We are what we eat: The colonial history of the banana

Maggie Lawrence

Abstract: During a recent trip to the food market, while contemplating buying bananas, I was suddenly struck by the image of Chiquita Banana on a label sticker. Fruit-topped and smiling, she seemed to be inviting me to enjoy the same tropical sun under which she labored to provide the world with the wholesome goodness of bananas. I vaguely remembered seeing this kind of image before, that is of a woman dressed up with fruit, maybe on TV. Intrigued by the idea of mobilizing the image of a Latin American woman to sell bananas, I investigated Chiquita and discovered an amazing gendered, racialized history, intertwined with the American political agenda and popular imagination in the 20th century. In this paper, I examine how gender relations, framed by notions of masculinity, femininity, race, nation, and family, have shaped the creation of the banana market, the conditions of labor which supply the market with produce, and the emergence of the banana as a cultural signifier.

Keywords: advertising; banana; consumerism; feminist; film; Latin-America

In 1939, theatrical producer Lee Schubert offered Brazilian singer and actress Carmen Miranda the opportunity to move north with a Broadway contract. Sporting a hat of tropical fruits made mostly with bananas and clad in colorful, frilly clothes, Miranda made her first appearance on U.S. ground at the World's Fair in New York City (Enloe, 1989). In the following years, she began appearing in films such as *Down Argentine Way* (1940) and *The Gang's All Here* (1943, Fig. 1 available from the author), singing, dancing, and providing comic relief with her limited and heavily accented English. One commentator described her as "the chief export of Brazil. Next [came] coffee" (Enloe, 1989, p.127).

The early 1940s was also the time of President Franklin Roosevelt's "Good Neighbor Policy," a campaign to replace the militaristic and imperial approach to US-Latin American diplomacy with a more "cooperative" strategy, since U.S. businesses in Latin America that had been established during the colonial period were integral to pulling the States out of the Depression and creating regional allies in the upcoming war years (Enloe, 1989, p.125). Foreign resources provided market goods and the control of them meant the control of those foreign governments, who were maintained (and limited by) American aid. The U.S. businesses involved in the "Good Neighbor Policy" which was simply an economic and ideological strategy for maintaining control in the place of a military one; and had evolved during colonial times in the late 1800s in Hawaii, Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, Nicaragua, Ecuador, and Colombia. This evolution also brought sugar, coffee, pineapples, and bananas to the U.S. market (Enloe, 1989, p. 124). Such colonies came to be known as "banana republics" in the following decades as the tropical fruit market boomed in the States and these nations and their peoples were imagined to be entirely dependent on this boom (and the U.S. government) (Enloe, 1989, p.125). Carmen Miranda played an important part in this boom and in the creation of the banana republic, indeed of Latin Americans in general, in the American consciousness.

In popular culture, evidenced by her performances in films and her production of albums of original and covered/popular songs, Miranda came to be an emblem not only of the 'zest and charm' of Latin American culture but also of how good US-Latin American relations were (Fig. 2). Her presence in the States signaled an interconnected, symbiotic relationship between North and Latin America, each culture complimenting the other, fulfilling a lack in

each. In her public and on-screen appearances, Miranda was always clad in her original World Fair clothes and hat; how could she be Carmen Miranda without them? She was always smiling, or at least always wanting everyone to be happy. She accomplished this by her "exotic yet amusing personality" (Enloe, 1989, p.127) and turned even the saddest of situations into causes for laughter and dance in her simplistic and comically-articulated understandings of events and relationships (of which she was never directly a part). Carmen was a completely a-political, wholesome delight, a naive native, a perfect escape from engagement with larger, difficult political, economic, and social changes; who also entertained the idea that American values were in the right. She was happy to be a part of Hollywood, and her countrymen were happy too, a sentiment that justified U.S. (colonial) involvement in Latin America in popular American imagination (Enloe, 1989).

In 1944, United Fruit, the largest grower and marketer of bananas in the US, created Chiquita Banana in the image of Miranda (Jenkins, 2000). A half-banana, half-woman in heels, a frilled skirt, and a hat of fruit, Chiquita sang of the health benefits of bananas and how best to eat them. Her songs were directed toward mothers and, by reference, their children: "*You can put them in a salad/You can put them in a pie-aye/Any way you eat them/It's impossible to beat them*," (Enloe, 1989). Following Miranda's role in creating a comfortable escape from daunting reality, Chiquita offered a tropical twist on American family staples. She was both the image of womanly know how and helpfulness and Latin American "zest" (Fig.3).

In France, bananas had been marketed toward mothers as the "ideal food for children" by Outspan, the major French foreign-produce company (Jenkins, 2000). In the US, individual food businesses had already capitalized on this idea by the time Chiquita appeared, but this "woman" (and United Fruit) took it to a whole new level. Chiquita starred in short pre-movie clips throughout the States, reconciling unease over exoticness with fun and cheery rhymes supposedly appealing to kids and their mothers (Fig. 4).

In *Chiquita Banana and the Cannibals* (1947, Fig.5), a "cannibal", a Black man of ambiguous nationality (he has a pipe and is clothed in a European-style bow-tie, but this could be referencing an African colony) captures a white explorer/colonizer and is about to cook him when Chiquita intervenes and instead explains that the "cannibal" and the white man should eat bananas, which of course should never be put in refrigerators (because they "*like the climate/Of the very, very tropical equator,*" Enloe, 1989, p.129). The character was extremely successful, as the U.S. became the leading consuming nation of the fruit, eating over 1500 tons more of it than any other nation per year (Enloe, 1989, p.132). The majority of these bananas were United Fruit brand.

The banana was quickly becoming a cultural icon itself. A colonial image like "Yes We Have No Bananas," a photo of young women banana sellers in Samoa with homemade signs in grammatically incorrect English (they did indeed have bananas), that would quite unlikely be noticed without the impact of Carmen Miranda and Chiquita Banana, became the inspiration for cultural production (Fig. 6). In 1947, the name of the image was co-opted for a film comedy (Jenkins, 2000, p. 97). The film needed no further reference, such as the image itself or some other banana-related signs or imagery because the words could stand alone as a comedic cultural signifier, highlighting the ubiquity of Miranda and Chiquita Banana, and illuminating the banana as an instantiation of Latin America and its peoples.

The politics surrounding the labor required to produce the banana itself has also served to maintain inter/national relationships of power. In her interviews with the "Bananeras" who were women working on banana plantations and organized in unions in Latin America, Dana Frank relates how the women deal with conceptions of gender in their labor practices and personal relationships. She describes the women's views on "machismo," the ideal expression of Latin American masculinity, and their work, their bosses, land, and international politics (Frank, 2005). Interestingly, the idea of "machismo" was mobilized in the colonial moment

by foreign corporations as a control mechanism. Plantations were "self-contained" worlds in the early-to-mid 1900s, and many included prostitution services, the advantages and disadvantages of which were debated by managers, the advantages being easy recruitment and retaining of male plantation workers as prostitutes helped form banana work into men's work, and banana men into *machistas* (and the disadvantages being sexually transmitted infections, Enloe, 1989, p. 141). Sexual politics, intertwined with racial ones, still revolve around the banana plantations and unions today. In speaking with a male union activist, Frank asks why he does not help cook, clean, or help watch his children. He replies, "Porque soy *machista*!" ("Because I'm a *man*!"). To this Frank says, "In the United States, we think men who cook and clean and wash dishes and take care of children are really sexy" (Frank, 2005, p. 88). Frank herself participates in the construction and maintenance of international relations of power in what I might call this classic colonial move of pitting the "development" and "victories" of the "first world" against those of the "Third World," implying that both (white) U.S. men and women are more liberated from the confines of gender roles.

Back in U.S. popular culture, the banana even made its way into the world of clothes. The clothing company 'Banana Republic' borrowed the idea of colonial adventure from the formation of actual "banana republics" in the mobilization of the gendered notions of nation, race, and family that sold the fruit. In addition to fine work and leisure clothes, Banana Republic used to carry a line of travel apparel. Some of the company's first advertisements in 1978 featured safari themes, and their catalogs showed travel clothes against backgrounds of jungle scenes, even the Taj Mahal (Lester, 1992). As it expanded, the store became known for its themed decorations, which included things like real Jeeps and foliage and atmosphere-setters like fog and steam (Lester, 1992). Banana Republic relied on a colonial nostalgia to sell its clothes: in its use of props like these and the imagery in its catalogs, as well as the actual design of its clothes, the company directly referenced a (imagined) time when banana republics, Latin America in general, presented an exotic adventure and the fun of a sunny culture. In this way, Banana Republic was also "selling a lifestyle" through the use of an "Other," by which the American became an American (Lester, 1992). In his essay on the racial politics and ideologies of the Banana Republic catalogue, Elli Lester argues that the commodification of the colonial project is also the commodification of the Other, and the consumption of the Other through clothing constructs the self-understanding of the Western subject, constituted in notions of gender, race, class, and geography/place. It is a similar process with the consumption of the banana. The commodification of the fruit emerged through a literal transposing of Latin American femininity (as constructed in the U.S. through the "import" of Carmen Miranda) onto its form. The body of the banana was the body of the Latin American woman, informed by American formations of family, race, class, nation, and even health.

Spivak uses the term "worlding" to describe the process in which people are located spatially as well as ideologically by the "othering" of perceived difference, meaning that this difference is understood to be essential and irreconcilable; and the "Other" is made as the difference comes to give the namer of it their own self-image and understanding (Spivak, 2003). There is only a Western subject in relationship to a "non-Western" subject, only a "native" in relationship to the "non-native." The banana, as both a material object and a cultural one, signifies the US-Latin American relationship, the U.S. and an Other; and as the fruit is consumed, it establishes, over and over again, the Other through which the American identity is understood. The idea of the banana and its movement through the U.S. market, as both food and cultural currency, furthered the U.S. colonial project even after it had been dissolved in any overt displays.

So, what is at stake with what we are putting into our bodies? The consumption of the banana as a singing, dancing, nutritional fruit has served to enable the gendered "worlding" of subjects even as it crosses national borders. The banana has sustained American health at individual, familial, and national levels, and relies on the consumption of the "exotic" and an

American worldly identity that relies on the naming of such. In a surprising encounter, the banana and the female “Other” are superimposed onto each other, giving form and visibility to an objectification that we literally consume – we are indeed what we eat.

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Author Notes

Maggie Lawrence is a Feminist Studies major at the University of California at Santa Cruz.

The text contains references to photographic images (Figures 1-6) that remain as part of an unpublished class paper. Details are available from the author upon request.

E-mail: mslawren@ucsc.edu