When she appeared on screen, the tempo quickened. Dressed in her outrageous costumes, topped by hats featuring bananas and other tropical fruits, Carmen Miranda sang and danced her way to Hollywood stardom. While she was best known for her feisty comic performances, she also played a part in a serious political drama: the realignment of American power in the Western hemisphere. Carmen Miranda's movies helped make Latin America safe for American banana companies at a time when US imperialism was coming under wider regional criticism.

Between 1880 and 1930 the United States colonized or invaded Hawaii, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Cuba and Nicaragua. Each was strategically valuable for its plantation crops. The British, French and Dutch had their plantation colonies producing rubber, tea, coffee, palm oil, coconuts, tobacco, sisal, cotton, jute, rice and, of course, the monarch of plantation crops, sugar. Bananas, sugar, coffee, pineapples - each had become an international commodity that Americans, too, were willing to kill for. But by the time Franklin Roosevelt came into office, sending in the marines was beginning to lose its political value; it was alienating too many potential regional allies. New, less direct means had to be found to guarantee American control of Latin America.

Carmen Miranda was born in Lisbon in 1909, but emigrated as a child to Brazil, where her father established a wholesale fruit business. Despite her parents' hopes that their convent-educated daughter would grow up to be a respectable young woman, she secretly auditioned for and won a regular spot on a Rio de Janeiro radio station. She became a hit and soon was an attraction on the local nightclub circuit. By 1939 Carmen Miranda had recorded over 300 singles, appeared in four Brazilian films and was being referred to by her compatriots as a national institution. It was at this point in her career that Broadway theatrical producer Lee Schubert saw Carmen Miranda perform and offered her a contract to move north. When she stepped off the boat in New York on May 4 1939, Schubert had the press corps already primed to greet his new 'Brazilian bombshell'. With her outrageous headgear and limited but flamboyant English (she spoke French and Spanish as well as Portuguese), she was on her way to being turned into the 1940s American stereotype of the Latin American woman. In response to reporters' questions, Miranda replied, 'Money, money, money . . . hot dog. I say yes, no, and I say money, money money and I say turkey sandwich and I say grape juice.'

The world's fair was attracting throngs to the Sunken Meadow fairgrounds just outside New York City in the summer of 1939, but Carmen Miranda still managed to make Schubert's show, Streets of Paris, a commercial success. Life magazine's reviewer noted:

Partly because their unusual melody and heavy accented rhythms are unlike anything ever heard in a Manhattan revue before, partly because there is not a clue to their meaning except the gay rolling of Carmen Miranda's insinuating eyes, these songs, and Miranda herself, are the outstanding hit of the show.

In 1940 Hollywood studio directors were boarding the Latin America bandwagon. Men like Darryl Zanuck, head of Twentieth Century Fox, had long cultivated friendships with politicians in Washington. It was one way of overcoming the barriers of anti-Semitism confronting many of the film industry's moguls. Thus when President Franklin Roosevelt launched his Latin American 'Good Neighbor' policy, the men who ran Hollywood were willing to help the government's campaign to replace a militaristic, imperial approach to US–Latin America diplomacy with a more 'cooperative' strategy. Roosevelt and his advisers were convinced that gunboat diplomacy was arousing too much opposition among precisely those Latin American governments which American businessmen would have to cultivate if the country was to pull itself out of the Depression. Tourism and investment were promoted in glossy brochures. Pan-American Airways flew holiday-makers to Havana and Managua; construction of the Pan-American Highway was started. Nicaragua's
Anastasio Somoza was invited to the world’s fair to celebrate regional democracy and progress. Latin American movie stars replaced the marines as the guarantors of regional harmony.3

Darryl Zanuck enticed Carmen Miranda away from Broadway to be his studio’s contribution to the ‘Good Neighbor’ policy. She appeared in the 1940 film Down Argentine Way, starring Betty Grable and Don Ameche, singing ‘South American Way’. Her film career soared during World War II, when Washington officials believed that it was diplomatically vital to keep Latin American regimes friendly to the United States. Propaganda and censorship agencies urged the entertainment industry to promote Latin actors and popularize Latin music.

Carmen Miranda was confined to light roles, treated by the studios as a comic or character actor, never a romantic lead. Perhaps her most lavish film was Busby Berkeley’s The Gang’s All Here (1943), whose set was adorned with giant bananas and strawberries. She mastered English, but was careful to maintain in her performances a heavily accented pronunciation, which suggested feminine naïveté. For many Americans, during the 1940s Carmen Miranda became a guide to Latin culture. While Hollywood’s Latin American male was stereotypically a loyal but none-too-bright sidekick, like Donald Duck’s parrot pal José Carioca, Miranda personified a culture full of zest and charm, unclouded by intense emotion or political ambivalence. Like the bananas she wore on her head, Miranda was exotic yet mildly amusing.

‘Carmen Miranda is the chief export of Brazil. Next comes coffee.’ So recalls Uruguayan historian Eduardo Galeano.4 Brazilians themselves were proud of Miranda’s Hollywood success. When she died suddenly of a heart attack in 1955, her body and effects were shipped back to Rio to be memorialized in a Carmen Miranda museum. Brazilian President Kubitschek declared a national day of mourning.

‘I'M CHIQUITA BANANA AND I'VE COME TO SAY’

The banana has a history, a gendered history. The fruit has its origins in Southeast Asia and was carried westward by traders. By the fifteenth century it had become a basic food for Africans living on the Guinean coast. When Portuguese and Spanish slave-traders began raiding the coast for Africans to serve as forced labor on colonial estates, they chose bananas as the food to ship with them; it was local and cheap. These were red bananas, a variety still popular in the West Indies and Africa. The yellow banana so familiar today to consumers in Europe, Japan, the Persian Gulf and North America wasn’t developed as a distinct variety until the nineteenth century. Then it was imagined to be food fit not for slaves, but for the palates of the wealthy. The first record of bunches of bananas being brought to New York from Havana was in 1804. But it was when the yellow banana was served as an exotic delicacy in the homes of affluent Bostonians in 1875 that it took off as an international commodity. In 1876 the banana was featured at the
United States Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia. The yellow banana symbolized America's new global reach.5

Notions of masculinity and femininity have been used to shape the international political economy of the banana. Banana plantations were developed in Central America, Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa and the Philippines as a result of alliances between men of different but complementary interests: businessmen and male officials of the importing countries on the one hand, and male landowners and government officials of the exporting countries on the other. To clear the land and harvest the bananas they decided they needed a male workforce, sustained at a distance by women as prostitutes, mothers and wives. However company executives’ manly pride was invested not so much in their extensive plantations as in the sophisticated equipment and technology they developed to transport the fragile tropical fruit to far-away markets: railroads, wire services and fleets of refrigerator ships. Even today company officials take special satisfaction in describing their giant cold-storage ships circling the globe, directed by a sophisticated international communications network, all to ensure that bananas that leave Costa Rica or the Philippines by the green tonnage will arrive in New York or Liverpool undamaged and unspoiled, ready for the ripening factory.6 The companies envisaged their customers to be women: mothers and housewives concerned about their families' nutrition and looking for a reliable product. The most successful way of bonding housewives' loyalty to a particular company was to create a fantasized market woman. The United Fruit Company, the largest grower and marketer of bananas, made its contribution to America’s ‘Good Neighbor’ culture. In 1943 the company opened a Middle American Information Bureau to encourage ‘mutual knowledge and mutual understanding’. The bureau wrote and distributed materials which emphasized the value of Central American products such as hardwoods, coffee, spices and fruits to the US war effort. It targeted school children and housewives: those who ate bananas and those who bought them. Nicaragua in Story and Pictures was a company-designed school text celebrating the progress brought to Nicaragua by foreign-financed railroads and imported tractors. ‘Fifty Questions on Middle America for North American Women’ and ‘Mid­dle America and a Woman’s World’ explained to the North American housewife, United Fruit’s chief customer, how the Japanese invasion of Malaysia made imported foods from Nicaragua and Costa Rica all the more important to her wartime security.7

United Fruit’s biggest contribution to American culture, however, was ‘Chiquita Banana’. In 1944, when Carmen Miranda was packing movie houses and American troops were landing on Europe’s beaches, United Fruit advertising executives created a half-banana, half-woman cartoon character destined to rival Donald Duck. Dressed as a Miranda-esque market woman, this feminized banana sang her calypso song from coast to coast. Chiquita Banana helped to establish a twentieth-century art form, the singing commercial. One could hear her singing the praises of the banana on the radio 376 times daily.

Americans who are now in their fifties still can give a rendition of her memorable song:

I’m Chiquita Banana
And I’ve come to say
Bananas have to ripen
In a certain way.
When they are fleck’d with brown
And have a golden hue
Bananas taste the best
And are the best for you.
You can put them in a salad
You can put them in a pie-aye
Any way you want to eat them
It’s impossible to beat them.
But bananas like the climate
Of the very, very tropical equator.
So you should never put bananas
In the refrigerator. No no no no!

United Fruit sales strategists set out to do the impossible - to create in housewives a brand-name loyalty for a generic fruit. They wanted women to think ‘Chiquita’ when they went to the grocery store to buy bananas. Roosevelt’s ‘Good Neighbor’ policy and Carmen Miranda’s Hollywood success had set the stage; animated cartoons and the commercial jingle did the rest. Between the woman consumer and the fruit there now was only a corporation with the friendly face of a bouncy Latin American market woman. Forty years later United Fruit Company has become United Brands; its principal subsidiary is Chiquita Brands, bringing us not only bananas, but melons, grapefruits and tropical juices.

Today virtually every affluent, industrialized country imports bananas from mainly poor, still agrarian countries. Each consumer society gets its bananas from two or three large agribusiness corporations which either have large plantations of their own or monopolize the marketing
system through which small growers sell their fruit. Since United Fruit's advertising coup in 1944, its competitors have followed suit, designing stickers for their own bananas. This allows a shopper to go into any grocery store in Europe, North America or Japan and check at a glance the state of international banana politics: just look for the sticker with its corporate logo and the country of origin. In London one might peel off a Geest sticker that says 'WINBAN' (the Windward Island nations of St Lucia, St Vincent or Dominica) or look for the Fyffes sticker (Fyffes is United Brands' European subsidiary) that gives the country of origin as Surinam. In Detroit or Toronto a shopper would be more likely to find a Chiquita, Del Monte or Dole sticker, with Costa Rica, Ecuador or Colombia written below the logo in small print, while in Tokyo Sumitomo's Banambo sticker would identify bananas produced in the Philippines.

After a century of banana big business, Americans remain the largest consumers of bananas, eating some 2 million tons of the fruit each year. But with the opening of the Philippines to banana companies, especially under the debt-ridden Marcos regime, hungry for foreign investment, consumers in Japan and the Persian Gulf have become the latest targets for advertising campaigns.
World Consumption of Bananas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Largest consuming countries</th>
<th>Major suppliers</th>
<th>Volume (tons)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td>Ecuador, Costa Rica, Honduras</td>
<td>2,325,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Ecuador, Columbia, Honduras</td>
<td>269,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Germany</td>
<td>Panama, Costa Rica, Honduras</td>
<td>503,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>Martinique, Guadeloupe</td>
<td>466,800</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>Windward Islands, Colombia, Surinam</td>
<td>322,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>Colombia, Costa Rica, Somalia</td>
<td>330,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>Canary Islands</td>
<td>415,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>Philippines, China</td>
<td>757,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
<td>Philippines, Guatemala, Ecuador</td>
<td>120,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>Ecuador, Brazil, Colombia</td>
<td>140,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Philippines, China</td>
<td>757,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Panama, Costa Rica, Honduras</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Panama, Costa Rica, Honduras</td>
<td>503,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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CARMEN MIRANDA ON MY MIND

WOMEN IN BANANA REPUBLICS

It is always worth asking, ‘Where are the women?’ Answering the question reveals the dependence of most political and economic systems not just on women, but on certain kinds of relations between women and men. A great deal has been written about countries derisively labeled ‘banana republics’. They are described as countries whose land and soul are in the clutches of a foreign company, supported by the might of its own government. A banana republic’s sovereignty has been so thoroughly compromised that it is the butt of jokes, not respect. It has a government, but it is staffed by people who line their own pockets by doing the bidding of the overseas corporation and its political allies. Because it is impossible for such compromised rulers to win the support of their own citizens, many of whom are exploited on the corporation’s plantations, the government depends on guns and jails, not ballots and national pride.

The quintessential banana republics were those Central American countries which came to be dominated by the United Fruit Company’s monoculture, the US marines and their hand-picked dictators. Their regimes have been backed by American presidents, mocked by Woody Allen, and overthrown by nationalist guerrillas.

Yet these political systems, and the international relationships which underpin them, have been discussed as if women scarcely existed. The principal actors on all sides have been portrayed by conventional commentators as men, and as if their being male was insignificant. Thus the ways in which their shared masculinity allowed agribusiness entrepreneurs to form alliances with men in their own diplomatic corps and with men in Nicaraguan or Honduran society have been left unexamined. Enjoying Cuban cigars together after dinner while wives and mistresses powder their noses has been the stuff of smug cartoons but not of political curiosity. Similarly, a banana republic’s militarized ethos has been taken for granted, without an investigation of how militarism feeds on masculinist values to sustain it. Marines, diplomats, corporate managers and military dictators may mostly be male, but they tend to need the feminine ‘other’ to maintain their self-assurance.

One of the conditions that has pushed women off the banana republic stage has been the masculinization of the banana plantation. Banana company executives imagined that most of the jobs on their large plantations could be done only by men. Banana plantations were carved out of wooded acres. Clearing the brush required workers who could use a machete, live in rude barracks, and who, once the plantation’s trees were bearing fruit, could chop down the heavy bunches and carry them to central loading areas and from there to the docks, to be loaded by the
ton on to refrigerator ships. This was men's work.

Not all plantation work has been masculinized. Generally, crops that call for the use of machetes - tools that can also be used as weapons - are produced with large inputs of male labor: bananas, sugar, palm oil. Producers of crops that require a lot of weeding, tapping and picking hire large numbers of women, sometimes comprising a majority of workers: tea, coffee, rubber.

Nor is the gendered labor formula on any plantation fixed. Plantation managers who once relied heavily on male workers may decide to bring in more women if the men become too costly; if their union becomes too threatening; if the international market for the crop declines necessitating cost-cutting measures such as hiring more part-time workers; if new technology allows some physically demanding tasks to be done by workers with less strength. Today both sugar and rubber are being produced by plantation companies using more women workers than they did a generation ago. What has remained constant, however, is the presumption of international corporations that their position in the world market depends on manipulations of masculinity and femininity. Gender is injected into every Brooke Bond or Lipton tea leaf, every Unilever or Lonrho palm-oil nut, every bucket of Dunlop or Michelin latex, every stalk of Tate & Lyle sugar cane.

Like all plantation managers, banana company executives considered race as well as gender when employing what they thought would be the most skilled and compliant workforce. Thus although the majority of banana workers were men, race was used to divide them. On United Brands' plantations in Costa Rica and Panama, for instance, managers recruited Amerindian men from the Guaymi and Kuna communities, as well as West Indian Black men and Hispanicized Ladino men. They placed them in different, unequally paid jobs, Ladino men at the top (below white male managers), Amerindian men at the bottom. Amerindian men were assigned to menial jobs such as chopping grass and overgrown bush, thus ensuring that Ladino men's negative stereotypes of Amerindians - cholos, unskilled, uneducated natives - would be perpetuated. The stereotypes were valuable to the company because they forestalled potential alliances between Ladino, Black and Amerindian men over common grievances.

Manager: It's easier to work with cholos. They're not as smart and don't speak good Spanish. They can't argue back at you even when they're right ... Hell, you can make a cholo do anything.

Ladino foreman: My workers are [not] cholos ... It's different here. Sure I can grab them [Ladino and Black male workers] and make them work faster; but the consequences will catch up with me tomorrow. We're not cholos here ... you understand?

Guaymi worker: They used to have up to 200 of us crammed into shacks eating boiled bananas out of empty kerosene cans.

To say, therefore, that a banana plantation is masculinized is not to say that masculinity, even when combined with social class, is sufficient to forge political unity. On the other hand, the presumption that a banana plantation is a man's world does affect the politics of any movement attempting to improve workers' conditions, or to transform the power relationships that comprise a 'banana republic'.

A banana plantation's politics are deeply affected not just by the fact that the majority of its workers - and virtually all of its managers and owners - are men, but by the meaning that has been attached to that masculinization. Even male banana workers employed by a foreign company that, in alliance with local elites, had turned their country into a proverbial banana republic, could feel some pride. For they were unquestionably performing men's work. They knew how to wield a machete; they knew how to lift great weights; they worked outside in close coordination with trains and ships. Whether a smallholder or a plantation employee, a banana man was a man.
I said, ‘By God and dis big right
han
You mus recognize a banana
man . . .

Don't judge a man by his patchy
clothes,
I'm a strong man, a proud man,
an I'm free
Free as dese mountains, free as
dis sea,
I know myself, an I know my
ways,
An will say wid pride to de end
o my days.
Praise God an m'big right
han
I will live an die a banana man.14

In the 1920s when banana workers began to organize and to conduct
strikes that even the US government and local élites had to pay
attention to, their demands reached beyond working conditions to
political structures. These workers' protests took on strong nationalist
overtones: the local regime and foreign troops were as much the
target of their protests as the plantation companies. But so long
as banana plantation work was imagined to be men’s work, and
so long as the banana workers' unions were organized as if they
were men’s organizations, the nationalist cause would be masculinized.
A banana republic might fall, but patriarchy remained in place.

WOMEN WEED, WOMEN CLEAN

The banana plantation has never been as exclusively male as popular
margery suggests. It takes women’s paid and unpaid labor to bring the
olden fruit to the world’s breakfast tables.

A banana plantation is closest to a male enclave at the beginning, when
the principal task is bulldozing and clearing the land for planting. But even
at this stage women are depended upon by the companies — and their
male employees — to play their roles. As in the male-dominated mining
industry from Chile to South Africa and Indonesia, companies can recruit
men to live away from home only if someone back home takes care of
their families and maintains their land. The ‘feminization of agriculture’
that is, leaving small-scale farming to women, typically without giving

them training, equipment or extra finance — has always been part and
parcel of the masculinization of mining and banana plantations.15 The
male labor force has to make private arrangements with wives, mothers
or sisters to assure them of a place to return to when their contracts expire,
when they get fed up with supervisors’ contemptuous treatment or when
they are laid off because world prices have plummeted. Behind every
all-male banana plantation stand scores of women performing unpaid
domestic and productive labor. Company executives, union spokesmen
and export-driven government officials have all preferred not to take this
into account when working out their bargaining positions. International
agencies such as the International Monetary Fund scarcely give a thought
to women as wives and subsistence farmers when they press indebted
governments to open up more land to plantation companies in order to
correct their trade imbalances and pay off foreign bankers.

Once the banana trees have been planted, women are likely to become
residents and workers on the plantations. Plantation managers, like their
diplomatic and military counterparts, have found marriage both a political
asset and a liability. On the one hand, having young male workers without
wives and children has advantages: the men are in their physical prime,
are likely to view life as an adventure and be willing to tolerate harsh
working and living conditions. On the other hand, young unattached men
are more volatile and are willing to take risks if angered precisely because
they will not jeopardize anyone’s security aside from their own. This
makes the married male worker seem more stable
to a calculating plantation manager. He may demand more from the company
in the form of rudimentary amenities for his wife and children,
but he is more likely to toe the company line for their sake.16

Women are most likely to be employed by the banana companies
if the plantation cannot recruit men from a low-status ethnic group, like Amerindians in Central America, to do the least prestigious and
lowest-paid jobs. In all sorts of agribusiness, women tend to be given
the most tedious, least ‘skilled’ jobs, those that are most seasonal,
the least likely to offer year-round employment and those company
benefits awarded to full-time employees. Weeding and cleaning are
the quintessential ‘women’s’ jobs in agriculture, both in socialist and
capitalist countries.17

Bananas today are washed, weighed and packed in factories on the
plantations before being transported to the docks for shipment overseas.
Inside these packing houses one finds the women on the modern banana
plantation. They remove the bunches of fruit from the thick stems, an
operation that has to be done carefully (one might say skillfully) so that
the bananas are not damaged. They wash the bananas in a chemical
solution, a hazardous job. They select the rejects, which can amount to up to half the bananas picked in the fields. Companies often dump rejected bananas in nearby streams, causing pollution which kills local fish. Women weigh the fruit and finally attach the company's tell-tale sticker on each bunch. They are paid piece-rates and foremen expect them to work at high speed. In between harvests they may have little work to do and not receive any pay. At harvest time they are expected to be available for long stretches, sometimes around the clock, to meet the company's tight shipping schedule.

Tess is a Filipino woman who works for TADECO, a subsidiary of United Brands, Philippines. She works on a plantation on the country's southern island, Mindanao. A decade-long war has been fought in the area between government troops and indigenous Muslim groups protesting against the leasing of large tracts of land either to multinational pineapple and banana companies or to wealthy Filipino landowners, who then work out lucrative contracts with those corporations. Tess herself is a Christian Filipina. She, like thousands of other women and men, migrated, with government encouragement, to Mindanao from other islands in search of work once the bottom fell out of the once-dominant sugar industry. She works with other young women in the plantation's packing plant, preparing bananas to be shipped to Japan by Japanese and American import companies. She is paid approximately $1 a day. With an additional living allowance, Tess can make about $45 a month; she sends a third of this home to her family in the Visayas.

Tess uses a chemical solution to wash the company's bananas. There is a large, reddish splotch on her leg where some of the chemical spilled accidentally. At the end of a day spent standing for hours at a time, Tess goes 'home' to a bunkhouse she shares with 100 other women, twenty-four to a room, sleeping in eight sets of three-tiered bunks.

Many women working on banana plantations are young and single, and, in the Philippines, often have secondary-school or even college educations. They may be the daughters of male employees, or they may be recruited from outside. They are subjected to sexual harassment in the packing plants and can be fired if found to be pregnant. The life of a banana washer is dull and isolated: 'We have no choice than to stay here. First, the company is quite far from the highway and if we ... spend our fare what else would be left for our food?'

Large banana companies - Geest in Britain, United Brands, Del Monte and Dole in the United States and Japan's Sumitomo - also require workers at the other end of the food chain, in the countries where they market their bananas. The docks, the trucks and the ripening plants reveal how company managers shape the sexual division of labor. Stevedors in every country are thought of as doing a classic 'man's' job, though again ethnic politics may determine which men will unload the bananas from the company's ships. Today in Japan, where immigrant labor is being increasingly relied upon to do the low-status, low-paid jobs, Filipino men do the heavy work of transferring bananas from ships to trucks. The job has become so closely associated with the fruit that to be a longshoreman in Japan is to be a 'banana'. Women are hired in all the consumer countries to weigh and sort at the ripening plant before the fruit heads for the supermarket. Food processing is as feminized - as dependent on ideas about femininity - as nursing, secretarial work and sewing.

Women are hired by the banana companies to do low-paid, often seasonal jobs that offer little chance of training and promotion; some involve the hazards of chemical pollution and sexual harassment. But many women still seek these jobs because they seem better than the alternatives: dependence on fathers or husbands (if they are employed), life on the dole (if work is not available), work in the entertainment industry around a military base, subsistence farming with few resources, emigration.

Many women are heads of households and take exploitative jobs in order to support their children; other women see their employment as
part of being dutiful daughters, sending part of their meager earnings back to parents, who may be losing farm land to agribusinesses. Neither women nor men working on any plantation—banana, tea, rubber, sugar, pineapple, palm oil, coffee—are simply ‘workers’. They are wives, husbands, daughters, sons, mothers, fathers, lovers; and each role has its own politics. The politics of being a daughter, a mother or a wife allows First World and Third World governments to rely on international plantation companies, which in turn are able to recruit and control women workers and win the consumer loyalty of women buyers. ‘Daughter’, ‘mother’, and ‘wife’ are ideas on which the international political system today depends.

**BROTHELS AND BANANAS**

Bananas have long been the objects of sexual jokes and pranks. One food company recently complained when an AIDS education campaign used a banana to demonstrate how a man should put on a condom. But the banana industry—not the banana itself—is far more seriously sexualized. Sexual harassment helps to control women working in the plantation factories; prostitution has been permitted in order to control the still largely male plantation workforce.

They were no more than lost villages on the Colombian coast, a strip of dust between river and cemetery, a yawn between two siestas, when the yellow train of the United Fruit Company pulled in . . . The age of the banana had come.

The region awoke to find itself an immense plantation. Cienaga, Aracataca, and Fundacion got telegraph and post offices and new streets with poolrooms and brothels. Campesinos, who arrived by the thousands, left their mules at the hitching posts and went to work.21

Plantations are self-contained worlds. Workers, managers and the crops they cultivate live together side by side, but regulated by strict hierarchies, the more blatant because they are carved into the landscape. Male managers and their wives live in comfortable houses with gardens and kitchens maintained by local employees and have access to their own clubs with well-stocked bars and refreshing swimming pools. Foremen and their families have their own more modest housing compound and privileges. Workers live in spartan accommodation that often lacks minimal sanitary facilities. Some plantations are better equipped than others. Head offices like to talk about the clinics and schools they provide. They rarely talk about the isolation, or the paralyzing debts accumulated by employees at the company store. Some companies have had to provide basic necessities for workers in order to obtain land rights and tax concessions from local governments. Caribbean critics of their countries’ past dependency on monoculture have coined the term ‘plantation economy’: foreign agribusiness giants have so dominated an entire society that it is reduced to a community permeated by dependency and paternalistic control.22

Plantations that depend on a predominately male workforce operate much like military bases. Women’s sexual availability just outside the gates (thus supposedly beyond the plantation manager’s control) has been offered as one of the rewards for enduring the isolated, harsh conditions of plantation life.

Few commentators on ‘plantation economies’ have thought to ask about the ways that sexuality has been used to control male workers. One who has is historian Ann Laura Stoler. When investigating life on Dutch-owned sisal, tea, rubber and palm-oil plantations in colonial Indonesia she asked about sexual politics.23 Stoler found that prostitution was integral to the way managers recruited and controlled male workers from several different ethnic groups. There were many more men than women on these estates. Women were hired at half the rates paid to men, not enough to meet daily necessities. Most were single Javanese women, hired on contract and living far away from home. To make ends meet many of these women provided sexual services to Chinese male workers living in the plantation barracks. Some young women were pushed into prostitution by being sexually harassed by foremen in the packing plants. White plantation supervisors enjoyed the privilege of selecting their sexual partners from the most recent female arrivals.

Prostitution became the norm on many plantations by design, not simply by chance. There are records revealing that managers debated the advantages and disadvantages of prostitution for their company. The debates have a familiar ring; they echo debates about military prostitution. Some Dutch commentators were alarmed at the high incidence of venereal disease among plantation workers and blamed the prostitutes. Others noted that white supervisors were assaulted by male Javanese workers who believed their daughters were being lured into prostitution. But the prevailing view was that it would be too difficult to recruit male workers for plantation work if they were not provided with female sexual services. Furthermore, in the eyes of many plantation managers, prostitution was a lesser evil than homosexual relations between male workers deprived of female companionship. Finally, devoting a sizeable portion of their wages to prostitution left many male workers further in debt and thus made it
harder for them to abandon estate work when their current contracts expired.

Around some United Brands plantations in Central America brothels are commonplace. They are situated just outside the company gates. While the men on banana plantations are Amerindian, Black and Ladino, the women working in the brothels are overwhelmingly Ladino. Information is limited, but most women servicing banana workers seem to have done other sorts of work before becoming prostitutes, and many are the sole supporters of their children. Racism and sexism are woven together in Central America’s banana plantation brothels, as is so often the case in prostitution politics. Ladino prostitutes told one researcher that they preferred Amerindian customers because, they said, these men were too shy to fully undress and got their intercourse over with quickly. This was not necessarily meant as a compliment to Amerindian masculinity and may have reinforced negative stereotypes among Ladino and Black male workers.24

PATRIARCHAL LAND REFORM

Not all bananas are grown on plantations owned or leased by large corporations. Many people in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean and Latin America eat bananas that are grown in their own yards or by small-scale independent farmers, a large proportion of them women, and sold by market women — Carmen Miranda’s and Chiquita’s inspiration — in provincial towns. Even some of the bananas reaching the supermarkets of industrialized countries — for instance, many Philippines bananas shipped to Japan — are cultivated by smallholders. Geest, one of Britain’s largest food companies, buys its bananas from smallholders in the Windward Islands: St Lucia, Dominica, Grenada and St Vincent.25

In 1985 Britons consumed nearly 2 billion bananas; over half of them were Windward Island bananas imported and marketed by Geest. Charles Geest, one of two Dutch brothers who founded the company, was listed in 1989 as one of 200 Britons personally worth over £30 million.26 But Geest operates quite differently to Dole, United Brands or other large-scale plantation companies. Its suppliers may have as much as twelve acres of land or as little as half an acre of land. These smallholders sell their bananas to the local Banana Growers Association, which in turn sells them to Geest. As the sole purchaser of Windward bananas and as the operator of the shipping company, the ripening plants and the wholesale network, Geest is able to impose quality standards, rules and a pricing formula that determine how its Caribbean suppliers must operate. Critics in the Caribbean and Britain charge that Geest makes unfair profits and controls local farmers without having to assume direct responsibility.

It is all too easy to carry out an analysis of Geest without asking where the women are. The question seems unnecessary if one assumes that once the plantation system is removed and a crop is grown by smallholders on their own land, women and men within a household will work together as equals. The only political question then worth pursuing is whether the smallholders are dealt with fairly by the international marketing firm and the governments which link the farmers and the ultimate consumers.

But scratch the surface of small-scale farming and a more complex reality appears. In Dominica a survey of 120 banana farms ranging from one to five acres in size revealed that 82 per cent were owned by men; only 18 per cent were owned by women. This, despite the fact that on virtually every farm it took both women’s and men’s labor to nurture and harvest bananas that met Geest’s high standards. In neighboring St Lucia 95 per cent of the small farms surveyed were owned by the men of the household, only 5 per cent by the women. In St Vincent the same pattern was repeated: men owned 70 per cent, women owned 30 per cent.27

The Banana Growers Association and Geest’s managers are overwhelmingly male. They deal with small-scale owners who are mostly male. ‘The smallholder and his wife’ is the phrase commonly heard in international development circles. The phrase is not just sloppy semantics. It permits development agencies and local agricultural ministries to imagine that the person in the rural household to whom technical training, new seeds or agricultural credit should be given is the adult man. The unspoken corollary is that what is progress for a husband will turn into progress for his wife.

Women grow more food than men.
Women buy more food than men.
Women cook more food than men.
But women own less land on which food is grown.
And women eat less food than men.

‘The farmer and his wife’ disguises the reality of the world’s food production. Most technical agencies agree that women produce at least half of the world’s food. In Africa they produce between 60 per cent and 80 per cent. It is the politics of land ownership that obscures this reality. If one is talking about food production, not land ownership, it might be more accurate to refer to ‘the farmer and her husband’.

More seriously, ‘the farmer and his wife’ not only obscures the gendered politics of land ownership; it also makes invisible the ways in which women organize their daily lives to sustain families and still
produce bananas on their smallholdings. The use of 'the household' as the unit for measuring the success or failure of any project or policy is radically flawed. It presumes — without testing that presumption against reality — that the relationships within any house are equal, that emotional, sexual and economic relationships between men and women and sons and daughters are naturally harmonious, without tension, without intimidation or coercion. This was the presumption used in Britain, France, Canada and the United States to deny women the right to vote: why would a woman need a vote of her own when her father, husband or brother would 'naturally' cast his ballot with her best interest in mind? What was a naïve assumption in the suffrage debate is an unfounded argument in the politics of the banana.28

Feminists in Third World countries who have made land reform a political cause have insisted that dismantling large plantations — whether locally or foreign-owned — must not be seen as sufficient to ensure that women gain the power and resources they need to shape rural development so that women as well as men benefit. If land reform is implemented without a critical examination of which small farmers will receive the precious land title, land reform can serve to perpetuate patriarchal inequities in the countryside.

In several countries where plantation agriculture has been dominant, women's groups are challenging relations between men and women that shape the way food is produced. In Kenya, where both high-ranking government officials and foreign agribusinesses have profited from the opening of more land to large-scale plantations, Kikuyu women working in a Del Monte pineapple packing plant went on strike in 1987 to protest at working conditions.29 Honduran peasant organizations with strong women leaders have created autonomous women peasants' groups to permit women to develop political skills. Honduras depends on bananas for over 30 per cent of its export earnings, and the government is closely allied militarily to the United States; the organized peasant women take part in land seizures and call on the government to revise its modest land distribution law so that women under than widows can gain direct title to land.30 A small group of Sanduran women, who have to support their children on $2 a day, by picking melons and cantaloupes for a multinational, joined the Sanduran Federation of Peasant Women (FEHMUC) and began asking about ways to generate income for themselves. They learned penty skills and made the broomsticks and bookshelves. With the money she earned one woman bought the village's first sewing machine, while another woman saved enough to send her daughter to secondary school.31

On rubber plantations in Malaysia, the world's largest exporter of rubber, most workers are Indian Malaysians, descendants of workers brought from India at the turn of the century to supply cheap labor for Britain's colonial estates. Women started to work on rubber plantations decades ago, but with the decline in world rubber prices, plantation owners have been turning more and more to women to tap their trees. They are hired as casual labor and thus are less costly than full-time male employees. Britain's legacy of ethnic divide-and-rule and Malaysia's anti-union laws have made bridge-building between Malay, Chinese and Indian women difficult. In addition, the rubber workers' union has been run by Indian Malaysian men. Despite the formidable obstacles, one Malaysian working-women's organization has begun performing dramas on rubber plantations to highlight the dangers for women tappers of the widely used pesticide paraquat. Some plantation women have gone blind from accidental spraying of paraquat, but with rubber prices falling and tappers earning as little as $35 per month, women workers have little time or energy to read, and newspapers cost money that must be spent on food and clothing. So the combination of dramatic performances and sending press clippings to be shared is the Malaysian women activists' strategy for making a small dent in the gender structure on which the rubber industry depends.32 In using drama to give rural women a new sense of their worth and their political capabilities, the Malaysian women are paralleling Sistren, a Jamaican feminist theater group, whose members are tackling the complex problems flowing from the decline of Jamaica's one-time sugar-dependent economy.33

In Nicaragua coffee and banana plantations that have been collectivized have not radically altered the sexual division of labor — there is still 'men's work' and 'women's work' outside and especially inside the rural home. But more Nicaraguan women are beginning to do field jobs, not just packaging, on the banana estates. In coffee cultivation, where women in the past were expected to plant and transplant seedlings, women are starting to use flame throwers in the clearing of hillsides. Later in the coffee-growing cycle women are beginning to join men in what used to be a 'men's job', the pruning of coffee trees. These small steps toward redefining the division of labor have led to an unexpected change in sexual politics. When only men worked together, they forged friendships that spilled over into their after-work socializing. Nicaraguan women on one coffee estate describe how men used to go off together to town to drink and visit brothels. Working buddies became brothel buddies. But, according to these women, now that men are more likely to work alongside women when they clear the land or prune the trees, they form friendships with those women and are less...
inclined to see drinking and going to prostitutes as the only after-work recreation.\textsuperscript{34}

Developing a politics of land reform and agricultural labor that does not reproduce patriarchal relationships between rural women and men is not something that happens automatically. It does not derive necessarily from either a class-conscious or a nationalist politics of food. Where unequal and unfair relations between rural women and men have been seriously challenged, it has usually required women's own analysis and autonomous organizing. Both have been seen by some male land-reform activists either as a waste of time or as a threat to peasant unity.

In 1985, as rural Filipinos were mobilizing to overthrow the Marcos regime, some activist peasant women decided that if land reform, a principal demand of the anti-Marcos movement, was to benefit women as well as men, women would have to organize autonomously. They created RICE (not an acronym). Eighteen months later, with Marcos replaced by Corazon Aquino, RICE had grown to 100 members and had affiliated with Gabriela, the umbrella women's group. RICE members also affiliated with the National Peasant Movement, popularly known as the KMP. Although the KMP is perhaps the most visible advocate of genuine land reform, the women in RICE saw it as a male-dominated organization. In villages where KMP was formed before RICE became active, KMP has remained dominated by male peasants. But where a branch of RICE brought together local women for discussions before KMP organized villagers, KMP's local councils have had more women participants and have accorded serious attention to matters of concern to women. One such issue is husbands' refusal to acknowledge the economic contributions made by their wives.

In my experience before, my husband didn't care about my financial contribution to the family. I worked in the fields like my husband. I did planting and weeding, etc., but he did not recognize this. If I was sick, my husband did not care, he just got mad at me. And I had no say over money matters.

Before, I used to take these things silently; I didn't answer back to my husband. But after being involved in RICE, I got up the courage to reason out why I was being treated like that and answer back to him.\textsuperscript{35}

RICE was not the name these women peasants gave themselves. But they soon adopted this English name in the hope that it would sound less threatening to local military commanders. It has been difficult for RICE to criticize the KMP's male domination in part because the army and military-supported vigilante groups have continued to torture and murder KMP activists.

Bananas, like anything else, can be militarized. In the Philippines, as in Honduras and Colombia, banana-plantation union activists have been assassinated by troops loyal to a government that sees multinational agribusiness as good for the economy. The current land system has been maintained in part by intimidation and force.\textsuperscript{36} But militarization not only bolsters the plantation system and undermines land-reform movements in general; it also makes any woman's criticism of a progressive movement's male leaders and masculinized agenda appear illegitimate, even dangerous. How can a woman dare to criticize a fellow peasant activist when he is the target of military harassment? An army which uses coercion to maintain the rural status quo makes it hard to shake a nationalist land-reform movement free from its patriarchal base.

Women peasant activists in Honduras and the Philippines have themselves become the objects of an American counter-insurgency doctrine called 'Low-Intensity Conflict'. LIC employs a sprawling definition of 'insurgency' to justify harassment, intimidation and local disruption, and relies on vigilante groups as well as uniformed troops. Its implementation in the Philippines and Central America has made it politically hazardous for rural women to challenge rural men. It has also undermined rural women's independent efforts. To a national-security official who views 'development' through the prism of low-intensity conflict, day-care centers and food cooperatives - projects rural women believe are integral to real land reform - are subversive; they are thus legitimate targets for counter-insurgency operations. In 1987 RICE had twelve groups on Mindanao; a year later only five had survived.\textsuperscript{37}

CONCLUSION

Today's affluent consumers are increasingly conscious of the nutritional content of their daily food. Walk into any supermarket and you see the aisles crowded with customers reading the fine print on labels. As affluent consumers' tastes change, the international agribusinesses prick up their ears. So do the bankers, foreign advisors and politicians who work with them to shape international food policies. If the banana was the 'new food' of 1880s America and 1920s Japan, broccoli, raddicchio and winter strawberries are the 'new foods' of the 1990s. This affects not only what women buy and cook in Saucilito and in Hampstead; it affects what women and men produce for plantation companies in Kenya, Malaysia, Guatemala and Jamaica.
It may be tempting to imagine plantations as part of an 'old-fashioned' way of life. They seem to symbolize the bad old days of slavery and colonialism. They conjure up the American ante-bellum South or the British empire according to Somerset Maugham. In reality plantations are as modern (or 'post-modern') as the home computer or toxic waste. Large plantation companies such as Castle and Cook (owner of Dole and Standard Fruit), Unilever (owner of both Liptons and Brooke Bond), Del Monte (recently purchased by R. J. Reynolds as part of its buyout of RJR Nabisco) and United Brands, are some of the largest multinational companies in the world today, wielding influence over their own as well as foreign governments.

Furthermore, plantation company executives don't stand still. When the political climate where they are operating becomes chilly – with the passage of land-reform laws or the successful unionization of agricultural workers – they try to persuade new governments to open up lands for plantation crops. When Honduran banana workers used strikes to compel their government to deny recognition to a company-controlled union, their employer, United Brands, began to look more favorably on the Philippines. Similarly, as 1992 looms in Europe, Del Monte has taken steps to persuade the government of Cameroon to open its lands to banana cultivation. Del Monte's Cameroon bananas will be marketed in Europe with the benefit of EEC trade concessions given to former European colonies. Other companies switch to new crops when the market begins to decline in once-profitable products. Thus nowadays the Chiquita label is turning up on melons. Britain's Brooke Bond, once synonymous with tea and still known by the woman tea-picker on its label, has moved into the flower business. Brooke Bond has convinced senior Kenyan government officials that it is in their interest to open extensive flower plantations. Carnations-for-export have become part of the international political economy.

Similarly, Coca Cola, world-famous for its soft drinks, has become one of the world's largest growers of citrus fruits. Its executives have persuaded the government of Belize, still hosting British troops but increasingly pressed to further American interests, to allow it to develop thousands of acres for exported oranges. Palm oil was seen in the 1970s and early 1980s by many export-sensitive governments and their foreign bankers as an attractive substitute for less stable plantation crops such as rubber; now oil-palm plantations are being threatened by Americans' aversion to cholesterol. Companies such as Unilever may rethink their investments in Zaire, Malaysia and Ecuador if Europeans follow the Americans in insisting that food-processing companies eliminate saturated fats from their cereals, cookie batter and other foods. In Guatemala and Chile, nervous governments and their military commanders are looking to grape and broccoli farming to pacify their rural populations and stabilize their currencies. General Pinochet has given governmental assistance to large-scale fruit estates owned by supporters of his regime so that they and fruit exports have become a principal prop for his government at a time when popular opposition has become alarmingly bold. Military counter-insurgency strategists in Guatemala are pinning their hopes on the opening of large broccoli, cauliflower and cabbage estates to pacify alienated highland Indians.

These plantation companies and the importing and exporting governments that rely on them for tax revenues and political support each make gendered calculations. They appeal to women as food purchasers and as food preparers. If Carmen Miranda helped smooth the way for a more subtle form of American regional influence, 'Chiquita Banana' helped create consumer loyalty for a product that yielded huge profits for an American corporation; the real market women of Latin America were marginalized by a potent combination of 'Good Neighbor' diplomacy and agribusiness advertising. On the other hand, while women consumers often have a difficult time acquiring accurate nutritional information, acting together they have helped open up the files of food corporations. Women who today buy more fresh broccoli than canned peas are not merely passive creatures in an advertising agency's scenario.

As women consumers – in Third World as well as First World countries – try to reorganize the politics of food, women food-industry workers – in the First World as well as the Third World – try to reorganize the politics of land and labor. Plantation companies and the governments who need them have depended on the control of women in order to profitably produce every one of their agricultural products. This has been especially obvious in those sectors where plantation managers have defined most of the tasks as 'women's work': tea, coffee and to a lesser extent rubber. The dependency on women has been harder to recognize in sectors where work has been masculinized: bananas, palm oil, and to a lesser extent sugar. But in both masculinized and feminized plantation agriculture women have been crucial to the success of the company and its governmental allies. For even where women do not supply the bulk of the paid labor, they perform certain crucial jobs – as seasonal weeder, as processing-plant workers – and they supply cheap, part-time labor, to be called on when the world price drops for the company's product. Women also provide a plantation's male workers with unpaid food cultivation, child care and sexual satisfaction. Women plantation workers and women farmers share a politics of invisibility. A woman
agriculturalist is transformed by writers, policy-makers and economists into 'the farmer's wife'. This transformation is a political process that is being challenged by women farmers not only in Third World countries, but also in West Germany, France, Spain and the United States.41

All too often the international politics of bananas (and sugar, rubber and broccoli) are discussed as if they were formulated only in bankers' board rooms or union leaders' meetings. Because both of these settings have been so male-dominated, the dependence of food politics on women and on ideas about masculinity and femininity has been ignored. This in turn has meant that even genuine non-feminist attempts to reform agrarian politics — in the name of nationalism or development — have failed to change patriarchal relationships. The politics of bananas and broccoli cannot be fully transformed until both women and men are made visible, as consumers, producers, managers and policy-makers.

Polyester. The very word conjures up an entire era. Shopping... Drip-dry. Consciousness-raising groups. Ho, ho, ho, we won't go. I hats for Nixon.

Polyester caused a major shift in American fashion in the late 1960s lasted until the mid-1970s. Although it was invented during World II, polyester, a plastics-based cloth, didn't become a household word twenty-five years later, when chemical companies, textile manufacturers, machinery producers, fashion designers and garment manufacturers together to create polyester double-knit clothing for women. At about the same time British consumers were switching from fish and chips to Indian take-aways and from Indian cotton to chemical-based brushed nylons.

Paris Knitting Mills is a clothing company in Ozone Park, across the river from Manhattan in Queens, an industrial neighborhood and home of generations of new American immigrants. Paris joined other garment companies in targeting a particular class of women for the new textile. Polyester double-knit suits were to be a godsend for 'the working moth...n...Joseph Lombardo, formerly a presser for Paris and now a union organizer working for Queens' steadily shrinking membership, was clear about the targeted consumer.

Paris did not sell to the designer group... Paris made double-knit suits for your mother or my mother — three-piece suits, with a blouse, a Chanel-type jacket, and a skirt or a pair of pants. They sold for thirty-five or forty dollars... For a forty-year-old woman who was going back to work after raising her kids it was ideal, because she could have three suits for a hundred dollar investment. She could mix and match.