Upon arriving in Honduras, I had planned to split my time between an organization of banana workers unions called COSIBAH in San Pedro Sula and non-profit Vecinos Honduras that works with rural subsistence farmers outside of Tegucigalpa. My intention was to capture the stories of agricultural workers’ experiences in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch—one of the most destructive storms to hit the isthmus in the 20th century. Through these oral histories, I aimed to better understand the impact of such a colossal natural disaster on the livelihoods of agricultural workers—in terms of how long participants were out of work, what they did while they waited to return to work or to their previous method of subsistence, as well as how agricultural workers’ dynamics with their employers transformed as a result of the event. As part of my research design—which I based in part off of a historical work by Charles Walker about the aftermath of a massive earthquake in Lima—I was particularly keen on seeking out what I referred to as “narratives of resistance”—so I arrived in the field most curious as to whether any individuals and/or communities within the two organizations had in some way contradictorily wound up in preferable social circumstances on account of the devastation.

After two and a half weeks in Honduras, I found that my original hunch was valid in certain cases but more importantly, that that dynamic was, of course, inextricably tied to a much longer saga of political struggles. My first day with COSIBAH—which very recently had actually changed its name to FESTAGRO—altered the course of my research in a very meaningful way. My main contact Iris Mungia directed me to a meeting happening a block away
in La Lima, just outside of San Pedro Sula, at the offices of one of the FESTAGRO affiliate
unions called SITRATERCO (the Sindicato de Trabajadores de Tela Railroad Company). ¹

While this union was on my radar going into the field as a major COSIBAH member
organization, I did not expect to spend more than a few hours there. However, the contacts that
resulted from attending the union’s comité femenina were the strongest of my trip. I was
ultimately able to conduct six oral histories with SITRATERCO members, one with a member of
STAS (a union of agro-industry workers that is also affiliated with FESTAGRO), and three with
FESTAGRO staff. After my first few days working with FESTAGRO and SITRATERCO, I
found that I had entirely underestimated the significance of the place I had chosen to study. La
Lima is the epicenter of United Fruit Company as well as the site of the infamous banana strike
of 1954. The living legacy of this strike is commemorated throughout the union offices and town
at large, in addition to the critical role the strike plays as a motivating narrative for present day
organizing. The humbling power of this realization pushed me to cancel my plans to work with
the second organization in favor of focusing exclusively on the situation on the North Coast.

Accordingly, in terms of content, I was able to piece together the following. As I had read
about in dozens of articles and monographs as well as less scholarly mediums, Hurricane Mitch
is remembered as a beyond-devastating event that now serves as a turning point or critical
juncture in many personal and family narratives. On the north coast of Honduras, the hurricane
had a very marked effect on the power dynamics of United Fruit Company plantations and
factories. In their oral histories, numerous people spoke about the fact that prior to Hurricane
Mitch, SITRATERCO had negotiated what were perhaps the most favorable conditions in the
union’s history in terms of wages and medical care, for example. According to many of the union

¹ Please note, in Honduras the United Fruit Company, or Chiquita operates as the Tela Railroad Company—thus the
union name SITRATERCO. Accordingly all SITRATERCO workers are employed by Chiquita, or as they call it,
“The Company.” Subsequently, I will refer to the Tela Railroad Company as such.
workers, after the storm, almost all of the banana fields on the north coast were flooded and destroyed. The company seized this as an opportunity to reverse SITRATERCO’s gains. They converted some of their banana fields to less-labor intensive operations like palm oil farms, and only re-planted and re-opened a fraction of the banana plantations that had been in operation before. Of course this meant fewer jobs, as well as fewer union members overall. Whereas before the storm in 1998 membership had reached somewhere around 10,000—in July 2015 there remained only 2,800 members. And because the storm’s destruction also produced a job shortage, the company was able to get away with slashing wages among many other violations of the then collective contract.

Despite these numbers, many of the SITRATERCO members I spoke with assured me they were better organized than before the storm. Additionally, SITRATERCO’s president says current members have access to more and improved overall benefits than existed before the storm—including a fund akin to life insurance. Although the company has gotten a lot more powerful since Hurricane Mitch on account of a massive decline in union membership, so has SITRATERCO enhanced its power—albeit in distinct ways. In the words of one member, while before the storm union members were defending their rights, now they are defending them in addition to pushing through new protections.

As such, during my visit, union members were highly engaged in a number of campaigns. A major issue they were organizing around was to prevent the company from closing the hospital in La Lima, as well as improving the quality of care they have access to and the time they are allowed off to tend to health concerns. While I was there, the urgency of that issue was deeply underscored by a call the comité femenina received from a compañera of theirs who had just been diagnosed with a late-stage cancer after not being permitted to see a company doctor. Cases
like this seem to galvanize the compañeras. They are also working to propose that the next collective contract include a series of clauses for women’s health such as the right to free mammograms and gynecological exams. The educational campaigns that make these initiatives a concrete possibility have grown extensively over the past 17 years. So, while Hurricane Mitch certainly delivered a blow to the political-economy and personal lives of banana plantation workers on the north coast of Honduras, those unionized through SITRATERCO are certainly a force to be reckoned with—even if fewer in numbers.

Thus overall, the Tinker Summer Field Grant allowed me to explore a region, topic, and organization that will form the basis for ongoing research, starting with my M.A. thesis. The data I gathered this summer will make its way directly into the manuscript of that project. Perhaps even more importantly however—the opportunity was significant in that it demonstrated first-hand the power of “place-based research.” Without spending extended time in a place of study and getting to know ones “subjects,” not only is it impossible to tell the full story, but it is all too easy to overlook invisible clues that, with time, might become the key to an argument.