

Who's the Top Banana?: Corporate Institutionalization of Race and Mobility in Central

American Banana Enclaves of the Twentieth Century

by Laura Sibert

LAST 4000-02 Core Seminar

Research Paper

16 December 2011

As an English-speaking native of Roatan Island, Honduras, Inez McNabb had considerable agency as a cook working for the elite American managers and their families on a United Fruit Company banana plantation. McNabb possessed certain skills that were in high demand such that if she were to find her mistress unreasonable,—and on several occasions she did—she was able to quit and easily find new employers<sup>1</sup>. The experience of McNabb stands in contrast to many other Central Americans in the early twentieth century, who found themselves excluded from the racial hierarchy that characterized the towns in which multinational corporations such as United Fruit operated in Central America.

The so-called banana enclaves were pristine representations of American society in its most ideal form and as such used physical boundaries and distinguishing markers to separate the Euro-American<sup>2</sup> corporate employees from the Central American servants. In the few cases of Central Americans who were able to circumvent these boundaries and gain mobility and agency, one might be led to believe that they did so through individual merit. Perhaps they did, if one accepts that individual merit in this case required the adoption of characteristics deemed desirable by the Euro-American population and the eschewal of undesirable characteristics associated with Latin American life and identity.

Thus, corporate institutionalization of class and, by extension, race in the Central American banana enclaves of the early twentieth century led to a rigid hierarchical framework exemplified by the housing one was allocated within the enclave. Denigrated racially and culturally in this idealized class system, the native Central American population was given very

---

<sup>1</sup> Harpelle, Ronald. "White Women on the Frontier: American Enclave Communities on the Caribbean Coast of Central America." *Wadabagei: A Journal of the Caribbean & Its Diasporas* 8, no. 2 (2005), 6-34.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this paper, I use the nomenclature established by Ronald Harpelle in his extensive research on banana enclaves. Euro-American refers to Americans, but also the small populations of British, Canadian, German or Swedish citizens in the enclaves. Hispanic refers to the oftentimes mixed race peoples of Central America, with their indigenous, European and African roots. Finally, there is the West Indian population which emigrates from usually English-speaking, formerly British colonies in the Caribbean.

specific, limiting roles and no room for ascension within this community. Nonetheless, some Central Americans became an exception to the rule, and were able to rise in station and esteem, but only by adopting the traits and characteristics desired by the Euro-American elite residents of the enclave. In addition to the well-established economic and political effects of multinational corporations in Central America, there were also disruptions of racial politics and spatial organization due to banana enclaves and which reordered demand in the employment economy with larger resonance in questions of local identity.

The first portion of the paper will acquaint the reader to banana companies' origins, roles and influence in Latin America, focusing especially on the United Fruit Company. This section will describe life in the banana enclave with a particular attention on spatial distribution of race and class as dictated by corporate policy. In order to illustrate the separation, I will look at census data for a banana enclave town and place it within the greater context of the daily interactions of members of the banana enclave and Latin Americans. The paper will continue by detailing the common roles of Central Americans and people of other races within the enclave. The majority of the paper will proceed to understand the social norms of society as evidenced by the diaries and journals of Euro-American foreigners and to examine the particular case studies of those Central Americans who were able to advance their position or autonomy in the enclave, as well as the ways in which they were forced to adopt hallmark characteristics of white society in order to do so. The paper will conclude with an examination of the larger significance of the findings of the paper.

Throughout the paper, I employ a variety of secondary sources. The first section focuses on spatial separation of race within banana enclaves using secondary sources. The second section, which scrutinizes the mobility and autonomy of Central American employees, utilizes

firsthand accounts by men and women living in the banana enclaves, many of which are journals and diaries from Euro-Americans. Due to a variety of causes including lack of education and/or lack of preservation, there is a dearth of native perspective. To overcome this notable absence, I will close-read passages of encounters with the local Central Americans by Euro-Americans in their journals in order to gauge both what characteristics Euro-Americans find to be important and whether or not the Central Americans were able to satisfy these expectations.

Although the banana was not native to the Americas, the warm, humid, rainy climate of the subequatorial region was perfectly suited to growing bananas<sup>3</sup>. The first banana plant was brought over by Friar Tomás Berlanga in 1516, yet for the next 350 years it was only consumed locally. The turning point for the mass consumption of the banana came when it was put on display in the 1876 World Exposition in Philadelphia. Realizing the huge profit to be made, small firms began importing bananas to the United States until 1899, named the Year without Bananas, when the banana crop was wiped out due to a sequence of freak weather occurrences. At this point came the transition from small firms to behemoth multinational banana corporations that thrived in a market that required enough reserve capital to weather bad seasons, the ability to grow their own crops and diverse land holdings such that if one area failed to produce a crop, then their entire product would not be compromised.<sup>4</sup> From these market conditions, the United Fruit Company grew.

United Fruit Company was incorporated in 1899 in Boston, Massachusetts and shortly thereafter became the dominant producer in the banana industry: its only rivals were the Atlantic

---

<sup>3</sup> Cohen, Rich. *The Fish That Ate the Whale: The Life and Times of America's Banana King*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012, 33-37.

<sup>4</sup> Cohen, 37.

Fruit and Steamship Company, Standard Fruit Company and Cuyamel Fruit Company<sup>5</sup>, but these offered little threat to UFCO.<sup>6</sup> United Fruit Company and, to a certain extent, the lesser fruit companies had very close relationships to the governments of the Central American nations and developed a relationship that benefitted both parties, although the fruit companies always maintained the upper hand. The government would give the fruit companies land and, in exchange, the fruit companies would build transportation infrastructure, such as docks, ports and railroads. The government would release fruit companies from their obligation to pay taxes and tariffs and the fruit company would not have to threaten to take their business elsewhere or involve the United States government's gunboats to protect their interests.

Oftentimes, fruit companies would blatantly overthrow the government if it did not acquiesce to their demands. William Sydney Porter, otherwise known as O. Henry<sup>7</sup>, famously writes about a fictional meeting between a representative of the Vesuvius Fruit Company, Mr. Franzoni, and a representative of the Anchurian government, Señor Espiritión, in which Espiritión demands payment for the completion of a road and Franzoni refuses to contribute more than twenty-five pesos. Espiritión, indignant, exclaims, "Your offer insults my government" and Franzoni replies, "Then we will change it." The offer was never changed<sup>8</sup>...

This example, although fictional, was in fact played out several times in various Central American "banana republics" and illustrates the tremendous power that the fruit companies had

---

<sup>5</sup> In some instances throughout the paper, I use the blanket term fruit companies or fruit corporations when referring to the practices of the large corporations that imported fruit to the United States from plantations in Central America. Other times, I refer to the United Fruit Company in particular. UFCO was, by far, the largest and most influential of all of the fruit corporations and many of the policies held by UFCO translated to the other fruit companies, in general terms if not specific ones.

<sup>6</sup> Langley, Lester D., and Thomas David Schoonover. *The Banana Men: American Mercenaries and Entrepreneurs in Central America, 1880-1930*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1995, 35.

<sup>7</sup> William Sydney Porter lived in Honduras for several years while fleeing embezzlement charges. During this time he wrote *Cabbages and Kings*, in which he coined the term "banana republic" to refer to Central American countries with primitive economies and corrupt governments.

<sup>8</sup> Henry, O. "Cabbages and Kings." In *The Complete Works of O. Henry*, 551-679. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1953, 666.

over infrastructure, land, capital and industry in these Latin American nations. Understanding the nearly unprecedented power that the companies had on the regional and national levels provides an important framework for understanding their importance on the local level in the banana enclaves throughout Central America.

There were three particular racial groups that interacted on the banana plantations and in the corporate enclaves: Euro-Americans, Hispanic Central Americans and West Indians. The Euro-Americans were usually managers or administrative officials in the enclave. They largely came from America, but some were from Britain, Canada, Germany or Sweden<sup>9</sup>. Although some of the fruit company employees were bachelors, many brought their wives and children, who lived with them in housing assigned by the fruit company. Another group important to the enclave was the Hispanic population. These men and women came from throughout Central America and migrated to the banana enclaves. Very few of the Hispanic workers were native to the area surrounding the banana plantations. For reasons which I discuss later, Hispanics typically held the least desirable jobs in the enclave, like maid, laundress or worker who clear-cuts the virgin forest. Finally, the West Indian population immigrated to Central America from formerly British-controlled islands in the Caribbean, like Jamaica and St. Kitts.<sup>10</sup> Many of these individuals were Afro-descendants of slaves brought to the Caribbean to work on sugar plantations. West Indians were in fact the first group brought to the banana enclaves by the United Fruit Company. Only after West Indians went on strike and Hispanic workers were hired as strikebreakers was there a significant number of Hispanics employed in banana enclaves.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Harpelle, Ronald. "White Zones: American Enclave Communities of Central America." In *Blacks and Blackness in Central America: Between Race and Place*, edited by Lowell Gudmundson and Justin Wolfe. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010, 315.

<sup>10</sup> Harpelle, Ronald N. *The West Indians of Costa Rica: Race, Class, and the Integration of an Ethnic Minority*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001, 36.

<sup>11</sup> Harpelle, *The West Indians of Costa Rica*, 19.

American fruit companies in Central America actually defied the labor norms that dictated demand for the rest of the Central American population. West Indian immigration throughout the Caribbean and Central America in search of work was frequent and faced few barriers prior to the 1920s. Local governments embraced the idea that “employers should be free to combine workers and worksites at will regardless of territorial boundaries, citizenship, or color.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, whoever had the desired skills or was willing to work at the desired (low) wages would be given the job, no matter their ethnicity or nationality. Change came during the 1920s when ideas of racial purity and eugenics became popular in the United States and, as a result, were spread throughout the hemisphere.<sup>13</sup> Desire for national racial purity (read: whiteness) caused Central American nations to put immigration restrictions in place targeting the Afro-descended West Indians. West Indians already living in the country were considered inferior and were the last candidates-of-choice for employers. Lara Putnam points out the irony in Central American nations excluding West Indians because of American ideas of racial purity while American companies throughout Central America consistently hired West Indian workers over Central American ones. Indeed, the United Fruit Company preferred to hire West Indian workers because they spoke English, among many other reasons on which I elaborate towards the end of my paper. Central American countries were forced to acquiesce to this labor demand because they were receiving valuable transportation infrastructure and plantation agriculture from fruit corporations in return<sup>14</sup>.

One of the contributing factors for the success of the multinational fruit companies was that they owned all of the factors of production for banana farming, from the land that the plants

---

<sup>12</sup> Putnam, Lara. "Eventually Alien: The Multigenerational Saga of British West Indians in Central America, 1870-1940." In *Blacks and Blackness in Central America: Between Race and Place*, edited by Lowell Gudmundson and Justin Wolfe. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010, 294.

<sup>13</sup> Putnam, 284.

<sup>14</sup> Putnam, 289.

grew on to the ports and ships that they were transported using <sup>15</sup>. Thus, banana companies



Figure 1 Manager's House, Bananera, Guatemala

required highly-skilled workers brought from the United States to work in the engineering, accounting, merchandise, machine and central fruit departments, among others<sup>16</sup>.

The towns in which the fruit

companies housed the industrial

facilities as well as the highly-skilled foreign workers were called banana enclaves. The particular housing complexes in which the families of skilled foreign workers lived were called White Zones. These compounds varied but oftentimes would include swimming pools, social clubs, commissaries, hospitals, and even golf courses.<sup>17</sup> The streets were paved; the lawns were perfectly manicured and irrigated during the dry season.<sup>18</sup> In essence, the fruit companies intentionally recreated the picturesque upper-class American neighborhood within the remote jungles of Central America.

Furthermore, society in the White Zones fell into a strict hierarchy, which was mirrored by the size and quality of the houses the employees were given by the fruit companies. One place in the hierarchy is determined by one's job, and, consequently, one's perceived importance to the operations of the company. As such, the Department of Engineers stood atop the hierarchy, closely followed by the Department of Accountancy. Of third most importance was the Department of Construction, while the Department of Agriculture was agreed to be held in

<sup>15</sup> Wilson, Charles Morrow. *Empire in Green and Gold: The Story of the American Banana Trade*. New York: H. Holt, 1947, 118.

<sup>16</sup> Wilson, 126-127.

<sup>17</sup> Harpelle, "White Women on the Frontier," 6.

<sup>18</sup> Emery-Waterhouse, Frances. *Banana Paradise*. New York: Stephen-Paul Publishers, 1947, 3.

comparatively low esteem. Frances Emery-Waterhouse moved to Siguican, Guatemala with her husband in the 1930s and later wrote a book about her impressions and experiences. In her book, Emery-Waterhouse describes the social strata as “a caste both rigid and inflexible.”<sup>19</sup> Fortunately for Emery-Waterhouse, her husband was an engineer, so she was able to enjoy all of the advantages that accompany such a social position, such as full membership to the White Zone social club and, for her husband, full access to the enclave’s golf course.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, the social hierarchy was reflected in the housing provided to clerical, supervisory, and executive personnel in the enclaves in order to incentivize higher work quality and, consequently, promotion within the corporation and society.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, the native Latin American workers in the camps lived in barracks, separated into single family dwellings<sup>22</sup>, while Euro-American workers lived in single-family houses that increased in size and quality as the employee rose in rank. Thus, the spaces in which employees lived were clearly separated by markers of space and quality in accordance with their position in the hierarchy as dictated by the banana company in a clear demonstration of corporate institutionalization of class.

Tela, Honduras serves as an exemplification of the concept of racial and spatial separation. Tela housed the Tela Railroad Company, a United Fruit Company subsidiary. Beginning in 1914, TRRC constructed a large complex for its managerial class, which soon grew into a behemoth compound encompassing not only TRRC administrative employees, but also Central Americans. The White Zone<sup>23</sup> in Tela Nuevo was reserved for Euro-American

---

<sup>19</sup> Emery-Waterhouse, 94.

<sup>20</sup> Harpelle, “White Women on the Frontier,” 10.

<sup>21</sup> May, Stacy, and Galo Plaza. *The United Fruit Company in Latin America*. Washington: National Planning Association, 1958, 186.

<sup>22</sup> May and Plaza, 184.

<sup>23</sup> The White Zone in Tela was later renamed the American Zone once racial integration took hold in the United States. For the sake of simplicity and consistency with naming conventions in other enclaves, I will refer to the area as the White Zone.

employees recruited from abroad. In order to maintain the separation, the entrances to the White Zone were perpetually guarded and the area surrounding it was always patrolled.<sup>24</sup> The best houses for the highest of the administrative class were nestled along the beach front, with the houses becoming gradually smaller and less attractive as one approached the railroad tracks skirting the edge of the White Zone where non-white skilled and professional workers lived. On the other side of the railroad tracks laid the barracks and housing for local Central American and West Indian workers. The best workers were placed closest to the White Zone. The rest of the workers' dwellings radiated around the White Zone in a semicircular fashion.<sup>25</sup> It is important to note that not all White Zones throughout Central America were set up in the same way as Tela Nuevo. Some were ordered into racially segregated neighborhoods, with a White Zone, a West Indian neighborhood and a Hispanic neighborhood. However, even in these varying configurations, the White Zone was still separated by physical obstacles, including fences, guards and barbed wire. Nonetheless, the consequences of a spatial configuration that arranges society deferentially around foreign Euro-American influences are immutable barriers, both racial and psychological, to the ascension of local Central Americans in enclave society.

Thus, United Fruit Company's policy of using houses as incentives to work productively did not extend to Latin Americans, who had limited upward mobility within the enclave. Arguably, the highest position that a Hispanic or West Indian could achieve is a doctor in the enclave's hospital<sup>26</sup>, a position in which he would still only be housed on the outskirts of the White Zone in the smaller, less attractive houses. In reality, achieving the education and position of doctor was rare for Central Americans or West Indians. The majority of positions available to them were as workers in the banana fields, as domestic servants in houses, as workers and

---

<sup>24</sup> Harpelle, "White Zones," 313.

<sup>25</sup> Harpelle, "White Women on the Frontier," 12-13.

<sup>26</sup> Harpelle, "White Women on the Frontier," 15.

managers in the service sector of the White Zone or as maintenance workers both in the machinery used for the banana crop and in the upkeep of the homes in the enclaves.

In the domestic sphere, the Euro-American wives of company employees in the upper classes of enclave society were given an allowance by the fruit company to employ servants, such as a cook, laundress, maid or houseboy.<sup>27</sup> These servants were largely Hispanic or West Indian workers. In some cases, they were given special quarters on their employer's property and in other cases they had to commute from other neighborhoods outside the White Zone. The Euro-American mistresses led lives punctuated by socialization and leisure. Yet, the Hispanic servants and Euro-American mistresses clashed on cultural levels, in particular with their different conceptions of proper work ethic. Ronald Harpelle notes, "Inefficiency among the hired help enters into virtually every account by a company wife of the trials of establishing a home in what were considered to be the frontier regions of the world. Order was essential to the well-being of the community and the question of reliable, efficient, and deferential domestic workers was a central issue of concern for company wives."<sup>28</sup> However, the measuring stick by which Central Americans assessed the quality and meaningfulness of their work differed greatly from that of the Euro-American mistress purely due to cultural norms. The emphasis on Central American workers' efficiency was put in place largely by the Americans and the corporate authorities. David Aliano argues that the United Fruit Company gave great importance to its mission to civilize life in the Caribbean and turn it into "The American Lake."<sup>29</sup> He focuses on United Fruit Company's Medical Department and their mission to cure first the body, then the mind, and finally, society in UFCO's territories. Aliano argues, "Beyond improved healthcare, the Medical

---

<sup>27</sup> Harpelle, "White Women on the Frontier," 11.

<sup>28</sup> Harpelle, "White Women on the Frontier," 21.

<sup>29</sup> Aliano, David. "Curing the Ills of Central America: The United Fruit Company's Medical Department and Corporate America's Mission to Civilize, 1900-1940." *Estudios Interdisciplinarios De America Latina Y El Caribe* 17, no. 2 (2006): 35-59, 39.

Department understood its work as an integral part of the Company's mission of infusing its laborers in Central America with a capitalist American work ethic and making them productive and efficient laborers.”<sup>30</sup> Therefore, the primary qualification that Euro-Americans demanded of the servants was an American-like work ethic that was in discordance with Central American conceptions of meaningful and quality work. The mission of civilizing and industrializing the Central American workforce, of course, extends beyond the domestic sphere and into the maintenance and agricultural domains.

The ideology of the so-called Protestant<sup>31</sup> work ethic revolved around the idea of “intense faith in activity” and “contempt for the idler.”<sup>32</sup> Although some moralists may contend that work for the sake of working is satisfactory, there also exists the idea that with hard work comes eventual rewards, whether they be in monetary terms or advancement in position or esteem. It could easily be argued that significant advancement through hard work was not open to large segments of the American population in the late nineteenth century, namely black citizens and women. However, insofar as the capitalistic work ethic was brought to Central America with the fruit companies, significant advancement in position and esteem was certainly not available to the Central American population. The roles available to Central Americans were severely limited within the enclaves and little opportunity for ascension was afforded within those roles. Hence, the Central American inhabitants were expected to adopt the American work ethic in order to gain favor with the Euro-American elites without being able to attain the rewards associated with the system due to their race.

---

<sup>30</sup> Aliano, 35.

<sup>31</sup> Although the term Protestant work ethic used to be imbued with strong religious undertones, the term has undergone a secularization that has put less emphasis on the Protestant component. The term is more universally “American” for taking pride in hard work, frugality and efficiency.

<sup>32</sup> Rodgers, Daniel T. "Introduction." Introduction to *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974, Xi-Xv.

Similarly to Aliano's claims that members of the UFCO's Medical Department sought to bring American customs to Latin America through medical treatment, Harpelle posits that the wives of foreign employees in banana enclaves were also expected to act as representatives of the United Fruit Company in its mission to civilize the inhabitants of Central America.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, this rationalization constructs a binary between the household servants and their Euro-American female mistresses, with whom they were most often in contact. This binary establishes white mistresses as those being served, while Hispanic or West Indian servants are forced into the role of those who serve. Because these roles are invariably tied to race, there is no room for upward mobility or ascension within the construct. Perhaps a laundress may rise to the employment of a cook or the cook may find employment in the house of someone with a higher station than her current employer. However, none of the instances of mobilization allows for the breakdown of the binary of race and station within the banana enclave.

Another characteristic that Euro-American mistresses looked for in their servants was the ability to read and follow direction, especially with cooks in the kitchen. Frances Emery-Waterhouse had difficulties with at least one cook during her time in Central America. The cook, Conchita María, was unable to read the English recipes that Emery-Waterhouse gave her. Yet when Emery-Waterhouse gave Conchita María recipes in Spanish, she discovered that she was not able to read those either.<sup>34</sup> Emery-Waterhouse was an enthusiastic student of Spanish, but other company wives who did not attempt to learn the language relied on West Indian women from the Caribbean who were English-speakers to work for them. However, West Indian women were not always available in many parts of Central America.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, even when cooks were able to read, they were not always able to produce the typical American cuisine their

---

<sup>33</sup> Harpelle, "White Women on the Frontier," 7-8.

<sup>34</sup> Emery-Waterhouse, 239.

<sup>35</sup> Harpelle, "White Women on the Frontier," 22.

employers demanded. Encouraged by the fruit companies to recreate typical food from America, company wives demanded dishes that were neither easy for the confused cooks to make with the foreign appliances, nor suitable for the hot, humid climate of the subtropics.<sup>36</sup>

Clearly, the terms of employment for domestic servants were very specifically outlined and dictated by the Euro-American mistresses of the White Zones in the banana enclaves. The ideal servant was efficient, took on the American creed of work ethic, could read, communicate in English, follow directions and follow American norms of cleanliness. This was the measuring stick by which Central American domestic servants were measured. Obviously, these characteristics that Euro-Americans held in high regard were at odds with local Central American culture. However, the “White rules” dictated the labor market in the White Zone and it was to their desires that Central Americans were to bend. The stakes of conforming to these rules included the continued employment of domestics in the White Zone labor market. Company wives had the power to not only discharge domestic workers, but defame them with the rest of the high-society Euro-American wives and jeopardize their ability to find other employment within the White Zone; however, this was not necessarily insurmountable because there were other sources for employment in the houses of the elite Hispanic class outside the banana enclave.<sup>37</sup> Further influence that company wives exerted over domestic servants was control of their wages. While the United Fruit Company provided its managerial and administrative employees with stipends to pay for domestic servants, the company did not determine a wage standard for domestics. The wages, pay raises, working conditions and fringe benefits were set on an individual basis by their employers.<sup>38</sup> Even if the wife did not control the finances of the household, she held influence over her husband and could act as primary counsel for him on the

---

<sup>36</sup> Harpelle, “White Women on the Frontier,” 25.

<sup>37</sup> Harpelle, “White Women on the Frontier,” 22.

<sup>38</sup> Harpelle, “White Women on the Frontier,” 21.

worthiness and usefulness of the domestic staff. Therefore, not only did Central American domestic workers need to conform to many, if not all, characteristics desired by the elite Euro-American class in order to continue their employment, but also because their wages—among other benefits—were tied to how well they were able to please their employers. On the other hand, women who spoke English and had a reputation as talented and good workers were placed in a better bargaining position dually for setting wages and having agency within the enclave.<sup>39</sup>

Returning to the example of Inez McNabb, the English-speaking cook from Roatán Island, Honduras, it is easy to see how her skills could allow her greater mobility and agency within the banana enclave.<sup>40</sup> McNabb had considerable skill in the kitchen (skill, in this case, being defined as her ability to recreate typical American dishes). She spoke English. Although she would on occasion show contempt for her employers, her reputation as a cook ensured that she always had work in the banana enclave. As a consequence, even when she would quit the employ of those whom she considered to be detestable mistresses, she was still able to find work in other households. Harpelle recounts a story of McNabb quitting her station on the night that her employers were hosting a dinner party. She prepared a roast, put it in the oven and slipped out the door, leaving her mistress to discover in her own time that McNabb was no longer in her employ.<sup>41</sup> Yet not even the wagging tongues of her spited former mistresses could deter McNabb from finding different employment. One might think that McNabb's remarkable pluck would indicate that she did in fact hold certain power over the Euro-Americans in the White Zone. They needed workers with certain skills and her possession of those skills gave her the agency to act

---

<sup>39</sup> Harpelle, "White Women on the Frontier," 23.

<sup>40</sup> McNabb's racial classification is not abundantly clear. Because she comes from an island in the Caribbean and speaks English, she is probably fits the West Indian identity most closely, even though she's Honduran. I have no evidence as to her racial heritage or the color of her skin, however, so this assessment is based solely on her characteristics described by Harpelle's after his interviews with her.

<sup>41</sup> Harpelle, "White Women on the Frontier," 23-24.

with impunity. While this may be true, her agency was nonetheless tied to her conformity—or, in more positive terms, fulfillment—of the characteristics that the elite Euro-American population desired in their Central American servants. In reality, she was a commodity they had molded to their liking, a victory for the civilizing mission of the United Fruit Company. Her benefit from this fact was simply an unintended side effect.

Lack of upward mobility was not only an issue for female Central Americans working in the domestic sphere of the White Zones. Racial preference also impacted males working in the banana enclaves as maintenance workers or store operators. Several of the same factors that played into race and station in the domestic sphere also translated over to the predominantly male sectors of the banana-growing process. In order to understand the racial conflicts that occurred in banana enclaves, it is important to understand the labor history and relations of the banana plantations. No one, except for several hundred indigenous inhabitants, was native to the areas in which bananas were planted prior to the twentieth century. West Indians from all over the Caribbean migrated or were imported to the remote Atlantic inlands where bananas were best harvested.<sup>42</sup> In the 1910s, West Indians went on strike and Hispanic people from all throughout Central America immigrated to the area as strikebreakers. They lacked familiarity with plantation work and the skills that West Indians possessed, and West Indians ended the strike and returned to work on the banana plantations. Yet West Indians unionized and demanded better wages such that the fruit companies hired Hispanic workers to fill the jobs that West Indians refused to do, the least desirable work on the plantation.<sup>43</sup> West Indians rose to low-level management positions, skilled positions and served as technicians and store clerks throughout the territories owned by the fruit companies. Many also came to own tracts of land on which they

---

<sup>42</sup> Bourgois, Philippe I. *Ethnicity at Work: Divided Labor on a Central American Plantation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989, 180.

<sup>43</sup> Bourgois, 181.

could cultivate cacao and sell the excess product to the multinationals instead of participating in the wage labor economy.<sup>44</sup> Conversely, Hispanic workers were left with the worst job, clear-cutting virgin forest for new banana planting while West Indians who worked in the agricultural sector had the “easier” jobs of harvesting and pruning the plants.<sup>45</sup>

West Indians were given preference for a few key reasons. In the first place, many of them spoke English, which put them in favor with their white, Euro-American bosses. Secondly, West Indians had higher literacy levels than Hispanics. The West Indians had also had several generations of experience with plantations and plantation work in the nations from which they emigrated. They already knew much of what was to be demanded of them. With such exposure to the inner workings of plantations, West Indians were especially attuned to the cultural norms of Brits and Americans and knew how to act around them. On the other hand, Hispanic workers had little previous experience with large-scale corporate plantations or the foreigners who operated them. In addition, although West Indians demanded higher wages than Hispanic workers, the fruit companies were able to save money by replacing North Americans with West Indians in middle-level skilled tasks and were able to pay them less to do so.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, a particular type of West Indian was attracted and able to work at the banana plantations according to Harpelle: “The West Indians who went to Central America [...] were not castoffs from the West Indies. The people who migrated to Central America were those who could sell their labour or skills to companies like United Fruit.”<sup>47</sup> As an extension of their high adaptability and exposure to the modern capitalist enterprise, West Indians were likely to be more educated than

---

<sup>44</sup> Bourgois, 67.

<sup>45</sup> Bourgois, 74.

<sup>46</sup> Bourgois, 74-76.

<sup>47</sup> Harpelle, *The West Indians of Costa Rica*, 19.

their Hispanic counterparts. West Indians had higher literacy and skill rates than Hispanics and oftentimes had dreams of becoming merchants or farmers instead of plantation laborers.<sup>48</sup>

Within twenty years of Hispanics' installation into the banana plantation labor force, a racial hierarchy had been established and, in turn, nurtured by the white managerial elite. Euro-Americans operated at the top levels of administration trailed by less-prestigious whites in lower levels of management and administration. Behind these men were the West Indians in low-level white collar jobs and technician positions. On the agricultural level, West Indians served as foremen and did the preferred jobs while the immigrant Hispanics performed the unpleasant jobs that no one else wanted. Even the West Indian *stevedores*, who loaded bananas onto ships, were motivated by the higher pay of the position and the lack of snakes and diseases that plagued inland work. In fact, the percentage of West Indians holding certain jobs was overwhelming in some cases. In one particular banana enclave, *all* of the workers in the Materials and Supplies Department and the Commissary Department were West Indian.<sup>49</sup> West Indians serve as a counter example to the previous example of Central American women in the domestic labor market because they already possessed many of the characteristics deemed desirable by the Euro-American elite: they spoke English, could read and write, and already were familiar with American customs, cuisine and expectations. West Indians cultural conformity to Euro-American ideals was likely the result of colonial or imperial influence, but it was not the specific result of the civilizing mission of the fruit companies in Latin America in the twentieth century.

The Hispanic population most obviously had little room for ascension within the roles they were allowed in the banana enclaves and, to a greater extent, the banana plantations. Because of their race, their language, their cultural norms and their lack of exposure to the

---

<sup>48</sup> Harpelle *The West Indians of Costa Rica*, 19-20.

<sup>49</sup> Bourgois, 75.

corporate ideology of twentieth-century Europe and America, they were stereotyped to only be capable of the “brute” work and not the skilled labor. Yet the West Indians, with all of the perquisites that their upbringings gave them on the plantations, were still limited in upward mobility by the dark pigment of their skin. A West Indian was only able to advance to the lowest white-collar jobs and was only preferable over white workers because he was able to be paid less than American workers.

Frances Emery-Waterhouse wrote about several of the non-Euro-American workers whom she encountered during her time spent living in the White Zone of the banana enclave in Siguican, Guatemala. Although she becomes friends with several working class Hispanic women, she largely ignores the Hispanic men in her account.<sup>50</sup> She usually only refers to them as *mozos*<sup>51</sup>, meaning youth or lad in Spanish, and mentioned them when she notices one doing something inappropriate, like urinating in public.<sup>52</sup> Otherwise Emery-Waterhouse refers to the Hispanic men by their occupation—such as soldier or member of a labor gang—rather than their names. West Indian workers, on the other hand, are mentioned by name, as well as described. Williams is one of several Jamaicans who operate a business in the plaza of Siguican. He is a tailor and Emery-Waterhouse has ordered clothing from him. Although he made an embarrassing error on her order, she still finds him and the other Jamaican business owners in the plaza “capable, friendly, honest and conscientious men.”<sup>53</sup> Brown is the dark-skinned Jamaican who is the manager of the commissary. He kindly telephones Emery-Waterhouse when he receives a new shipment. He has an odd habit of adding “only” every time he quotes a price: “Ten dollars

---

<sup>50</sup> Emery-Waterhouse, 125.

<sup>51</sup> Emery-Waterhouse, 101.

<sup>52</sup> Emery-Waterhouse, 99.

<sup>53</sup> Emery Waterhouse, 89.

only.”<sup>54</sup> Finally, Emery-Waterhouse mentions the central-postmaster most commonly referred to as Central, who speaks English poorly and who has the annoying habit of withholding magazines, like *Good Housekeeping*, from the Euro-American mistresses for several weeks until he’s read them.<sup>55</sup>

To be clear, as a housewife in the White Zone, Emery-Waterhouse would have had far more contact with the usually West Indian service industry workers in the enclave than the workers in the banana plantations. It is not surprising that Hispanic men are a foreign breed to her. However, Emery-Waterhouse’s blindness towards the existence of the male Hispanic population, while she eagerly interacts with the West Indian population echoes the hiring policies of the United Fruit Company. Because of the skills and knowledge they lacked, Hispanic men were undesirable workers in the American corporate enclaves for all but the most dangerous jobs. At the same time, knowledge of English, among other things, ingratiated the West Indian workers with their Euro-American bosses and gained more favorable positions within the enclave.

Therefore, banana enclaves and banana plantations have altered the labor ecosystem of local Central American economies just as much as the larger multinationals fruit corporations have altered the political ecosystem of these same nations. Due to the spatial redistribution that assigns importance on a gradient scale, everyone is exactly aware of the status he holds within the community, sometimes to the detriment of the community. Those on the outskirts, separated racially and spatially, are given no means to ascend in a society that assigns them specific roles and specific rules of conduct to accompany those roles. These rules of conduct are dictated by the standards of working and living which have been imported into the tropics by the

---

<sup>54</sup> Emery-Waterhouse, 97.

<sup>55</sup> Emery-Waterhouse, 98.

multinational corporations as a method by which to civilize its inhabitants. Sometimes in this society, agency and mobility are mistaken for freedom. In reality, the means to achieve agency and mobility for Central Americans are afforded by fulfilling the capitalistic standards of conduct.

Through a study of the spatial distribution using a mixture of primary and secondary sources, I demonstrated that banana enclaves and White Zones in particular created a Eurocentric organization of people and resources that created physical and psychological barriers to societal ascension for non-white inhabitants of the enclaves. Furthermore, I validated claims that Euro-American elites established the limited roles for Central Americans. For the Central Americans who were able to rise above the limiting roles, I posited that they were only able to do so by adopting the Euro-American model for success; and I verified this by examining both general concepts and specific examples in which women gained mobility and agency by taking on the desired characteristics of Euro-American society.

This study focused on three main groups: the Euro-American employees of the multinational corporations and their wives, the West Indians and the Hispanic/Central American workers. In actuality, each of these groups was much more nuanced in their roles in the banana plantations and enclaves and composed of many more ethnic groups than I was able to detail. Further study of the distinct groups could provide a more intricate and complete picture of the different waves of workers throughout time as well as their ethnicities and cultural differentiation from one another. Though providing a rather simplified view of the players within the banana enclaves, this paper gave an illustrative look at the order of society in banana enclaves and the opportunities—or lack thereof—for mobility within banana enclaves.

The greater themes of this paper pertain to issues of cultural exchange versus cultural domination and the ways in which the latter was put in place in the banana enclaves of the early twentieth century. The fruit companies of this time period are often studied for their immense influence in the politics and economics of the region on a national scale. However, fruit corporations created plantations in regions of Central America where they had not existed previously and brought in two populations foreign to the area to work in them: the Euro-Americans and West Indians.

The presence of fruit companies reordered demand in the employment economy by requiring workers to adhere to Euro-American norms in order to advance. West Indians naturally had these characteristics and were rewarded with higher positions and pay, while Hispanic workers did not and were given only the least desirable jobs as a result. Central Americans were left with a choice between adhering to their traditional cultural norms and traditions and converting—or attempting to convert—to those desired by foreign interests in order to advance their employment, agency and upward mobility. This disruption in racial politics for the benefit of foreign economic interests had a profound impact on spatial organizations and local identity in Central America for the duration of the United Fruit Company's occupation and, likely, beyond.

### Bibliography

- Aliano, David. "Curing the Ills of Central America: The United Fruit Company's Medical Department and Corporate America's Mission to Civilize, 1900-1940." *Estudios Interdisciplinarios De America Latina Y El Caribe* 17, no. 2 (2006): 35-59.
- Bourgois, Philippe I. *Ethnicity at Work: Divided Labor on a Central American Banana Plantation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.
- Chomsky, Aviva. *West Indian Workers and the United Fruit Company in Costa Rica, 1870-1940*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996.
- Cohen, Rich. *The Fish That Ate the Whale: The Life and times of America's Banana King*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012.
- Emery-Waterhouse, Frances. *Banana Paradise*. New York: Stephen-Paul, 1947.
- Euraque, Darío A. *Reinterpreting the Banana Republic: Region and State in Honduras, 1870-1972*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996.
- Harpelle, Ronald N. *The West Indians of Costa Rica: Race, Class, and the Integration of an Ethnic Minority*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001.
- Harpelle, Ronald. "White Women on the Frontier: American Enclave Communities on the Caribbean Coast of Central America." *Wadabagei: A Journal of the Caribbean & Its Diasporas* 8, no. 2 (2005): 6-34.
- Harpelle, Ronald. "White Zones: American Enclave Communities of Central America." In *Blacks and Blackness in Central America: Between Race and Place*, edited by Lowell Gudmundson and Justin Wolfe, 307-33. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Henry, O. *The Complete Works of O. Henry*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1953.

- Langley, Lester D., and Thomas David Schoonover. *The Banana Men: American Mercenaries and Entrepreneurs in Central America, 1880-1930*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1995.
- Manager's House, Bananera, Guatemala, First Half of Twentieth Century*. United Fruit Company Photograph Collection, 1891-1962, Baker Library, Harvard Business School, Boston. Accessed November 6, 2013.
- <http://www.library.hbs.edu/newsletter/archives/2005-11-spotlight.html>.
- May, Stacy, and Galo Plaza. *The United Fruit Company in Latin America*. Washington: National Planning Association, 1958.
- Putnam, Lara. "Eventually Alien: The Multigenerational Saga of British West Indians in Central America, 1870-1940." In *Blacks and Blackness in Central America: Between Race and Place*, edited by Lowell Gudmundson and Justin Wolfe, 278-306. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.
- Rodgers, Daniel T. "Introduction." Introduction to *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850-1920*, Xi-Xv. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974.
- Striffler, Steve, and Mark Moberg. *Banana Wars: Power, Production, and History in the Americas*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.
- West, Richard. *The Gringo in Latin America*. London: Cape, 1967.
- Wilson, Charles Morrow. *Empire in Green and Gold: The Story of the American Banana Trade*. New York: H. Holt, 1947.