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⇒ Do Bananas Have a Culture? United Fruit Company Colonies in Central America 1900-1960**

Abstract: This article is concerned with the processes underlying the development of the unique identifications and culture which evolved among the First Class Workers of the United Fruit Company - the vast majority of whom were citizens of the United States, working alongside Europeans and Central Americans - during the first half of the twentieth century. Examining the social and cultural practices widespread among the Company's colonies, I trace the nature of the 'Banana Culture', a term coined by the members of this group.

Keywords: United Fruit Company; Culture; Identity; Central America; 20th Century.

Strenuous Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving day was a strenuous day. As usual, most of the families ate their turkey dinner at the club at noon [...] As a fitting climax to the many parties everybody went aboard the *Matina* for a last farewell drink with the Sandersons in the evening – to the tune of a *marimba* band brought on board for the occasion [*sic*] (*Unifruitco*, Jan. 1949: 24).

This sketch featured in the January 1949 volume of the *Unifruitco*, the employee newsletter published by the United Fruit Company (UFCO). The festivities conducted by the Costa Rican division of the largest U.S.-based corporation in Central America point to a fusion of US tradition and Central American culture on the most emblematic of US holidays – Thanksgiving. The employees had the customary turkey dinner, yet ate at noon, and in the company club rather than in their private homes, later dancing to the sounds of the marimba upon the deck of a United Fruit vessel. This hybridity, coupled

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with exceptionally close ties to the corporation, led to the development of new individual and collective identifications amongst the ‘First Class Workers’ of United Fruit, identifications which undermined national, ethnic, and culturally accepted distinctions, and to the formation of a ‘Banana Culture’, a term coined by the employees themselves. This is certainly one of the most interesting cultural phenomena related to UFCO’s activity, and the subject with which this article is concerned.

UFCO’s First Class Workers numbered in the tens of thousands, the vast majority of them were citizens of the United States brought by the Company to work in Central America. Company employees resided in settlements specially established by UFCO along Central America’s Atlantic and Pacific coastal lines, and lived alongside the local population comprised of hundreds of thousands of inhabitants and workers.¹

The various facets of United Fruit’s activity – economic, political, and ethnic – have proven fertile ground for historical research.² However, the greater part of this corpus has ignored the population of First Class Workers – considered a homogeneous ethnic and class population – which imposed the cultures of the United States upon Latin American states in an act of cultural imperialism. This inattention is attributable to the prevalent tendency to view the cultural forces at play as unidirectional – from that of the northern empire (USA) to the southern area (Latin America). The inverse influences of local environments upon UFCO’s foreign employees have hence been overlooked.

Contrary to extant research, I find in the First Class Workers of the United Fruit Company a distinct case study of a heterogeneous, colonial society situated in a ‘contact zone’ of diverse cultures (Pratt 1992: 4-6) subject to perpetual change, and a foundation for the generation of new self-definitions and cultures.³ This well of cultures and identities, common in cultural frontiers, sprang not only from the cultural confluence in the

¹ The number of U.S. and European employees, initially called ‘Whites’ in UFCO documentation and later ‘Employees from the Temperate Zone’, varied according to corporation manipulations aimed at controlling financial privileges. Including family members, real numbers for the years spanning 1916-1931 ranged from 4,187 to 45,775, compared with records of 53,000-165,000 defined as ‘Colored of Various Types’. Thus North American and European employees comprised between three and thirty percent of the corporation’s work force. See: United Fruit Company, Medical Department: *Annual Report – United Fruit Company, Medical Department, 1916-1931*. Boston: United Fruit Company.

² See for example Kepner (1936); Bourgois (1989); Chomsky (1996); LeGrand (1998: 70-71); Strifler (1999: 91-120); Putnam (2002); Bucheli/Read (2006: 204-227).

³ By using the terms “colonial society” and “colonies” here and throughout the text, I obviously do not imply that these had the same meaning and connotations as they did under the Spanish regime. However, I would like to suggest that the UFCO settlements in Central America were types of colonial enclaves which economically and culturally resembled Dutch, British and French colonialism in Africa and Asia during the same period.

With respect to the social, political and economic realm in South America from the Spanish conquest to date, Anibal Quijano’s concept of “coloniality” seems more appropriate than colonialism or neocolonialism (Quijano 2008). However, embracing the Quijano’s broad argument does not exempt us from a microanalysis of U.S. imperialism, one of whose salient features was its operation through economic and cultural mechanisms (Rosenberg: 1982, 1999) with UFCO being one of its most prominent vehicles in the first half of the 20th century. The usage of the term “colony” with respect to UFCO points to a somehow less recognized aspect of U.S. imperialism: although it is perceived as mainly economic, cultural, and political in nature, it had a significant territorial dimension as well: UFCO took over vast lands, turning them into “forbidden cities”, as Gabriel Garcia Márquez (2003: 114) termed it, with regard to the local populations.

UFCO colonies, but chiefly – and here lies my principal argument – from the profound influence of the singular and close bond to the corporation; that capitalist entity which consistently proves so much more than a purely economic system.

Through the examination of social and cultural practices customary to the UFCO colonies – such as consumption, leisure activity, family relations, and uses of language – I investigate the effects of both the colonial, multi-cultured environment and the US capitalist corporation upon the way of life led in the compounds. I will expound upon the process which allowed First Class Workers to identify themselves not according to their national identity (US citizens, British, Costa Ricans, etc.), nor according to their ethnicity (whites, blacks, Hispanics), but rather as ‘Banana People’, ‘Tropical People’, or ‘UFers’ (as in United Fruit). For some, these self-given identifications (and by using this term I would like to suggest an active dynamic process rather than the existence of an eminent ‘identity’) subverted the ‘official’ ones, and remain applicable and valid unto this day.

1. Sources and Methodology

The corpus of primary sources for this study consists largely of the volumes of *Unifruitco* and *United Report*, internal newsletters published by the UFCO’s public relations department between 1925 and 1932 and then again between 1948 and 1970.⁴ All in all several hundred volumes were published. Rich in text, graphics and photos, it describes the everyday life of the employees in the ‘Tropical Divisions’. The texts were written by the employees and underwent extensive editing by the company management in Boston. The newsletters were distributed free of charge and according to the employees’ testimonies were considered a loyal description of their experiences, while from a research point of view, these materials seem to have been the main tool employed to create and shape the workers’ consciousness and loyalty to the corporation.

Sources exclusive to this study are a series of sixteen oral histories of former UFCO workers and their children who grew up in the colonies during the first half of the twentieth century, recorded during participant observation at the 2004 ‘Quince’, the biannual reunion of UFCO retirees in Florida, USA. Further primary sources include two independently published memoirs written by former UFCO employees (Stephens 1989; 2002).

This article deals with the decades between the turn of the twentieth century and the 1960s – United Fruit’s golden era. I will first examine those practices customary to daily life in the colonies which reflect the First Class Workers’ encroachment upon the local cultures. Later I will discuss how the constellation of hybridization at work in a society living under corporate patronage facilitated the creation of personal and communal identities and of a unique culture – the ‘Banana Culture’.

⁴ The recess in the newsletter’s publication occurred in the years of the Great Depression and World War II. This research makes use of the volumes published up to 1958; from the 1960s onwards, UFCO underwent a profound change. The expression ‘Unifruitco’ was also used to designate UFCO employees and it is this meaning that is implied by any non-italicized uses of the term.

2. Everyday Practices in the United Fruit Company Colonies

2.1. *Iguano and Pie – the Material Culture of the Colonies*

The material culture and mores of UFCO settlements were shaped by two key factors – the supplies made available at company stores, and the products of local origin consumed by the employees. A specialized company department, the Merchandising and Supply Department, was responsible for furnishing the material needs of the company's First Class Workers, from their houses – made of an imported Californian redwood – to their furniture, which was manufactured in the company's workshops in Central America (by local craftsmen with indigenous materials), and on to their food and clothing, most of which was specially brought in.

The Merchandising and Supply Department's main feature, as well as its most effective tool in the institution of the colonies' material world, was its chain of company stores, the 'commissaries' – retail stores which sold basic food supplies, clothing and footwear. The official reason – for maintaining the commissaries was the alleged remoteness of the farms, although they were never truly isolated and existed alongside local marketplaces. In fact these stores, where employees made purchases by means of coupons that made up a considerable part of their salary, served as effective expedients for the establishment of an economically and culturally closed market and guaranteed UFCO the dependence of its employees. J.W., the son of a US-born employee and a Swiss woman, who grew up in the Honduran Corporation division in the 1940s, compares the way of life on the UFCO compounds to a socialist society, an ironic parallel for the most prominent representative of US capitalism in Central America.⁵

R.B., son of a US father and Nicaraguan mother, recounts: "The walls were decorated with local art, but you would bring things down from the States also, reminding you were did your parents lived or were did you came from. Pictures of your parents or grandparents [*sic*]"⁶ Such objects brought both visibility and stability to cultural categories, positioning the First Class Workers on the continuum running from 'alien' to 'local'. The exterior – of one's home and physique – was foreign: imported clothes, walls made of Californian redwood and luxury articles which preserved the cultural scheme of the mother country. The interior was local: inside one's home the furniture was made of indigenous wood and the walls decorated with local artwork (deemed folklore), while one's body was nourished with local gastronomic resources.

Indeed it is in the kitchen that the encounter of foreign and domestic is most conspicuous. On one hand, basic food products became luxuries, imported by the company in cans and endowed with sentimental value (during World War II, when the supply of UFCO stores was irregular, J.W.'s mother would travel to an 'American store' in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, to get peanut butter). On the other hand, the foreign employees encountered the fruits of the local marketplace as well as the local cuisine, all of which

⁵ Interview by the author with J.W., Tampa, Florida, September 2004. Other informants drew comparisons with military bases.

⁶ Interview by the author with R.B., Tampa, Florida, September 2004.

was regarded as something of the folkloric and exotic, even adventurous. Clyde S. Stephens, a former UFCO employee, told the story of how locals of Golfito, Costa Rica, challenged not only the sense of taste of the gringos who dared enter a local bar, but also their masculinity, by sending them more and more servings of raw turtle eggs, considered to be an aphrodisiac. “Everyone in the Chica Pica had their eyes on this big, blond *gringo* doing something he never dreamed of doing his whole life” (Stephens 2002: 222-224, original in italics).

Above all, it was the fact that the majority of those who did the cooking in the North American and European households were coloured men and women from the Caribbean that brought local gastronomy into the US homes. “Ami Wright, extra right hand and cook for the Owen family for the last fifteen years, has resigned... she is proud of the fact that her grandmother was ‘pure African’” (*Unifruitco*, May 1949: 30). UFCO compounds developed a cuisine based partly upon North American tradition and culture and partly upon local dishes. At a 1927 picnic in Almirante, Panama, alongside the traditional beef, “delicious *iguano* was available for every delicious folk”, and all of the women responded affirmatively to the request to bring a pie (*Unifruitco*, Oct. 1927: 165, original in italics). The menu of the Christmas dinner held in 1929 for UFCO hospital staff in Guatemala, hosted by Dr. McFile, the Scottish director, indicates a growing tendency towards fusion, and a bidirectional cultural influence: soup, turkey, beef and pork, potatoes, Arroz con Frijoles (the original Spanish in the newsletter is followed immediately by an explanation in English: “specially prepared native dish of rice and beans”), baked plantain (green banana), cabbage and potatoes, aguacate (“alligator pear”), salad, rolls, sweet cakes, fruit, nuts, candies, cigarettes, and pineapple juice (*Unifruitco*, Feb. 1929: 432). In 1949 the *Unifruitco* ran the story of a graduation party held for two teenagers in Golfito, Costa Rica, that could have taken place in a typical US diner, complete with hamburgers, potato chips, cheese squares and Coca Cola (*Unifruitco*, Aug. 1949: 31). Inversely, in 1952 the newspaper announced that *arroz con pollo* (rice with chicken, a common dish in the Central American kitchen) had become the most popular dish, alongside ice cream, to serve at birthday parties for US kids (*Unifruitco*, Jan. 1952: 14). Note that in 1929 the *Unifruitco* still translated the names of the local dishes, whereas in 1949 its editors saw no such need.

Within the UFCO colonies, therefore, a constant borrowing of local culinary items, appealing because of their exoticism, took place. These items were assimilated into the North American repertoire and contributed to the creation of a hybrid kitchen. The dishes and preparation methods changed according to circumstances: U.S. traditional at Thanksgiving, machismo and adventurous in the local bar, or a fusion of all at a charity Christmas dinner. This hybridity, however, can be viewed neither as a spontaneous cultural exchange, free from the context of the power relations in play, nor as an innocent and genuine embrace of the local cultures by the foreign employees. It was more a combination of everyday constraints and the need to survive in remote places with colonial curiosity and desire for the native way of life. Furthermore, the products which UFCO imported from the States or manufactured in Central America were an additional link in the chain of the company’s economic aggressiveness, and as these products affected the local gastronomy, were also another form of cultural imperialism.

2.2. *Between Elvis and the Marimba – the Colonies' Culture of Leisure*

The recreational culture of the UFCO settlements revolved, physically and ideologically, around the 'clubs'. The underlying purpose of the clubs, sponsored by the company, is revealed through the statements made upon the inauguration of the club in Cristobal, Panama, in 1929: "It will serve to keep employees in close touch with each other and with the members of the staff who will all meet at various times for healthy, clean entertainment" (*Unifruitco*, March 1929: 495). The Cristobal club boasted sixty members and an assemblage of elected administrators, all US, white men; the swimming pool was properly named the 'Washington Pool'. Essentially agents of the corporation, the clubs granted UFCO substantial control over its employees' leisure culture; supervision of the men and women to whom access was permitted, of the activities, and even of the nature and quantity of beverages of which those men and women would partake. Situating the clubs within the perimeters of the North American compounds was meant to bar the necessity – or the temptation – to meet the surrounding habitat and to forestall the decline into what professional literature termed 'tropical decadence', a medical syndrome thought to be the 'malicious outcome' of the extended presence of young North Americans in hot climates, away from the restraints of home.⁷

Employees spent time at the clubs on a daily basis, after work. The principle activities were drinking, card playing (poker for the men, bridge for the women), screenings of Hollywood films, and dances held every Saturday night. In early years the music played at the balls was North American: at the dance held in Puerto Limon, Costa Rica, in 1928, a jazz concert was transmitted live from management headquarters in Boston through United Fruit's radio network, followed immediately by speeches from UFCO officials (*Unifruitco*, Oct. 1928: 169). This radio broadcast, a medium frequently used by the Company during this period, bespeaks UFCO's attempts to fashion its employees from afar, to keep them a part of the United States and at the same time to consolidate an 'imagined community' encompassing of all of the company's foreign divisions, all tuned in together.

Yet it is these clubs that became an arena exceedingly conducive to the local elements that eventually altered the culture of the foreign First Class Workers. As in other spheres, the weekly dances and other celebratory events underwent a process of change driven by both the dictates of daily life on the remote settlements and the attraction to the local environment: the marimba gradually overtook the saxophone; waltzes were replaced by Latin dances. This shift in the preferred types of dance and music at First Class Workers' parties brought about a series of changes that undermined United Fruit's policy of ethnic and class segregation. The marimba was played by employees of low class whose presence at the clubs, under normal circumstances, would be prohibited; they now became visible and even necessary. The US employees learned dances from the local population, particularly from the local women. Ms. S.C., a Panamanian woman of Chinese-Columbian origin who worked as a secretary for UFCO in the 1940s recalls teaching the foreigners "Panamanian dances... Boleros, just simple dances, nothing

⁷ According to the UFCO president, in 1927 alone the company invested eighty thousand dollars in entertainment (*Unifruitco*, Oct. 1927: 134).

extraordinary because most of the boys came down and they hadn't heard any Latin music before, so they had to get accustomed to hearing the beat. We had a lot of fun and sometimes they stayed until morning".⁸

While the locals were fully aware, as manifested in the Panamanian dancing instructor's comment, of the North Americans' inability to truly understand and acquire the Latin beat, some of the North Americans felt they were adopting a new culture (or at least the *Unifruitco*'s editors used this to create a façade of belonging and partnership in the multinational and unstable settlements): a news item covering the visit of a top UFCO executive from Boston to the Dominican Republic reported that at the Company party, "the guest of honour proved very adept at learning *our native dance*" (*Unifruitco*, April 1949: 24, my emphasis). Adopting Central American music and dance, as shallow and external as it might have been, prompted further distancing between the North Americans on the colonies and those back home. The gap was bidirectional: the workers at the UFCO tropical divisions were left 'far behind' US popular culture as recounted by S.T., born in the United States to US parents and raised in Honduras and Guatemala in the 1950s: "someone once asked me what do I thought of Elvis, but when Elvis was popular in the States I was listening to Bill Haley and the Comets".⁹ The duality also permeated the settlements themselves and became a divide between the public and private spheres: "we still listened to American music but we danced to Latin music", said S.T.¹⁰

As in the case of the local cuisine, the adoption of local Afro-Latin music by North American UFCO employees was more than innocent enthusiasm with a new rhythm: it played, rather, a role in the global balance of power and the making of cultural tastes serving political and economic purposes. The embrace of Latin dances by North Americans and Europeans alike, chiefly the Argentinean tango and Cuban rumba, was a common phenomenon in the early twentieth century; one that bolstered a cultural legitimacy in their countries of origin stretching beyond the dances themselves and hence having an element of decolonization (Moore 1995: 166; Savigliano 1995: 83-104; Daniel 1991: 1-10). This legitimacy, however, was in fact quite the opposite of acceptance, for the most part sterilizing those subversive aspects of the dances, in terms of ethnic, class and gender relations, in favor of mere sentimentality and exoticism. Accordingly, the dances so enjoyed by UFCO's foreign employees and perceived by them as the symbol of their cultural assimilation, were not the original Latin dances but softened, adapted versions – sewn by U.S. composers and tailored to white, North American tastes. Most likely the dancers themselves were unaware that in dancing to these tunes they were in fact anchoring U.S. cultural imperialism rather than achieving cultural assimilation.

The first generation of First Class Workers was infatuated by components of local cultures and imitated them, while at the same time transforming them into a commodity. This came into play at another interesting recreational activity common at the company clubs – the costume balls. At these balls, US employees and *mestizos* of high social status masqueraded as natives of lower classes – precisely those people from whom they took such pains to differentiate themselves, geographically and culturally – and present-

⁸ Interview by the author with S.C., Bocas del Toro, Panama, October 2004.

⁹ Interview by the author with S.T., New Orleans, September 2004.

¹⁰ Interview by the author with S.T., 2004.

ed theatrical re-enactments of local scenes. In May of 1929, the 'International Club' in Puerto Limon, Costa Rica, "announced a typically 'Tica' festival of rural life". The ballroom was adorned in the fashion of Don Concho's salon (note the name chosen for this fictitious figure, the meaning of whose name varies from a taxi driver to a rustic man), and the evening's artistic programme included a mock wedding (an intimation of the parodic and disparaging tone most likely taken during this ceremony). The characters were First Class Workers all garbed in rural, native Costa Rican dress. "Long wooden tables of rough boards, lighted with candles, made the setting more picturesque. The *tamales* were delicious, and served with real Costa Rican coffee, made a most special treat" (*Unifruitco*, July 1929: 751).

Donning costumes was not exclusive to the early years of the colonies' existence, during which period the local population may have been considered a more exotic element. At the farewell party of a US employee held in Quepos, Costa Rica in 1948, the celebrants all dressed up as "coffee pickers and conchos"; on Columbus Day in Golfito, in 1955, both North Americans and *mestizos* "turned Indian" (*Unifruitco*, March-April 1948: 24; *Unifruitco*, Nov.-Dec. 1955: 14).

Dressing up for a limited amount of time – poor as rich, colonists as natives – is a prevalent convention within the contexts of colonial and class relations, as well as an integral part of folk and popular carnivals (Low 1996: 66). The double masquerading (i.e. ethnic and class-distinctive) of the UFCO employees as locals of low social status obviously stemmed from a 'natural' colonial curiosity, but only to a degree. Their accounts of the experience must have led to renewed self-awareness examination. Although they unmistakably transformed into natives under controlled conditions for a limited period of time, without penetrating the local culture, and brought carefully chosen elements into the community's boundaries (alienating them to the point of theatre), the events themselves testify to a simulation of contact with the native and the alien, anticipating the genuine meetings, and even weddings, that would take place in the coming decades.

2.3. *Miss Costa Rica and Uncle Sam – the Ideals and Praxis of 'The Unifruitco Family'*

More than any other type of everyday practice, that of human contact – social, romantic and sexual – facilitated the creation of a physical and mental space common to both foreigners and local individuals and workers, cultivating the distinct culture and identity of the UFCO First Class Workers. For the family circle is the locus, or habitat, of socialization and it is here that habits of cultural adaptation are acquired, and hence the desire of colonial administrations to control it (Stoler 2000: 45). Hierarchical structures such as those based on race and class become more complex within the family cell and appear to be different, even contradictory, to those of one's native land or to social conventions. The practices surrounding marriage and the family on the UFCO colonies deviated from the norms set by other colonial regimes, and herein lies their singular significance.

Since the days of La Malinche and Cortez, local women in Latin America as well as at other colonial sites have acted as agents of contact between local and colonial societies. Associations with women from the local population opened the door to cultural

exchange – languages, knowledge, customs. Already in 1926 the *Unifruitco* reported on a picnic party

composed of UF boys and the charming señoritas of Limon duly chaperoned by their parents [which] set sail to for the little Island of Uvita *to participate in a pleasure that our Northern friends, whose knowledge of tropical life comes from highly flavored stories, imagine us to be having everyday* [sic] [*Unifruitco*, June 1926: 694, my emphasis).

The text insinuates that the North Americans were not blind to the exotic dimension implicit in relationships between white men and coloured women, nor to its influence upon their readers in the United States. It seems, however, that UFCO was more concerned with the quality of its employees' affairs rather than with their racial constitution; for marriage and family entailed a system of privileges as well as the stability of its work force.¹¹ The conservative, 'normal' family structure was the ideal to which the company aspired, while questions of race and class became secondary. The very small number of US single women who lived on the UFCO compounds could not match that of US single men, and as UFCO extended its activity in Central America, interracial relations became a reality with which the corporation had no choice but to contend. The approach taken by UFCO was to transform interracial marriage, as opposed to any sort of extra-marital involvement, into the symbol marking the creation of 'The Unifruitco Family'. The enthusiastic headlines in the UFCO press – to be read as the outcome of latent negotiations between the employees and company management – give the impression that interracial weddings were far from compulsive occurrences to be quieted or simply accommodated. On the contrary, interracial marriage became the realization of the idealized matrimonial union between the United States – masculine, capitalist, and rich – and Central America – poor, dependent, but sensual and exotic. Thus the marriage of Minor Keith, one of United Fruit's founders, to Christina Castro Fernández, daughter of Costa Rica's former president Jose Maria Castro Madriz, was commemorated as one of UFCO's constitutive myths: company propagandists described how Keith rescued Castro Fernández from a shipwreck, delivering her home safely after two weeks on an isolated island (Wilson 1947: 63).¹² While there is much evidence of marriages of local women of low class, some of them of Indian or black origin, and North American men (Stephens 1989: 107; Stephens 2002: 61), it is precisely the fact that Keith's marriage became one of UFCO's fundamental myths which testifies to the true nature of the love affair between US and Central America from UFCO's point of view – an alliance of interests between the US empire and Central American elites.

A visual manifestation of the idea of marriage can be seen in the figurehead of the Fourth of July parade in 1928 in Puerto Limon: 'Miss Costa Rica', played by a local woman, alongside a US worker in the role of Uncle Sam (*Unifruitco*, Sep. 1928: 100).

¹¹ In regards to the local work force, Striphler tells us that UFCO used to brutally interfere in cases of family crisis (Strifler 1999: 12). It can be assumed that the company did the same with its First Class Workers, if in a more subtle manner.

¹² Although UFCO propagandists described Ms. Castro Fernández as a lost, helpless girl, she was, as a matter of fact, an educated creole, on her way back from a shopping tour in New York. Her father was Keith's political patron in Costa Rica.

Primary sources reveal that this phenomenon of mixed marriages was neither marginal nor forbidden in any way: on a farm in Honduras at the end of the 1930s, seven out of fifteen US overseers were married to local women, a fact that met with neither concern nor deliberation (Stephens 1989: 217).¹³ The two life stories outlined briefly below shed light upon the practice of interracial marriage, the types of families to which it gave birth, and its effects on relationships between North Americans and locals outside the immediate family.

Doña Antonia, a Honduran woman whose indigenous origin earned her the sobriquet the ‘Princess of the Maya’, was born at the beginning of the twentieth century to a large and established family in San Pedro Sula. After graduating as a school teacher, she looked for a job in the banana region of Honduras where she met her first husband, a Massachusetts-born accountant. G.S., daughter of Doña Antonia, indicated

I don’t think they [her family] really minded it except [that] I had an uncle that was very charismatic, and when my dad died [...] he did not want my mother to stay with the company. He wanted her to go back to live in San Pedro with all the Latin people and she refused. She said “No, because the company gives me a lot of things”, like transportation, education for us and things like that [...] My uncle, when he wanted her to go back to San Pedro to work in the newspaper business he said, “oh you just wanna live there with those gringos and wear pants and slacks”, because they used to play golf a lot [...] but he eventually succumbed to it. I mean he thought, well she is better off, because she got a lot of things with the company that she would not have had, had she gone back to live in San Pedro.¹⁴

Years later Doña Antonia married another foreign employee of the company, of British descent: “She was teaching him Spanish and he proposed to her and they got married”.¹⁵ Like most of the local women married to UFCO’s foreign employees, and in contrast to the US wives who were almost exclusively housewives, Doña Antonia was employed at UFCO’s regional headquarters as the headmistress of the boarding school for the First Class workers’ children. In this capacity Doña Antonia functioned as a mediator between the US children and their local surroundings, as well as between the native children of local UFCO employees and Anglo-Saxon language and culture.

Mrs. S., daughter to a Nicaraguan family of Belgian ancestry, represents a different pattern of integration within the North American colonies. Mrs. S. was initiated into the First Class Workers’ society upon her marriage to a Honduran engineer. Subsequent to her divorce she remained in the UFCO settlement, working as a telephone operator. During the early 1940s Mrs. S. remarried, this time to a North American employee, whereupon she quit her job and transferred her children from the Spanish school to the UFCO school, happily conforming to the lifestyle of the North American women. Her son, L.S., remembered that, “she was very happy, she played poker, they had a very easy life (laughing)... [her daily routine was] to work the servants, she had a wash lady and a yard

¹³ In all of the sources that I inspected, I found no evidence of actual, versus imagined, relations between North American women and local men. Nor did I find any evidence attesting to homosexual relations, which most certainly took place.

¹⁴ Interview of the author with G.S., New Orleans, September 2004.

¹⁵ Interview of the author with G.S. 2004.

boy. They had a very good life, very easy, as women, probably more so than the people who did not work for the UFCO”.¹⁶

So the assimilation into the leisure culture that characterized the upper classes was in itself confirmation for these women – and for their environment – of their passing from one class to another. It was, however, a two-way process: the women ‘elevated’ themselves to North American status and simultaneously introduced Latin elements of education, language and custom, in both private and public spheres, into the North American cultures. That North American men placed their homes and families’ futures in the hands of local women indicates the extent of their willingness to adopt aspects of the local culture, becoming, in the most intimate way, an integral part of that culture.

Children born on the colonies were nicknamed ‘Unifruitco kids’ and were treated by the company media with an attitude of admiration advocating the centrality of the family in community life. But even more notable was the fact that this approval stemmed from the fact that the children were perceived as the first generation to enter the Promised Land, ‘the Unifruitco land’ of bilingualism and multiculturalism. These children were the manifestation of the company ideal, at least in terms of its rhetoric, of mutual relations between the United States and the countries of Central America. The caption above the photograph of a child, published in the *Unifruitco* in 1949, announced: “My name is Christopher Davison Jr. and I am one year old. My father is an American and my mother is Cuban. So when I grow up I’ll be bi-lingual which should make me a perfect ‘Futufer’”, [sic] (*Unifruitco*, Aug 1949: 36). (‘Futufer’: a combination of ‘Ufer’, i.e. UFCO employee, and ‘future’).

As in other colonial communities, the US children were nursed by local caregivers – chiefly black women. While interaction between adults was profoundly influenced by the lines drawn by class, race, and ethnic background, those same barriers were mitigated amongst the children. Upon reaching school age the children of foreign and local First Class Workers all attended the same elementary schools, which were operated by UFCO according to the US school curriculum.¹⁷ UFCO financed the education of all children born to First Class Workers, foreign and Latin alike, including high school and college education within the United States. Sending children from the colonies to the metropolis was common practice in colonial societies, usually justified by concern for the children’s well-being: children would be more likely to succumb to native epidemics, and, figuratively speaking, ‘nativeness’ in general (Stoler 1992: 334). As for UFCO, it may be said that the Company was interested in ‘infecting’ its employees’ children with the native culture to a carefully controlled degree, and while still very young and under the authority of their parents – so long as they re-entered the US system of education. But this vision proved more complicated in practice than in theory, a point upon which I will soon elaborate.

¹⁶ Interview by the author with LS., New Orleans, September 2004.

¹⁷ The UFCO school at Quepos, Costa Rica taught 40 pupils in 1952, only 5 of them children of foreign employees, the rest children of local First Class Workers. This ratio was common to company schools.

2.4. *From Sweetheart to Señorita - the Evolution of the Colonies' Dialect*

The UFCO newsletter, *Unifruitco*, first appeared in English, while a gradual shift towards bilingualism began in 1948. The interaction between English and Spanish within the realm of print was to a great extent analogous to that of US employees and their local surroundings.

During the initial years of the company's presence in Central America, the foreign employees communicated mostly in English. United Fruit, however, requested that its employees learn Spanish for purposes of business: "A complete understanding with Spanish speaking people is impossible without a working knowledge of the Spanish language on the part of our employees" [*sic*] (*Unifruitco*, Nov. 1927: 198). By degrees, Spanish words infiltrated the English. The use of Spanish words – sometimes erroneously – endowed them with supplementary meanings intended to highlight the exoticism and folkloric characteristics attributed to the region and its language. Even within English texts, 'parties' were consistently *fiestas* and farewell parties were *despedidas*, designating them as specific to the tropics. Spanish was excessively used in English texts to describe women:

This division received a very pleasant surprise [...] in the person of Miss Muriel Belyea [...] Señorita Belyea is originally a Main daughter, but comes to us from Dirchester Mass. She is a graduate of the Chandler Secreterial School and from the point of view of humble reporter she is *muy dulce* [*sic*] (*Unifruitco*, Aug. 1929: 33).¹⁸

Beyond the predictable paternalism and condescension towards its female subject, the journal manages, with just a few words in Spanish, to turn a Yankee secretary into a 'sweet señorita'.

Between the renewal of its regular publication in 1948 and 1958, the *Unifruitco* gradually became a bilingual medium; evidence of the 'Latinization' undergone by UFCO and of the widespread use of Spanish amongst its foreign employees. The newsletter's English articles, interspersed with Spanish phrases and words, mimicked the conversational mode of combining the two languages: "Greetings too, to Rosalie Lindsay, also from Mississippi and *tambien* a school teacher" (*Unifruitco*, Sep.-Oct. 1949: 34). During the 1950s, the newsletter was divided almost equally between English and Spanish, but while English materials were printed in regular font, the Spanish texts appeared mostly in italics. The Spanish and English exercises featured by the journal during this period exemplify the meaning each language assumed for its non-speaking population: to be eligible for the position of overseer (for locals) or to become bi-lingual (for foreigners) (*Unifruitco*, Jan. 1949: 20). If in the first decades of the company's Central American operations Spanish was an effective tool for getting work done, by the middle of the twentieth century Spanish had become the means for creating a hybrid, new culture.

Adhering to the belief that language is an agency capable of charting borders different from those on a political map, such as the lines circumscribing national or political

¹⁸ "Señoritas americanas" was commonly used to describe US female employees. Note the change in spelling from *Senorita* in 1926 to *Señorita* in 1929.

groups, ethnic minorities, or social classes, I suggest that language in the UFCO colonies served as an instrument of either exclusion from or inclusion in the new ‘Banana Culture’. Above all it was the ability to proficiently and naturally weave English and Spanish together that branded the ‘true’ Banana People. Anyone lacking this adroitness, because they spoke only Spanish or English, was quickly identified as either a foreign outsider or a local of low social status, two groups not part of the ideal propagated for UFCO colonial society.

3. Hybrid Space, Corporate Identifications

With the goal of tracing the evolution of a new culture and new individual and collective identifications, this article dealt with several social and cultural practices common amongst the First Class Workers of UFCO colonies in Central America during the first half of the twentieth century. These practices originated in the supremacy the United States claimed to have in the Western hemisphere; notions regarding sexual morality and family values, gender roles and domestic life; views concerning the adaptation of culture and language, and so forth. However, it is the constant application of these ideologies, through everyday practices, which caused the inevitable modification of those practices and the construction of a new culture.

I like to compare this to an evolutionary process – the body remains the same, initially at least, but during the process of cultural reproduction, numerous minute mutations take place in the body’s cells, eventually changing it as a whole. Some of these mutations were accidental: the weekly food delivery contained “a strange fruit, which looks like a melon, but tastes like gum”, describing a North American housewife as she first encounters a papaya (Stephens 1989: 81-83). But these mutations were frequently deliberate and therefore doubly important, as in the case of UFCO’s policy of non-interference in interracial marriages (to the point of consecrating them as an ideal) in favour of community stability and economic control.

These mutations did not transform the foreigners into Latins or Caribbeans, nor did it mean that the different cultures became equal. Most of these encounters stayed on the level of folklorism and curiosity. This said, the long term repercussions of this were to blur, to some extent, the stringent boundaries that UFCO had drawn between the various ethnic groups and classes within the regions of its activity. In the UFCO colonies, US culture consistently maintained its position of ascendancy and normativity; though all the while, in practice, the way of life gradually borrowed more and more elements of the local surroundings – either out of curiosity and attraction or because of everyday circumstances and constraints. These practices, repeated over the course of decades, resulted in personal and collective identifications with this hybrid lifestyle and culture.

These newly-begotten identifications were necessities, especially during the crisis that many of the US employees experienced after extended periods of working in Central America. The crisis was particularly acute amongst the employees’ children, who were mostly socialized in multi-cultural surroundings or even households and therefore had a more hybrid identity. Once they had returned to the United States for high school, they felt the need to redefine themselves, for their current surroundings now failed to perceive them as US citizens.

While growing up in various UFCO settlements in the 1940s, J.W., son of a US father and Swiss mother, spoke fluent Spanish and had no contacts at all with his homeland, “there was no need for... there was nothing there to be connected with”.¹⁹ But he still saw himself, first and foremost, as a patriotic US citizen, especially during World War II: “I looked at myself very definitely as an American. The war was on, American soldiers in the news reels; we had movies, once a week... cartoons, you know, Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck and Donald Duck”.²⁰ But when he arrived at his Tennessee high school, he was considered a foreigner by the local pupils:

A couple of boys came in to my room and asked me where I was from, and I said I was from Honduras, and they say, “Where is that?”[...] and I said, “Well it’s in Central America”, and they said, “Oh, you mean you’re a spig?” and I didn’t know what he meant, I never heard that discouraging term before [...] that referred to people of Latin American origin, and so they beat me up [...] The irony of all of this is that my ancestors came from the very state that we were in, in Tennessee. So I immediately went and looked for some of the Latin American boys and began to hang around with them for a while [...] It made me feel like an outsider and it made me feel like a foreigner in my own land that was clearly not my own land.²¹

As an adult J.W. tried to return to the ranks of UFCO’s workers, but like many other ‘sons’ of the Company, he felt unable to settle into that station. He worked in US embassies in Latin America and then retired to Miami: “I am a tropical person. I’m almost completely bi-cultural – American and Latin American”.²²

Sisters G.V. and M.S.D were born in Honduras to parents originally from the United States. Throughout their childhood the family wandered amongst UFCO’s colonies in Central America; today they reside in Texas. Reflecting upon their identities, the sisters say “We are proud Americans, but Honduras is our mother country”.²³ Children of mixed couples or of First Class Workers of Latin origin were also schooled in the United States, and many eventually chose a US nationality, yet still describe themselves as belonging to both cultures. “We think we were God’s chosen people, because we had Latin culture, we had an American culture”, exclaims R.B.²⁴, the son of a US citizen and a Nicaraguan woman, currently living in Miami.

What set of circumstances caused and enabled foreigners and Central Americans alike, members of the First Class Workers, to hold this meeting of cultures and to undergo a personal transformation? First, it was the fact that UFCO’s control over its employees was exercised largely on the level of rhetoric and was, in practice, oriented towards monetary interests. Secondly, and more importantly, what occurred in the banana regions was not a convergence of two monolithic cultures and ethnic groups, but rather an encounter between cultures and populations of varying degrees of ‘purity’ or ‘concentration’ – between members of an immigrant society and the inhabitants of regions subject to repeated colonization, regions that had been contact zones for centuries. Many of the

¹⁹ Interview by the author with J.W., 2004.

²⁰ Interview by the author with J.W., 2004.

²¹ Interview by the author with J.W., 2004.

²² Interview by the author with J.W., 2004.

²³ Interview by the author with G.V. and M.S.D, Tampa, Florida, September 2004.

²⁴ Interview by the author with R.B. 2004.

US employees were first-generation Americans, so that moving to the UFCO colonies was simply an additional step along the trail of their family's quest for a brighter future.

An undermining of the 'original' identities of colonists alongside the creation of a distinct, colonial identity are phenomena common to colonial maturation. What makes the group that I have studied unique are its close ties to the UFCO (in the anecdote opening this article, both the Thanksgiving turkey dinner and the marimba ball take place at company sites – the Club and the Ship). On the one hand UFCO foreign employees conducted affairs with their local surroundings in a way that was somewhat extraordinary when compared to other colonists – and I refer chiefly to the social legitimization of interracial marriage.²⁵ On the other hand, the corporation's authority over the lives of its employees produced relationships between them and actual places that were of a weaker constitution than that of other colonialists. The UFCO foreign employees switched from beef to tortillas, from the saxophone to marimba; they married señoritas and spoke 'Spanglish', but not a single testimony did I find, written or oral, of a UFCO foreign employee who defined him – or herself – as 'US-Guatemalan', or 'Yankee-Costarriense', in the manner of Rudyard Kipling's 'Anglo-Indian' for example. The only self-assigned designations are of 'Tropical People', 'Bananeros' or 'Banana People' or 'those of American and Latin culture'. The dominant frame of reference for these people was that of UFCO, and not the tangible national states in which they lived. In fact, for UFCO's foreign employees these states carried no special meaning or consequence beyond that of serving as the backdrop for the operations of the met-state – the UFCO. It was UFCO that was responsible for their relocation to Central America, and it was the company that determined at which colony they would be stationed, while the lifestyle they would lead, the appearance of their houses and their clubs (all designed to remind them of Omaha and Portland), was irrespective of their physical location. By creating the notion of a general 'tropics', the company significantly abolished the personal connection between its workers and the actual countries, in favour of the bond to the corporation. On an embroidered tablecloth photographed in the *Unifruitco* is a caption in both English and Spanish: "Home Is Where the Banana Is / Donde esta el Banano esta el Hogar" (*Unifruitco*, Nov. 1948: 55). The identities of the company's employees were therefore delineated by their ties to the corporation, its productivity, and the imagined concept of the fabricated 'tropics' marketed by the company in order to secure them to the colonies.

The UFCO employees I interviewed, who categorized themselves as 'bi-cultural' or 'multi-cultural', chose the term 'Banana Culture' as a more appropriate or convenient definition, allowing them to blur their ambivalent ethnic and national identities and to accentuate those association with the corporation:

There was a certain culture there, but again, it doesn't exist any more. The foundation of that culture was that we all worked for the same company. Everybody was involved with the same company. And everybody was involved directly or indirectly with the production of and exporting of bananas. That was the one thing that bound us all together [...] and that was the basis for the culture.²⁶

²⁵ Cf. Stoler (2000).

²⁶ Interview by the author with J.W., 2004.

In many cases the process of acquiring a ‘banana identity’ was a conscious act involving both nostalgia and homage to a childhood lifestyle in the face of severe criticism directed at UFCO. “I was an American”, recalls S.T., who, as a child of US employees, spent only ten years in the UFCO compounds. “Only later, when I realized how special this group of people was, did my perception change”. When I interviewed her, S.T. labeled herself a “Chiquita banana brat”, as in “military brat”.²⁷

The self-bestowed identification of ‘Unifruitcos’ embodies a choice made by people of diverse ethnic and national origin – whites and *mestizos*, North Americans, Central Americans and Europeans – to gather into what may be called a sort of imagined community. It is this act of imagining that enabled several thousand people, who lived in isolated compounds throughout Central America over a span of more than five decades, the vast majority of whom never knew one another, to conceive of a collective identity: boasting a distinctive territory, language, cuisine, common customs and symbols, and whose members shared a uniform sense of class and culture; a culture characterized less by its hybridity than by its bond to the UFCO.

4. Epilogue

In the fall of 2004 I took part in the ‘Quince’, one of two reunions held by UFCO tropical retirees in the United States which have taken place for more than thirty years. The Quince takes place biannually in Florida, on September 15 – the Independence Day of the Central American republics. The second reunion, the ‘Fiesta Chiquita’, occurs in alternate years in New Orleans, on the weekend closest to the Fourth of July.

The reunions were initiated in the early 1970s, when most of the foreign employees had retired from the company and had been replaced by Central Americans. And as UFCO moved into the realm of nostalgia for its former employees, it is no wonder that these reunions attracted, and continue to attract, hundreds of former First Class Workers and the members of their families who grew up on the colonies. They gather from all over the United States and Central America for three days of fancy dinners, Latin balls and extensive reminiscing, as if they were still in the company colonies and in the first half of the twentieth century.

It should be noted that the informants for this research, those whose stories I tracked and the participants of the reunions, number but several hundred out of the hundreds of thousands who were employed by UFCO or lived in its settlements. Nonetheless, the decision to hold these reunions in the first place (as well as maintaining a vivacious website²⁸ intended for UFCO retirees exclusively from the tropical divisions, again marking themselves a separate group within the entirety of the UFCO workers) points to the strong sense of community amongst people most of whom never knew one another personally during their childhood or careers in the company’s colonies. To hold the reunions on the dates commemorating both Central American and US independence, the Spanish names of the reunions and the fact that they take place on the frontier lines of the United

²⁷ Interview by the author with S.T., 2004.

²⁸ See <<http://www.ChiquitaTropicalRetirees.com>>.



FIGURE 1

Former UFCO employees and ‘kids’ dancing the marimba at the Quince, wearing Chiquita Banana hats (Photographed by the author, Tampa, Florida, September 2004).

States, as well as the fact that they are open solely to UFCO retirees and their families – all display the ambivalent identity of these people, positioned between the United States and Central America, but more than anything else, under UFCO’s wings.

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