Bay to curate the first exhibition in the new gallery space as well as the final and only in-person exhibition of Archives of Resistance: Northern Migration. Marton Robinson's *Un Lugar Para Enterrarla - A Place to Bury* has been a culmination of our collaboration since 2016 considering all of our conversations and hangouts as artistic collaborators in familiar and foreign landscapes across the Americas.

References

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