



## A Camera in the Garden of Eden: The Self-Forging of a Banana Republic

By Kevin Coleman

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In the early twentieth century, the Boston-based United Fruit Company controlled the production, distribution, and marketing of bananas, the most widely consumed fresh fruit in North America. So great was the company's power that it challenged the sovereignty of the Latin American and Caribbean countries in which it operated, giving rise to the notion of company-dominated "banana republics."

In *A Camera in the Garden of Eden*, Kevin Coleman argues that the "banana republic" was an imperial constellation of images and practices that was checked and contested by ordinary Central Americans. Drawing on a trove of images from four enormous visual archives and a wealth of internal company memos, literary works, immigration records, and declassified US government telegrams, Coleman explores how banana plantation workers, women, and peasants used photography to forge new ways of being while also visually asserting their rights as citizens. He tells a dramatic story of the founding of the Honduran town of El Progreso, where the United Fruit Company had one of its main divisional offices, the rise of the company now known as Chiquita, and a sixty-nine day strike in which banana workers declared their independence from neocolonial domination. In telling this story, Coleman develops a new set of conceptual tools and methods for using images to open up fresh understandings of the past, offering a model that is applicable far beyond this pathfinding study.

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"Offering at once a visual as well as political history, Coleman breaks new methodological ground in revealing the imaginative dimensions of social power. A tour de force." (Greg Grandin, author of *The Empire of Necessity* and *Fordlandia*)

"By joining the many who used photography as part of their struggle, this book reactivates the imperial camera's shutter—one can no longer separate the study of colonies from the study of the sovereign democracies that ran them. This continuity makes Coleman's book a must for every scholar of imperialism." (Ariella Azoulay, author of *The Civil Contract of Photography* and *Civil Imagination: A Political Ontology of Photography*)

"This is a brilliant work, an extraordinary study that will become a model for historians (and scholars from other fields) who wish to incorporate photography rigorously into their analyses. The author's erudition and his capacity to tease out meanings make this work applicable to all of Latin America (and other neocolonial states), as well as obligatory for anyone who wishes to write intelligently about photography. Although I have worked on the question of photography and history for more than forty years, I can think of no work that is in any way comparable to this book." (John Mraz, author of *Photographing the Mexican Revolution: Commitments, Testimonies, Icons*)

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About the Author

Kevin Coleman is an assistant professor of history at the University of Toronto Mississauga.

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