

The Banana Files: Empire vs. Resistance

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Introduction

It was 1983. The cold hustle and bustle of the world's people in the lobby of Tower 1 was at once intimidating and exciting, frightening and alluring. A diverse amalgam of mini universes zipping past each other, gravitating within orbits held together by neoliberal capital. It was a spectacle that even Le Corbusier himself could hardly have anticipated: a synchronous chaos that was, and was to be, erupting in a New York City moment. This was the spectacle that Maritza beheld, albeit briefly, as she emerged from the subway, a flicker of excitement momentarily breathing new life in her after an arduous day at a Bronx pizzeria. She rushed to deliver the bit of money she had saved for her mother, Berta, still back home in San Pedro Sula, so conspicuously distant from this city that had given her little other than dollars and winters. In spite of her exhaustion, she smiled as she thought about the packed envelope of cash she would hand to the mail clerk, feeling (finally!) somewhat vindicated for having made the biggest bet of her life.

As she rushed through the lobby, pretending to know where she was going, she was gripped with an all-body anxiety. She became preoccupied with finding the delivery place her friend had told her about. As she looked around, worrisome thoughts swirled against a backdrop of gringos in suits dashing past gawking tourists with bulky cameras and funny hats. And in a silent corner she spots a curly-haired man in gray uniform, a mop and bucket at his side. In a flash, she was pulled in by an unknowable gravity. Maritza approaches him and asks for directions, her anxiety fading when he responds in Spanish with a boricua smile.

San Pedro and New York

The year my parents met at the World Trade Center, Cold War geopolitics and global neoliberal restructuring were transforming the relationships between cities and countries, spaces and places. The winds of a new-old libertarian ideology—one based on the incontestable supremacy of the invisible hand—had re-emerged in the creation of a new world order. And although merely a decade old, the Towers were already witness to spectacular changes, not only in the surrounding cityscape, but also in the circuits of commerce that ensnared cities everywhere.

Nowhere was this more evident than New York City, where several years of deindustrialization and suburban flight had nearly left the city bankrupt. Implementing a model of urban governance that was to characterize life under austerity, powerful investment banks like Chase and Citibank seized upon the city's economic woes to launch a financial coup, slashing funding for social welfare programs (including those used by impoverished communities of color) while

diverting them into incentives for corporate investment and high-end real estate development. By the beginning of the '80s, the consequences of regime change were already palpable in the streets: the crumbling, graffitied edifices of neoliberal austerity juxtaposed against new glass high-rises and luxury condominiums. The new polarized geographies told not the story of two cities, but overlapping multiverses. Of course, one doesn't need to repeat the story of the Reagan years, so painfully familiar is their legacy. One need only recall vintage stock footage from the nightly news, their hallowed threats echoing across space-time: Crack cocaine. AIDS. Homelessness. Communism. The ever-refined discourse of welfare moms and Black and Brown criminality.

At the same time, the world my mother left behind was succumbing to a different set of transformations. Far from being insulated from the revolutionary forces stirring up the rest of the isthmus, Honduras orbited a path heavily circumscribed by U.S. imperialism—a path dictated in large part by an historical legacy as the quintessential 'banana republic.' Interestingly, a proclivity towards liberal reformism within the Honduran military elite not only staved off the sort of popular unrest seen in Guatemala and El Salvador, but also created pathways towards civilian rule. Around the time Reagan assumed office in Washington, an elected constituent assembly was drafting a new Honduran constitution (to take effect in 1982). The election of Roberto Suazo ended eighteen uninterrupted years of military leadership. And an unshakeable recession throughout the country brought a virtual slowdown in the industrial capital of San Pedro Sula, quieting activity in the many banana plantations dotting the urban periphery. Yet none of these transitions were as impactful as what was to emerge from a collaboration with the American military, Honduras turned into Empire's launching pad for a paramilitary counteroffensive. As strategic piece in Reagan's checkerboard of war, Honduras was indelibly shaped by the mass influx of U.S. military funds, equipment, and training—including, most notably, an elite death squad (Battalion 316) led by a School of the Americas graduate. With the threats and intimidations, disappearances and drive-by executions, a different sort of coup—an imperialistic, military one—had descended in Honduras.

In my case, migration and the forces of political economy ensured that two cities in a Cold War universe—San Pedro and New York—would collide in orbit. As the product of a bipolar world come undone, I nevertheless sense Reagan's ghost. His message, crisp and callous.

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Chiquita and Lempira

I am always made aware of the layers of difference that separate me from the land of my ancestors, the several degrees of uprootedness. Growing up in the Brooklyn barrio, worlds away from the palm trees and earthy plantains of San Pedro Sula, my connections to a *catracho* homeland were sporadic, often brief, sometimes theoretical. Within the self-contained universe that is New York's unique form of

multiculturalism, my Honduranness also functioned more as an accessory, a label of little distinction amid larger groups of nuyoricans, dominicanxs, mexicanxs.

In spite of all that, childhood trips made me who I am. In those years, we would drive to Pollo Campero or Pizza Hut, visit my tíos and tías in the Fesitranh, drive further out to Lake Yahoá or Tegucigalpa, or even further out to the Mayan ruins of Copán (a sacred childhood favorite). To be sure, those impossibly humid summers in the '90s were filled with memorable, awkward cultural exchanges, the impacts of which became ingrained deeply into a double consciousness. As a child, every return trip felt overwhelming as everyone in the Ramírez clan would come out to welcome us. In that amorous airport whirlwind of *tías, tíos, primos*, and *sobrinos* with names I couldn't remember, there was also my mother, the prodigal daughter returneth with wide-eyed *gringo* boys and a Puerto Rican husband. (Did it say something that my brothers and I were Abuelita's favorite grandchildren?)

Looking back, I can recall the relics of pro-American sentiment everywhere. My mother inherited the house my grandfather had built in his years as a carpenter for one of the infamous U.S. banana companies, Chiquita (formerly United Fruit). Even though my mother was the youngest of six, she was the only one to have to made it in the States—to have *aventurado*, as she puts it, by leaving her country. My curiosity was piqued by the hints of the *sueño americano* that floated from conversation to conversation, even on Honduran television. Being on the other end of that equation was nothing if not surreal. From my accent to cousins' expressed envy for my jeans, toys, and video games. Even in the pride my mother exuded in returning home with American dollars.

To this day, I recall a moment when my mother dragged me out of a car, only to exchange a \$100 bill for lempiras, the man's eyes widening with ostensible awe as he smiled at Ben Franklin. Given that Honduran currency is named after an indigenous Lenca leader from the early years of anti-colonial resistance, the meaning of the exchange was also powerfully metaphoric.

The new millennium would change everything, of course. My grandmother, the Ramírez matriarch, would die just months shy of 9/11. My father would lose a job. And in our Brooklyn apartment, environmental racism would leave us with asthma, depression, and a variety of enigmatic illnesses between my brothers and me. And yet, Lempira and Chiquita has already left their imprints in my psyche: I am their mestizo banana child, an odd fruit and a fighter. And my roots are long and brown.

U.S. Imperialism and the Original Banana Republic

If there is an argument I would want disseminated widely, it is the following: much of what we know about Honduras is misleading or categorically false. If mentioned at all, Honduras is rendered as characteristically 'poor,' 'small,' and 'violent.' Even well intentioned scholars and reporters, sometimes even hondureñxs, fall into the trap of referencing Honduras as a 'failed state' or a country in need of 'development.' While I can't deconstruct this language at length, I would say that it

may help to re-orient our vision of Honduras, to see in it what Eduardo Galeano saw throughout Latin America: a cosmopolitan country rich in natural resources and histories of rebellion; a country that has been incessantly pillaged and ransacked, poisoned and corrupted; a country that has survived unjust odds and abuses of power.

A long history of U.S. intervention in Honduras traces back to 19th century commercial ventures. One well-known example is that of the New York and Honduras Rosario Mining Company: its owner, Washington Valentine, became so successful with the silver mines of Tegucigalpa that he was dubbed the “King of Honduras.” It was the banana industry, however, that attracted the most U.S. capital investment, a process that helped reconfigure the Honduran agrarian economy into a monocrop exporter by the beginning of the 20th century. The transformation was such that when American novelist O. Henry first coined the pejorative phrase ‘banana republic’ in 1904, it was done in reference to his time spent in Honduras.

Banana companies like Samuel Zemurray’s United Fruit Company gained significant political clout through economic imperialism: cajoling local authorities, obtaining generous land concessions, and securing special privileges and exemptions that eroded the country’s tax base while deepening its debt. At the nexus of economic and military coercion, U.S. banana companies were also powerful enough to be able to launch coups against unfavorable presidents (including Miguel Dávila in 1911, and Francisco Bertrand in 1919) and then install successors who would provide more agreeable terms, including lavish land concessions and control over docks, service facilities, and other infrastructures.

The relative failure of coffee in Honduras resulted in an almost complete monopoly of foreign-controlled banana industries—particularly, the big three of Chiquita (United Fruit), Dole (Standard Fruit), and Del Monte)—in shaping the country’s internal political economy. With banana imperialism at the heart of unprecedented degrees of land dispossession and wealth extraction, very little of which remained domestically, Honduras became a theater for mass labor unrest and union organizing. In fact, the famed Marxist writer Ramón Amaya Amador beautifully captures this drama between exploited campesinos and gringo capitalists in his novel, *Prisión Verde* (1950).

Although coups and military dictatorships were also rampant in the history of Honduras, by the 1980’s, civil unrest was largely contained by a military reformism and U.S. Cold war imperatives. As it is widely known, the Palmerola Air Base in Comayagua served as the central base of operations for U.S.-trained Contras against the Sandinistas and Salvadoran guerrilla forces. However, the local impact of U.S. military assistance—reaching a peak of \$77 million annually—is rarely ever discussed. While not as severe as in its neighbors, U.S. complicity played a role in the Honduran state’s repression of everyday civilians, including the disappearances and tortures of communists and left-leaning activists. Some of this funding helped develop an infamous elite death squad, Battalion 316, responsible for the killings and disappearances of hundreds of hondureños. Unsurprisingly, Battalion 316 was initially led by General Gustavo Álvarez Martínez, a student of the infamous School of the Americas (now Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation) in Fort Benning, Georgia.

With the end of the Cold War came a brief reduction in U.S. military aid to Honduras. However, the triumph of the neoliberal model foregrounded yet another war against the Honduran people initiated during the Reagan years—that of widespread poverty, accelerated now by free trade agreements and structural adjustment programs. One cannot underestimate the extent of the destabilization produced with market deregulation and the privatization of social services in a country with crushing poverty, exceptional even in the context of Central America. Anthropologist Adrienne Pine, for instance, notes how the IMF and World Bank strong-armed Honduras into reducing its economy to two tracks: export agriculture and maquiladora-style industry. The signing of CAFTA-DR in 2006 has only accelerated many of the same destabilizing market dynamics, including a deepened economic dependency on the United States. Given particularly that the U.S. continues to be the primary market for Honduran exports, what one witnesses with such trade agreements is much of the same asymmetry that has characterized over a century of U.S.-Honduras relations.

More so than overt state repression, the economic violence exacted by foreign multinationals and U.S.-led neoliberalism is difficult to qualify, so extensive are the ripples across Honduran society. Typically forgotten are the diverse consequences of persisting poverty and joblessness, the loss of land and autonomous livelihood that Amaya Amador captured decades ago. One of them is mass movement to cities like San Pedro Sula, whose unplanned, rapid-fire growth epitomizes the disruptions in a country once traditionally rural, now one of Central America's most urbanized societies.

Finally, one cannot understand the contemporary situation in Honduras without engaging the issue of violence and gang warfare, also facilitated in large part by U.S. imperial relations. Since the mid-'90s, the deportation of (suspected) gang members from U.S. cities was implicated in a renewed terror across Central America; in Honduras, where civil conflict had been avoided, gang warfare was complicit in the worst insecurity problem in recent modern history. Between 2001 and 2010, U.S. Marshals transported about 130,000 convicts to Central America, over 40,000 of which were returned to SPS and the capital. (This is not to suggest that gangs were the source of the problem in themselves, since a context of neoliberal austerity, joblessness, and state mistreatment of racialized immigrants are arguably more culpable.) Ironically, under the auspice of combatting drug trafficking and terrorism, Honduras borrowed many of the same punitive strategies deployed in North American cities against communities of color—except with more catastrophic results. Anti-gang legislation and 'Mano Dura' policies targeting delinquency also became means to curtail civilian rights, a demonstration of U.S. influence in the age of the Patriot Act.

This was the Honduras President Manuel Zelaya inherited when elected in 2006. While highly imperfect, his administration did make laudable attempts to lift Honduras from poverty and deplorable dependency, including: lifting the minimum wage, mandating free, universal education for children, and providing subsidies to farmers. Zelaya was also in the process of implementing other liberal measures that were ended with his ouster, including legalizing the morning-after pill and

incorporating Honduras into Hugo Chavez’s ALBA. Given these conditions, it’s easy to see how his presidency threatened to the status quo.



Honduras: The Militarization of Everyday Life

Year after year in post-coup Honduras, countless numbers of indigenous, LGBT, and environmental activists have been killed or disappeared. Honduras has become one of the central hubs of a multi-billion dollar enterprise in narco-trafficking, and San Pedro Sula momentarily acquired the notorious label of being the ‘murder capital’ of the world. The English-language media is full of sensationalized reportage of a country that is otherwise conveniently forgotten—even when the emperor’s hands are so clearly filled with blood.

When an indigenous environmental activist, Berta Cáceres, was assassinated in March 2016, international attention had once again spotlighted the violence and insecurity reigning in Honduras. Cáceres, alongside members of the organization she co-founded—the National Council of Popular Indigenous Organizations of Honduras (COPINH)—had been battling the construction of the Agua Zarca Dam, a hydroelectric project that was to be built on a river of spiritual significance to her Lenca community. While her death sparked mass outrage and highlighted the very real threats faced by Honduran activists, it also pointed to a culture of impunity that cast militarized murder as natural. Moreover, few reporters have been able to contextualize the extent of military domination in Honduras and its deep roots in U.S. training, assistance, and patronage.

While I cannot speak from the vantage point of everyday experience, I only needed to consult family to sense the reality of the violence. In the years I witnessed airport-style security and stop-and-frisk policing changing the daily rhythms of New York City life, on the other end of a cordless landline I’d hear of a different reality, with tíos and primos casually discussing kidnappings and robberies at gunpoint in SPS and Tegus. Those who could afford it would move into gated communities. No one would leave the house at sunset. When visiting a dying aunt who lived just a few blocks away, my cousin insisted on us taking a cab. It was a lifestyle my mother couldn’t stomach, having lived away so long. She would sell the house for a fraction of its worth.

Some years later, while living at a Rhode Island college, my radicalization brought me back to Honduras. I remember the morning in late June when I’d jump out of bed upon seeing the online headlines, incredulous: a military coup? There was something surreal about reading how a president had been arrested in his pajamas, and within a matter of hours, flown to Costa Rica and kept in exile. It was 2009, and Americans couldn’t give a damn. My family didn’t care either. So in the ensuing weeks and months, I had to wade through contradictory reports from biased news agencies (those I’d learn were owned by one of the country’s leading families, and allied with the post-coup Conservative party), as well as independent radios and online periodicals fiercely broadcasting the resistance in the face of death threats and state repression. As I scrambled—and failed—to find solidary groups to

organize with, I was disheartened by the U.S. media circuit, which had agonizingly little to say. I watched as Obama dragged his feet, and then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton refusing to denounce the coup.

During the ensuing years of mass-scale, non-violent resistance to the coup—and the violent military repression that executed an untold number of civilians—the Obama Administration conveniently turned a blind eye to the mess it helped foment. Honduras became a problem to quickly dismantle, quietly bury, even if the solution came at the expense of human dignity and livelihood. Years later, in an interview she conducted with an Argentinean news agency, Cáceres herself would point fingers at Clinton for the years of brutal, post-coup state violence that killed off her compañerxs for defending their land rights. Incredibly, in her book, *Hard Choices*, Clinton even claps herself on the back for helping restore democracy—an example, she claims, of her “pragmatic” foreign policy approach.

While the coup wasn't the start of daily urban violence and militarism, as sometimes suggested, it certainly accelerated many of the processes of resource extraction and land dispossession that had been initiated earlier under banana imperialism. We know, for instance, that Honduras's legacy of pandering to U.S. foreign policy and land-guzzling multinationals was given a powerful boost in the post-coup governments of Pepe Lobo and Juan Orlando Hernández—both of whom 'won' highly contested elections under the threat of military force. With the full backing of the Yankee military, the post-coup administrations fulfilled the demands of global capital and local oligarchy by selling off Honduran natural resources and green-lighting environmentally destructive megaprojects at the expense of local campesinxs and indigenous sovereignty.

The reinforced alliance between foreign capitalists, agro-oligarchs, and a state-military apparatus resulted in an all-out war against left-leaning activists of all stripes. However, with the passing years it was made clear that a broad cross-section of Honduran society had become susceptible to threats, disappearances, and cold-blooded executions: from indigenous and Afro-indigenous communities, to environmental and LGBT activists, to campesinos, street children, students, reporters. Through it all, in a cycle of violence breeding ramped-up security measures breeding more violence, what has emerged is an unprecedented scale of U.S.-sponsored militarization.

There is no question that a startling pattern has emerged vis-à-vis Honduran insecurity: what in the '80s was justified in Cold War terms of toppling communist subversives (threats to the new world order of unfettered markets), is today carried out under the auspices of fighting gang warfare and drug trafficking. While the complicated relationships between poverty, gang involvement, and illicit drug economies are indeed difficult to disentangle, U.S. imperial response has been one of confining or deporting as many of its problems to outside its increasingly militarized borders. When an unprecedented number of child refugees attempted to seek asylum at the U.S.-Mexico border in 2014, Clinton's response—that unaccompanied minors 'should be sent back'—failed to acknowledge the causal roots causing the crisis, exacerbated in large part by *her own* actions. In a similar lack of accountability, when an expanding narco-trafficking industry disrupted life

among indigenous communities in the Western rural region of the Moskitia (including demolition of their ancestral lands), U.S. DEA agents and U.S.-trained military police failed to acknowledge, let alone make amends, for the murder of innocent civilians.

While it is daunting to think of the many communities are today impacted by the ongoing re-militarization of everyday life, it is much easier to trace the different, often overlapping, forms of U.S. assistance. It is perhaps unsurprising that security models originally implemented by U.S. Empire domestically and abroad have filtered into Honduran streets, *maras* and *delincuencia* now covers for unchecked state violence and repression. Hoping to keep some of the chaos from spilling over into its own backyard, the Pentagon has quietly enabled a number of paramilitary-like initiatives in Honduras in recent years: millions of dollars funneled through bilateral or multilateral defense agreements, such as the Central American Security Initiative (CARSI); the development of inter-agency task forces like FUSINA; and training for militarized police units, like the infamous TIGRES. The U.S. blood trail is particularly evident in these last two agencies: As scholar Dana Frank points out, FUSINA was initially headed by a School of the Americas graduate, German Alfaro, commander of a battalion implicated in dozens of extrajudicial killings of campesino activists in the Aguán Valley. Moreover, a local committee for disappeared family members from the '80s (COFADEH) has even denounced the Tigres as a "crude resurrection" of the political disappearances and executions performed by the U.S.-trained Battalion 316 death squad.

I have no doubt that much of the violence strangling Honduras today is directly rooted not simply in distant legacies of U.S. imperialism, but in active and ongoing security interventions. Recent movements showcase the resilience of *catrachos*, now absolutely fed up with the culture of impunity that has reigned in our country between local autocrats and exploitative foreigners. In 2015, when it was discovered that millions of dollars had been embezzled from the Honduran Social Security Institute (IHSS) by the president's National Party, an unprecedented number of Hondurans took the streets, week after week for several *months*, carrying torches and demanding an end to administration's corruption. Still yet, in the following year, Berta's assassination brought out even more people from the international community, a chant of "Berta Vive, La Lucha Sigue" reminding everyone of the ongoing life of Honduran resistance. As with the many other martyrs who have died in battles in the Aguán, Moskitia, San Pedro or elsewhere in the diaspora, they are reminders not just of the sacred precariousness of life, but also a collective calling to fight for our freedom. It is the revolutionary spirit of Lempira echoed in the aspirations behind the country's motto: *Libre, Soberana e Independiente*.