

**Intervention Symposium—“Plantation Methodologies: Questioning Scale, Space, and Subjecthood”**

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**The Specters of the Plantation in Central America**

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The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. And just as they seem to be occupied with revolutionizing themselves and things, creating something that did not exist before, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they anxiously conjure up the spirits of the past to their service, borrowing from them names, battle slogans, and costumes in order to present this new scene in world history in time-honored disguise and borrowed language.

—Karl Marx, *The 18<sup>th</sup> Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1852<sup>1</sup>

The tradition of the plantation weighs like a nightmare on the living in Central America. Its 20<sup>th</sup> century was shaped by the tension between finding a (mono)crop that would link it to the world market and the modernization process, and procuring alternatives to the pernicious effects of plantation economies. From indigo and cochineal, through bananas and coffee, to pineapples and palm oil; from creating a regional common market, through agrarian reforms, to the promotion of the services economy and new export crops, Central America is caught between embracing the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm> (last accessed 27 October 2023).

plantation as its ticket to modernity, and breaking away from its legacy of destruction of workers' bodies and nature, as well as the forms of authoritarian politics that accompany them.

For example, during the 1990s Central America allegedly moved away from monocrops and towards services and light industrial and garment assembly (*maquila*). This was also supposed to be a period of transition from military to civilian rule. Hope was in the air. A decade and change later, however, the region plunged into a period of increasing levels of violence, rivaling those of the 1980s, and the democratic façade gave way to authoritarian politics. The plantation also made a comeback: Costa Rica became the largest exporter of fresh pineapple in the world, and both Honduras and Guatemala proposed to extend their oil palm fields to rival Colombia's levels. But to talk about a comeback is inaccurate: plantations never left. Even in activities supposedly different or incompatible with plantation economies, such as tourism or drug trafficking, the same forces continue to operate.

We argue that Central America is haunted by the specters of the plantation. If the plantation *seems* to have withdrawn from some places, its different forms of infrastructure mediate how its presence becomes palpable. For Gordon (2008), haunting raises specters that remind us of what has been lost but whose violence shapes everyday life, space, and time. For us, in Central America, the plantation haunts the unlikely geographies of activities such as tourism or drug trafficking in two main ways. First, through the porosity of the plantation. While the dominant geographical imagination presents different economic activities as discrete forms of development, the plantation constantly overflows its own boundaries and interacts with other spaces through pesticide drift or the use of paramilitary forces, for example. Second, through the strategic articulation between the plantation and other forms of value extraction. The plantation co-produces and shares infrastructure (e.g. roads, ports), institutional frameworks (e.g. trade liberalization), and labor worlds (e.g. "surplus populations" [Li 2010]) with apparently disparate activities. Thus we must constantly pay attention to the ways in which the histories and practices of seemingly contradictory economies and institutions entangle and articulate. At the same time, we cannot forget that plantations are not all mighty forces. Their specters also conjure images and memories of refusal and resistance (McKittrick 2011).

### **Plantation Specters and Drug Trafficking**

Much of the cocaine that reaches the USA from South America passes through Honduras, with Colón Department as one of the most important corridors. Colón, and particularly the valley of the Aguán, is usually understood as a frontier space abandoned by the state, but it is anything but that. In the 1970s, it became the epicenter of the Honduran agrarian reform, as landless peasant families from different parts of the country were brought to the Aguán by a reformist government to plant oil palms. Later, in the 1990s, as the country veered towards what we know as neoliberalism, the lands of the agrarian reform became available through the market and 70% of the oil palm-covered lands distributed in the Aguán came under the control of a limited group of large landowners. Through this process of primitive accumulation, not only were the lands of the plantations alienated, but also the former beneficiaries of the agrarian reform were freed from the land and became a large pool of cheap and exploitable labor. It is around this time that the region became one of the country's central trafficking corridors.

In places like the Aguán, not only do drug traffickers land their planes in the plantations and use the same routes through which palm oil is transported to the global markets, but they also navigate the tensions between the “legal” and “illegal” to their advantage. For example, oil palm plantations are great fronts for money laundering: they are expensive year-long operations with a high entry cost that both requires constant investments and creates a continual cash flow. Further, the plantations cover vast amounts of land that make it hard to know or control what happens inside. Also, both activities are predicated upon the exploitation of a highly vulnerable labor force that must be made docile through the use of violence. Not only do plantations exploit labor markets that are not necessarily “legal”, but they also depend on “external” actors that help them do some of the dirty work. However, to draw lines between the inside and the outside is difficult: drug traffickers tend to buy and run oil palm plantations as “legitimate businesses”, just as “legitimate businessmen” take advantage of the ability of traffickers to impose order through violence without the constraints of the law. Thus, just as in Guatemala they speak about narco-cattle ranchers (Devine et al. 2018), in Honduras we should speak about narco-palm producers.



**Image 1:** A straight road between endless rows of oil palms in the Bajo Aguán region; according to local dwellers, roads like these are sometimes used to land airplanes in the dead of night  
(photo by Andrés León Araya)

### **Plantation Specters in Tourism**

In the 1870s, banana plantations expanded along the Caribbean coast, attracting “free” workers from throughout the Greater Caribbean. In Costa Rica, this process came to a close in 1934, when a great banana strike prompted the banana plantation to leave the region. However, the banana companies remained through a contract farming scheme in which Black independent farmers sold their cacao production to them in exchange for access to land. Later, in the 1980s, the *Moniliophthora roreri* fungus (“la Monilia”), killed thousands of cacao trees that helped sustain local families. Afterwards, banana and plantain plantations began to appear in patches



throughout the region, just as many locals saw tourism as an economic alternative. In Cahuita, for example, snorkeling along the corals became one of the main tourist attractions. However, the plantation haunts this delicate ecosystem, as the sea water, contaminated by pesticides used in the banana plantations, whitens the corals.



**Image 2:** Entrance to a lodging business in Cocles Beach, South Caribbean Coast, Costa Rica  
(photo by María José Guillén-Araya)

Anti-plantation forces also haunt tourism. While the leisure experience of visitors demands velocity and productivity, closer to the rhythms of the plantation, local tourism workers refuse to do so in their everyday practices. Rather, the “Caribbean rhythm” that tourists hear much about, is infused by the rhythms and conditions of another crop also weaved into the region’s history:

cacao. Throughout the 1600s and 1700s, fleeing Black slaves from different parts of the Greater Caribbean found in the daring landscapes of the Costa Rican south Caribbean coast, the absence of their Spanish and *Criollo* masters and the slower pace and intensity of cacao, an opportunity to manage their land and labor at their own rhythm. Thus, in the present, the specters of the plantation and its alternative, or negation, shape the field in which tourism takes shape.



**Image 3:** Cacao stores and cacao ceremonies have become major tourist attraction in Talamancas; sometimes read as a revival, cultural appropriation, or as un-authentic fabrications, cacao products are publicized for their properties for the health of the body and the spirit (photo by María José Guillén-Araya)





**Image 4:** Stores, restaurants, hotels' lobbies, and other businesses seek to create atmospheres of relaxation to meet tourists' expectations about the good life of the Caribbean coast. An attribute of this good life is the "ritmo Caribe" or "ritmo caribeño"—the Caribbean rhythm, the slow temporality in which everything takes time to accomplish and the cycles of nature (and not itineraries) are the ones dictating the ways of navigating the tourist experience (photo by María José Guillén-Araya)

### Closing Comments

The plantation in Central America is far from gone. Whether in more visible ways, through the still existing (and expanding) banana, pineapple, or oil palm plantations, or in its spectral form, as in the geographies of drug trafficking and tourism that we have been describing, the plantation

continues to haunt the present. In this Intervention, we wanted to point out how, either by our conscious decision to study it or not, the effects and infrastructures of the plantation continue to shape realities that might seem distant to it, yet are profoundly interconnected. However, to be able to explore the ways in which the plantation haunts other spaces, through strategic articulation and porosity, we must be attuned to the histories of the places we are studying. It is by understanding how past and present come together to produce particular landscapes, such as those of drug trafficking or tourism, that we can identify how what is supposed to be gone, still prevails in different ways. It is also by following these tensions that we can identify the stories and practices of refusal and opposition, that can help us think about ways of going beyond the plantation as a template for the future of the region.

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