

Review / Reseña

Portillo Villeda, Suyapa G. *Roots of Resistance: A Story of Gender, Race, and Labor on the North Coast of Honduras*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2021. 432 pp.

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The 1954 Great Banana Strike stands as one of the most important moments in twentieth-century Honduran history. The mass walkout involved over 25,000 laborers, spanning *junteros* to *patronas*, who came together to challenge the rapacity of the United Fruit Company (UFCo). Scholars have long made gestures to the significance of this labor uprising, particularly in the context of the emerging Cold War. Fewer, however, have recovered working-class representations of the rebellion. Portillo Villeda's *Roots of Resistance* offers a deeply moving workers' history of the 1954 strike. Pouring over hundreds of oral histories, she uncovers the trials and triumphs of the *campeña/os* who labored, leisured, and ultimately led a massive revolt against the putatively all-powerful UFCo and Tela Railway Company. In the process, she reveals how these laborers forged a uniquely raced, gendered, and classed "banana worker identity" that not only sustained the strike of 1954, but left indelible imprints on present-day Honduras (3).

Portillo Villeda starts by situating the 1954 strike in the context of decades of labor exploitation. In the late nineteenth century, businessmen from the United States sought a new frontier "to get rich quick" following the gold rush (39). In their imagination, Honduras's north coast constituted an insalubrious but idyllic Garden of

Eden, ripe (pardon the pun) for their investment. These self-serving myths sparked negotiations over land with liberal reformers in Honduras who, at the time, viewed export production as a prerequisite for economic development. By the mid-nineteenth century, companies such as the UFCo had developed sprawling plantations and company towns across the north coast. The infrastructure they constructed in exchange for the tracts ultimately served the purposes of export production, not Honduras as a whole. Portillo Villeda reminds us of this with a succinct statement: “the capital city of Tegucigalpa would never be connected to the ports by train” (50).

After providing this backdrop, Portillo Villeda turns to her principal subject: the *campeña/os* who built their lives between the banana trees on the north coast. She first introduces us to a sprawling list of male workers, which include *yarderos*, *paleros*, *escopeteros*, *deshijadores*, *concheros*, and *regadores de agua*, among many others. These laborers migrated to the *campes* from across Honduras and neighboring countries, working and living together in close proximity. Their squalid housing and brutal work conditions often fueled fights along racial lines, with Mestizo men occasionally forcing Black workers to sleep on the porch. Notwithstanding these tensions, many *campeños* built camaraderie due to the grueling conditions of company life. Many played soccer and drank together, which helped foster a unique local identity as tireless “Indios” (99). Notably, “Indio” came to represent a person born in Honduras rather than an Indigenous person. The label—and the camaraderie of shared pastimes—were not always capacious enough to include all workers, particularly Garifuna and Black workers. Nonetheless, Portillo traces how this limited conception of kinship among *campeños* challenged company control and, later, undergirded the strike.

The book’s most stunning achievement, however, lies in Portillo Villeda’s examination of *campeña* life in the *fincas*. Even though these women outnumbered men in the local economy, the company refused to recognize them as formal employees. Portillo Villeda makes painstaking efforts to retrieve their voices from the historical record, painting a rich portrait of the intersection of gender, race, and class on the north coast in the process. She starts by illuminating the lives of *meretrices* and *clandestinas*. Many of these sex workers engaged in prostitution due to the precarious economic conditions in the *fincas*, to avoid “dying of hunger[sic]” (149). They worked in brothels which often compensated them along racial lines, with Black women receiving significantly less pay than lighter-skinned women. The company and Honduran state also cracked down on their work for capitalist purposes, alleging that *clandestinas*, in particular, transmitted sexual disease to male laborers and therefore hurt the bottom line. Yet

Portillo Villeda showcases how women continued to engage in clandestine sex work despite these regulatory campaigns and maintained a degree of “self-determination” over their labor (145). In the process, she brilliantly recasts sex work as an act of quotidian resistance to corporate control and to state efforts to regulate women’s bodies and labor.

Portillo Villeda further elucidates *campeña* experiences in a magisterial exploration of cooks and street vendors in the *campos*. These *patronas*, as they were called, established an archipelago of *comedores* that dotted the entire banana economy. Cooks incorporated a host of ingredients and methods, ranging from Garifuna mondongo soup to Indo-Hispanic *nacatamales*, reflecting the diversity of the north coast. Their kitchens operated in a liminal space, between the company and the workers, providing a communal space of respite from the grueling conditions on the plantation. Yet Portillo Villeda remains careful not to cast these informal spaces as oases from the hierarchies of race and gender that characterized the company’s formal division of labor. She emphasizes how these kitchens, in many ways, reified various inequities. They frequently relegated Black laborers to the most grueling labor and required women to arrange their schedules around those of male workers. Despite these limitations, *comedores* became critical to *campeñas*’ evolving self-conception as “working women” over the course of decades (176).

After chronicling the construction of this banana worker identity over the *longue durée*, Portillo Villeda turns to the 1954 strike itself. She argues that the walkout did not “constituted a spontaneous mass action nor a top-down, coordinated action” (187). Instead, the rebellion witnessed ordinary laborers and organic intellectuals drawing on their historical consciousness to foster solidarity and make demands. Their demands reflected their experiences, characterized by inadequate housing, poor health care, dismal regulations, and a lack of educational opportunity. Portillo Villeda’s contributions in these final chapters in particular are manifold. But her most powerful intervention lies in her excavation of women’s central role in the strike itself. While recognizing that “[w]omen were excluded from [formal] day-to-day organizing” (211), they remained indispensable to the strike’s success. They advocated for the formalization of their labor, provided food on credit to subsidize the walkout, and even put their bodies and lives on the line to protect their husbands from being taken by the military. The company’s ensuing concession, she argues, was thanks to their resistance.

Portillo Villeda concludes by examining the contemporary legacy of the 1954 Great Banana Strike in Honduras. Through oral histories, she explicates how present-

day Hondurans are transmitting recollections of the uprising from generation to generation despite the state's efforts to consign their memories to what Hannah Arendt called "holes of oblivion" (Arendt 232). As a result, grandchildren of the original *campesña/os* grow up in houses where the topic is often "as present as the air they breathe[sic]" (Portillo Villeda 236). For Portillo Villeda, the preservation and transmission of these memories of this transcendental walkout signifies hope for activists opposing rapacious corporations in the present. This conclusion notably complements recent work on neighboring Guatemala by Diane Nelson and Betsy Konefal, which illustrated the enduring and animating legacy of the 1940s and 1950s in Guatemala's "post-peace period" (Gibbings and Vrana 225-275).

Ultimately, *Roots of Resistance* is a striking piece of scholarship. In addition to the book's myriad insights, Portillo Villeda writes with a distinct humanity that professional historians frequently shy away from. She unabashedly speaks as a "Central-American-American" and her project reflects a "search for self . . . the country beneath my skin" (28). This urge to access an indistinct yet omnipresent past is familiar for those of us who grew up in households haunted by unspoken memories of the Cold War. For Central Americans who grew up in this liminal space between past and present, Portillo Villeda reminds us that there is not only insight in uncovering these stories, but power in preserving them, as the roots of future resistance.

Works Cited

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- Gibbings, Julie, and Heather A. Vrana. *Out of the Shadow: Revisiting the Revolution from Post-Peace Guatemala*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020.
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