Bayonets and Bananas:

U.S. Imperialism and the Latin American Fruit Trade in Dos Passos's U.S.A. Trilogy

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Abstract

This article explores the theme of U.S. imperialism in Latin America built into the *U.S.A.* trilogy. It proceeds from the observation that while the focus of Dos Passos's work is on the United States, his approach is also transnational, taking in the emerging superpower's relationship to other parts of the world in its thematic compass as well. Specifically, I argue that contained within the trilogy is a story of U.S. hegemony and exploitation in Latin America at the hands of strong political and economic forces.

With the extended depiction of the Mexican Revolution in *The 42nd Parallel* as my initial focus, I show how Dos Passos, through his account of successive U.S. administrations' involvement in the conflict, sketches out an interventionist modus operandi that continues into the 1920s. Throughout, my analyses often depart from the Newsreel sections, whose contents repeatedly invoke U.S. political and economic involvement in Latin American affairs, revealed through their interaction with not only Dos Passos's other narrative modes, but also with the historical record itself. In the second part, I turn to the Latin American fruit trade, which constitutes a sub-topic that is referenced in each volume of the trilogy. Departing from the appearance of the novelty song "Yes! We Have No Bananas" in one of the final Newsreel sections, I argue that its seeming triviality belies a more sinister function, namely that of blocking out the Colombian Banana Massacre of 1928 from Dos Passos's narrative.

Keywords

The 42nd Parallel, Banana Massacre, John Dos Passos, Mexican Revolution, Modernism, *U.S.A.* Trilogy.

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1 Despite its title, John Dos Passos's U.S.A. trilogy does not take place exclusively on U.S. American soil. Even a cursory reading of the work as a whole reveals that the majority of the middle volume, 1919, is set in Europe as the focus and action shift to World War I. Less immediately apparent and not widely covered in criticism is the fact that a significant portion of the trilogy also deals with Latin America. Within that thematic cluster, Dos Passos tells a story of U.S. hegemony and exploitation through a confluence of political and economic interests. But the story that he presents cannot be read or accessed directly; rather, it has to be teased out and pieced together, being dependent on the logic of juxtaposition inherent to the trilogy.

2 In his monograph on the U.S.A. trilogy, Donald Pizer was the first to explore at length the mechanics of interplay between the four narrative modes used by Dos Passos: the narratives of fictional characters, the biographies of historical figures, the Newsreel sections of headlines and song lyrics, and the autobiographical prose-poetry of the Camera Eye segments. Through the logic of montage, as Pizer details, Dos Passos was able to suggest connections between the contents of these disparate textual modes, opening up a web of implications for the reader. "The juxtapositional richness of the trilogy is," as Pizer puts it, "almost infinite" (54). Following on these insights, Grace Kyungwon Hong has stressed the importance of dealing with the trilogy in a spatial rather than sequential manner. To this end, she suggests the work be viewed in terms of cartography. "Rather than progressing in a linear trajectory," she points out, "U.S.A. maps out a series of relationships and events that intersect with each other in myriad ways" (96).

3 As such, the story that Dos Passos tells of U.S. imperialism in Latin America also has to be approached spatially rather than sequentially; it needs to be read across the narrative modes, as well as back and forth between them, in a dialogic fashion. In his essay on 1919, Jean-Paul Sartre intuitively sensed the non-linear logic of Dos Passos's work: "Not for an instant does the order of causality betray itself in chronological order," he observed (90). For this reason, the point of departure for the present inquiry cannot be the first mention of Latin America in the work (the Camera Eye narrator's memory of hearing about a train journey his parents took to Mexico); nor can it be the first time one of the characters sets foot on Latin American soil (when Mac walks across the border from El Paso to Ciudad Juárez in his seventh narrative segment). Rather, and in keeping with the spatial logic of the trilogy, I want to map out the thematic cluster on U.S. imperialism in Latin America by turning to two connected fragments in the work, whose juxtaposition acts as a catalyst for interpretation.

4 Newsreel XIII, appearing halfway through *The 42nd Parallel*, contains two items that refer to Mexico. One is a fragment from a news article about the political

turbulence of the Mexican Revolution: "Washington considers unfortunate illogical and unnatural the selection of General Huerta as provisional president of Mexico in succession to the overthrown president" (184). The other consists of some lines from "La Cucaracha," the familiar Mexican folk song. Since the two items follow each other in the internal sequence of the Newsreel, the song could be seen as in some way commenting on the article fragment. Yet what is their connection? Although its roots stretch further back, the infectious "La Cucaracha" rose in popularity with the Mexican Revolution. As such, the song could very well be seen as mere flavor or atmosphere, an attempt to capture the everyday sounds of the revolution. But could it hold a deeper meaning? Consider the verse that Dos Passos reproduces, in the original Spanish: "*La cucaracha la cucaracha / Ya no quiere caminar / Porque no tiene, porque no tiene / Marijuana [sic] que fumar*," which translates as "The cockroach the cockroach / Doesn't want to walk anymore / Because it doesn't have, because it doesn't have / Any marijuana to smoke."

5 The narrative of the song is straight-forward, but gains a deeper meaning in the context that Dos Passos puts it into. In essence, the titular cockroach is dissatisfied because it has been deprived of marijuana, which is derived from the cannabis plant, a resource rich to Mexico.[1] Through countless iterations of the song spanning at least two centuries, the insect protagonist has been made to take on different identities—overtly or implicitly. During the revolution, it was sometimes associated with Pancho Villa and the rebels themselves, but at other times—and perhaps predominantly—it was used to mock and ridicule President Victoriano Huerta, the counter-revolutionary usurper. In an often-repeated claim, it is said that Huerta was a marijuana addict (e.g. Asprey 261), and in this light, performing the song could be seen as a way to comment on his parasitical rule. Indeed, the account from a journalist who traveled with Villa's forces makes clear that the revolutionaries referred to Huerta as *la cucaracha* (Campos 162). In his Newsreel montage, Dos Passos does juxtapose the song with the installation of Huerta as president, but importantly, the focus of the news fragment is not on the event as such, but rather on the U.S. response to this latest development in the revolution. In other words, the key context here is U.S. involvement in Mexican affairs, and it is against this background that both the identity of the cockroach and the nature of that which it has been deprived of become interesting. In the Mac narrative that makes up most of the first half of *The 42nd Parallel*, Dos Passos offers a provocative answer to each of these two questions.

6 Fainy "Mac" McCreary is the working-class character who drifts down to Mexico to "kinda get into things, into the revolution," as he himself puts it (114). His presence in Mexico is anomalous, however, since every U.S. American except for him seems to be in the country for one reason: oil, another resource

rich to Mexico. In fact, every single compatriot he encounters is connected to the oil industry: the oil prospector he meets in a bar, the independent oil promoter Ben Stowell, and J. Ward Moorehouse with his associates Janey Williams and G.H. Barrow in tow, who are in Mexico to mediate between U.S. oil companies and the newly-installed Carranza government. The oil business, however, is not running as smoothly as it used to, but has rather come to a standstill as a result of the political turbulence. As Mac is crossing the border to Mexico, we learn that "[t]he bars of El Paso were full of ranchers and mining men bemoaning the good old days when Porfirio Diaz [sic] was in power and a white man could make money in Mexico" (113). That is, in the days before the revolution, long-time president and de facto dictator Díaz allowed U.S. business interests to operate freely and extensively in Mexico.[2] The U.S. nostalgia for the days of Díaz is contrasted with the paranoia and fear of violence felt by the previously mentioned oil prospector in the narrative present of the revolution. Hiding out in a locale simply but significantly named "American Bar," suggesting something of a refuge, the man is shocked that Mac as a fellow U.S. citizen has no plans to get out of the country, exclaiming that "[t]hese bandits'll be on the town any day . . . It'll be horrible, I tell you," after which he counts the cartridges to his gun (265, ellipsis in original).

7 Whether exaggerated or not, an explanation for the hostility towards U.S. expatriates in Mexico is suggested by Ricardo Perez's comment to Mac that "[i]t was your ambassador murdered Madero," referring to the fact that the U.S. ambassador to Mexico, Henry Lane Wilson, conspired with then-General Huerta and other elements of the Mexican military to overthrow the democratically elected President Francisco I. Madero (115). The ambassador's actions constituted a significant change in cross-border relations: from having previously only nurtured commercial interests, the United States was now interfering with Mexican politics. This interventionist practice was continued by the subsequent U.S. administration under Woodrow Wilson, who grew averse to Huerta and actively sought to depose him, culminating in the U.S. occupation of Veracruz in 1914. While the professed motive was that of ousting a despot, the real reason may have been Huerta's failure to calm the social and political unrest that was hindering U.S. financial interests from resuming their business in Mexico. This is at least what Dos Passos suggests in Newsreel XIV, where a headline apparently referring to the amphibious landing at Veracruz ("RIDING SEAWOLF IN MEXICAN WATERS") is preceded by one describing a successful instance of economic lobbyism: "WILSON WILL TAKE ADVICE OF BUSINESS" (210). Accordingly, Mac's next narrative section begins with Huerta's resignation under the twin pressure of American occupation and domestic insurgency. As the fleeing president is succeeded by Venustiano Carranza, Dos Passos shows how representatives of U.S. corporate inter-

ests immediately flock to the scene: Ben Stowell, the oil contractor whom Mac befriends, is "trying to put through a deal with Carranza's government to operate some oilwells" (269), and J. Ward Moorehouse on his publicity trip is confounded by "Carranza's stubborn opposition to American investors," wishing only for "friendly coöperation," and expressing disappointment that "the Mexican papers had been misinformed about the aims of American business in Mexico" (276–77).

8 The flurry of activity to secure the flow of oil provokes a curious image, namely one of the United States suffering the inevitable withdrawal symptoms from having been deprived of its number one stimulant. Like the cockroach in the song, the United States literally cannot move or function normally without having its addiction appeased. It is of course an addiction brought on by technological modernity, one that would only escalate in the coming decades, which we can see dramatized in *The Big Money* through its focus on the automobile and aviation industries. And as is evident from the above discussion, the United States will go to great lengths to have its addiction satisfied. In this light, it becomes clear why, in the news item, Washington considers "unfortunate illogical and unnatural" the swift governmental succession in Mexico: the toppling of the Madero administration marks another change in power, forestalling any kind of political stability that could allow for meaningful business relations to resume (184).

9 The whole idea is neatly encapsulated in the secondary character G.H. Barrow, a union man working for the American Federation of Labor whom Moorehouse enlists to "peaceably and in a friendly fashion" ease the relationship between capital and labor (237). In this role, Barrow accompanies Moorehouse on his trip to Mexico, to mediate between U.S. business interests and Mexican officials, in a "purely unofficial capacity," as Moorehouse assures Mac (276). However, Barrow shows little interest in matters of labor, but rather seems to have his mind elsewhere, asking Mac and Ben "whether Mexicans were as immoral as it was made out," and "whether it wasn't pretty risky going out with girls here on account of the high percentage of syphilis" (271). When he is offered to be taken out for a night on the town, Barrow justifies his acceptance by saying that "[a] man ought to see every side of things when he's investigating conditions" (271). A night of revelry follows, where Barrow takes full advantage of the "conditions" of Mexico, drinking tequila, chasing women, seeking out prostitutes, as well as singing and dancing. In other words, rather than investigating conditions, it is clear that Barrow is more interested in satisfying his vices and addictions. Significantly, at one point during the night, "La Cucaracha" is requested and duly performed by the cantina band (273).

10 From the two original items, news fragment and song lyric, we can thus discern and piece together the whole: the connection between U.S. involvement in

Mexican affairs and a drunken *gringo* singing along to “La Cucaracha,” with the figure of Barrow revealing the discrepancy between noble intention and sordid reality. Rather than merely providing flavor, the combination of song and news fragment spurs an alternative reading of history, in which the United States’ policies and activities during the revolution had less to do with a genuine interest in bilateral cooperation or promoting democracy at large than with trying to reclaim its own commercial interests.

11 The theme of U.S. involvement in Latin American affairs is not limited to Dos Passos’s segments and material on the Mexican Revolution, but continues as a recurring motif throughout the trilogy, only broken off by the war in Europe. For example, in *The 42nd Parallel*, a headline in Newsreel XII boasts: “ROOSEVELT TELLS FIRST TIME HOW US GOT PANAMA,” no doubt indicating a certain imperialist bravado (151). The original article from the *Chicago Tribune* reports on a speech given by former President Theodore Roosevelt, in which he reminisced about the stalled negotiations over the construction of the Panama Canal. “Colombia was trying to hold up Uncle Sam,” he asserted. “I decided that this should not be done.” As he continued, he emphasized action over deliberation, illustrating his famous Big Stick diplomacy: “I could have sent a learned report to congress and there would have been an able debate, but I didn’t. I took the isthmus and started the canal” (“Roosevelt Tells First Time How U.S. Got Panama”). Later in the trilogy, however, Dos Passos questions the methods through which the United States “got” the canal zone, suggesting that they were less transparent and more underhanded than Roosevelt lets on. This is implied through the biography of diplomat Paxton Hibben, who in his role as *chargé d’affaires* in Bogotá is described as helping to “wangle the revolution that stole the canal zone from the bishop of Bogotá,” referring to the U.S. support of the separatist movement that caused the territory of Panama to be divorced from Colombia, giving Washington control over the strategically important canal zone (513).

12 In Newsreel LV in *The Big Money*, we find the ominous headline “AMERICAN MARINES LAND IN NICARAGUA,” reflecting the latest development in the U.S. occupation of that country, which had just been thrown into civil war. Specifically, as a consultation of the original article reveals, the headline refers to an intervention in August 1926, in which U.S. troops were deployed in the coastal Bluefields region to safeguard commercial interests against advancing insurrectionists.[3] Considering this wider context of U.S. intervention in Latin American affairs, and the way in which Dos Passos appears thematically concerned with it, there is a seemingly trivial headline elsewhere in *The Big Money* that suddenly takes on greater urgency. For when “Pershing Dances Tango in the Argentine” in Newsreel LII, we are likely to be suspicious: is the U.S. military once again stepping across Latin American soil or is the

dance nothing more than a diplomatic show of interest in local culture? As a consultation of the original news story reveals, the answer is of course the latter—the retired general was there on a goodwill tour of South America—but there is nonetheless something unsettling about the headline in the context of U.S. foreign policy as sketched out by Dos Passos.[4] In fact, it bears mentioning that General Pershing commanded the 1916 military expedition in which the U.S. Army crossed into Mexican territory at the height of the revolution in pursuit of Pancho Villa, a historical fact that directly connects the suave dancer of the headline to previous interventionist incursions into Latin America.

13 General Pershing's dance captures in a single headline the jarring and uncomfortable combination of the trivial and the consequential characteristic of the Newsreel sections in the trilogy. To use an example unrelated to Latin America, we may think of how the headlines "LITTLE CARUSO EXPECTED" and "MACHINEGUNS MOW DOWN MOBS IN KNOXVILLE" follow each other in Newsreel XLIII, juxtaposing celebrity culture with race riots (755).[5] The purpose of this pattern is naturally to criticize the trivializing effect of mass culture, which "mixes and scrambles everything together"—as cultural critic Dwight Macdonald would put it two decades later (62). For the reader, it also helps to defamiliarize those seemingly trivial artifacts and signifiers, encouraging us to think more critically about their nature and role—that is, to return to the example above, whether celebrity culture was taking focus from far more important social issues, both in the media and in the public consciousness. This was at least Dos Passos's view and likely what he in part sought to convey through the Newsreels. As he wrote in 1927, shortly before beginning work on *The 42nd Parallel*, lamenting the perceived public indifference to the Sacco-Vanzetti case: "Tabloids and movies take the place of mental processes, and revolts, crimes, despairs pass off in a dribble of vague words and rubber stamp phrases without leaving a scratch on the mind of the driven instalment-paying, subway-packing mass" ("Sacco and Vanzetti" 99). Later, in 1968, Dos Passos would recall that "[t]he Newsreels were intended to give the clamor, the sound of daily life" ("An Interview with John Dos Passos" 283). The word choice here is revealing, as the Newsreels are not mere background noise but indeed clamor: there is something distinctly overpowering about them in their sensory overload, and as such, they also represent the ability of mass culture to divert focus and to drown things out.

14 The power of the media's clamor to obscure and drown out certain news events is in fact established early in the trilogy—specifically, in *The 42nd Parallel*'s Newsreel XXII. Here, in another thematically unrelated but formally significant example, the large headline "COMING YEAR PROMISES REBIRTH OF RAILROADS" is followed by "DEBS IS GIVEN 30 YEARS IN PRISON" in noticeably smaller print (445).[6] The former headline thus appears to literally

and figuratively overshadow the latter, and their contrasting size presumably corresponds to the varying amount of attention given to the two different items in the media: while the large font of the headline about the railroads may be understood to represent front-page news, the smaller font used for the Debs verdict suggests an item buried somewhere at the back of the paper. However, by putting them next to each other in the Newsreel, Dos Passos not only makes visible these medial strategies of selection and presentation, but also points to a connection between the two headlines. Because the two are of course related. Readers have already become acquainted with union leader Eugene V. Debs from his biography earlier in *The 42nd Parallel*, and there Dos Passos supplies the connection: "Debs was a railroad man," the piece opens, foregrounding the professional identity that would serve as the basis for his commitment to the labor movement (30). With a "gusty rhetoric that set on fire the railroad workers," the biography continues, Debs "made them want the world he wanted, / a world brothers might own / where everybody would split even" (31). His passionate activism and impulse for organization made him unpopular with the railroad companies, and he eventually landed in jail for a period after his involvement in a major strike outside of Chicago. Now, however, with Debs sent off to prison for a much longer time—as referenced by the headline—the railroad companies were no doubt rejoicing. With no one to organize the railroad workers, no one to start strikes and generally stir up trouble, the coming year would indeed promise a rebirth of the railroads. Thus, in the internal sequence of the Newsreel, the upbeat headline is made to obscure the underlying miscarriage of justice facilitating the railway industry's consolidation, in turn mimicking the media's ability to skew the news.

15 If we keep in mind both the potential mechanisms of concealment in the Newsreels and the theme of U.S. intervention in Latin America, our eyes and ears will be alert when we reach a familiar novelty song in Newsreel XLIX, found at the beginning of *The Big Money*: "*Yes we have no bananas / We have no bananas today*" (815, italics in original). This may strike us as a humorous, seemingly harmless song—a blatant musical commodity, the very archetype of style without substance—yet it does more than refer to itself. Because implicit in these two lines of lyric is an inability to supply a demand, suggesting that potential profit is being lost as people want to buy when there is nothing to sell. As such, the exchange between vendor and customer in the song resounds through the broader economy, suggesting supply chain disruptions at a time of high demand.[7] This economic problem, contained in the quoted song lyrics, gestures back to the biography of fruit magnate Minor C. Keith found earlier in the trilogy. There, Dos Passos not only explains how bananas became so popular in northern markets, but also casts light on the grim origins of the supply chains enabling their consumption.

16 Dubbed "Emperor of the Caribbean" by Dos Passos in the biography title, Keith is born to a family that "liked the smell of money," and, as if governed by genetic determinism, he is drawn by the allure of profit throughout his life (211). The smell of money dominates his other senses to the point that when hundreds of men die during a disastrous attempt to build a railroad through the jungles of Costa Rica, Keith's response is to send in 1500 more workers, who also perish. When the railroad is finally finished, it is a financial disaster. In order to recoup his losses, Keith starts planting bananas along the tracks, so that the trains might have something to haul: "this was the beginning of the Caribbean fruittrade," Dos Passos explains (213). In an attempt to make the railroad viable, Keith continues to trade in rubber, vanilla, tortoiseshell, sarsaparilla, and whatever he can get his hands on. "[A]nything he could buy cheap he bought," we are told, and "anything he could sell dear he sold" (213). Suddenly, lo and behold, there is a change in the fruit-eating habits of the northern hemisphere, as a previously exotic delicacy is now becoming widely popular: "in Europe and the United States people had started to eat bananas" (213). As the co-founder and vice-president of the newly-formed United Fruit Company, Keith swiftly responds to the demand by cutting down the jungles of Central America to plant more bananas, and to build more railroads to transport the bananas. And as a result, "every year more steamboats of the Great White Fleet / steamed north loaded with bananas," until Dos Passos reaches the final punchline of historical causality: "and that is the history of the American empire in the Caribbean, / and the Panama canal and the future Nicaragua canal and the marines and the battleships and the bayonets" (214). Thus, Dos Passos suggests that it is the popular demand and appetite for an exotic fruit that inaugurates an era of U.S. political, economic, and military domination in Central America, beginning with bananas and ending with bayonets.

17 The juxtaposition of bayonets and bananas does not only remind us of the connection between U.S. political and economic interests in Latin America, but it also brings to mind a major cause of supply chain disruptions in the fruit trade at the time, which could offer an answer to why the vendor in the song is out of bananas: strikes and labor unrest. In fact, as Dos Passos was completing *The 42nd Parallel* in 1929, which featured the biography of Keith, a United Fruit strike with deadly consequences had recently made the news. This was the Colombian Banana Massacre of December 1928, in which striking workers at a United Fruit plantation in the coastal town of Ciénaga were gunned down by the domestic military. The workers were demanding higher pay, collective insurance, and more sanitary housing—but United Fruit was not willing to yield (Elías Caro & Vidal Ortega 32). After days of unrest, and following skirmishes between the strikers and the military, General

Carlos Cortés Vargas issued the order to decisively quell the workers, fearing that the U.S. military might otherwise intervene in the conflict. "Prepare your mind to face the rebels and kill before foreign troops tread upon our soil," he reportedly told one of his commanders before the attack (qtd. in Farnsworth-Alvear et al. 470–71). As we already know from Dos Passos, the general's fears would not have been unfounded, since the U.S. marine had indeed landed in Nicaragua two years earlier to protect national interests from a local uprising. Exactly how willing the U.S. government was to intervene in the Colombian disturbance is not known, but it is clear that the dissolution of the conflict was viewed positively. After the massacre, U.S. ambassador Jefferson Caffrey sent a dispatch to Secretary of State Frank B. Kellogg, whom he had kept updated about the conflict: "I have the honor to report that the Bogotá representative of the United Fruit Company told me yesterday that the total number of strikers killed by the Colombian military exceeded one thousand," he wrote (qtd. in Farnsworth-Alvear et al. 470).

18 Curiously, despite Dos Passos's vilification of Minor C. Keith in *The 42nd Parallel*, there is not a single reference to the Banana Massacre to be found in the trilogy, even though the events in Ciénaga took place within the time period covered by the work as a whole. While Keith had stepped down as vice-president of United Fruit by the time of the strike and ensuing massacre, he was nevertheless the co-founder of the company, and his uncompromising business mentality had arguably left an imprint on its operations. Given the wide compass of what Dos Passos holds Keith responsible for ("the Panama canal and the future Nicaragua canal"), it is surprising that he does not take the opportunity to include the Banana Massacre in the catalog of misdeeds enumerated in the biography. Add to this the fact that the character Joe Williams takes up employment on a United Fruit ship in 1919, written and published after the massacre, and there learns more about the company and its practices, which again shows Dos Passos's antipathy towards Keith's business empire. While loading cargo in Dominica, Joe meets an older man living on the island, who proceeds to denounce the "United Thieves Company," as he calls it: "it's a monopoly," he vents, "if you won't take their prices they let your limes rot on the wharf" (492). The fruits are different, yet the methods are presumably the same. Perhaps this is another reason for why the vendor in the song has no bananas to sell: they are rotting on a wharf somewhere. Since they effectively hold a monopoly, United Fruit would rather let the fruit go to waste than risk decreasing their profit margins. These business practices, in which profit maximization takes precedence over all, are undoubtedly consistent with the labor policies that ultimately led to the Banana Massacre.

19 Even though it would seem to thematically fit into his narrative, it is not possible to say whether Dos Passos was aware of the Banana Massacre.

A survey using the digital archive *Newspapers.com* shows that the violent confrontation and its immediate aftermath were covered by over fifty U.S. dailies between December 7–10 in 1928, from the *Los Angeles Times* to the *Boston Globe*. Yet at that time, Dos Passos was on the move, traveling through Europe on his way back from the Soviet Union, so he could not have caught any U.S. coverage of the Colombian tragedy.[8] He would not return stateside until around Christmas (Ludington 274–75). But even if he had been at home and perusing the papers as usual, avid consumer of the news as he was, Dos Passos would not necessarily have become much the wiser about the events in Ciénaga. For the vast majority of the more than fifty articles published in the U.S. press were identical, consisting of the same Associated Press reports. Notably, in all their three articles on the situation as it was unfolding, the Associated Press avoided all mention of United Fruit—a conspicuous omission that would almost have to be intentional. Only two news articles mentioned the U.S. fruit corporation in relation to the affair: the dispatch from the *Chicago Tribune*'s own correspondent, and a United Press piece ("Yankee Cruiser Waits Order to End Banana War," "24 is Death Toll"). The former was republished in two regional newspapers, and the latter had much smaller circulation than its Associated Press counterpart, only appearing in five outlets.[9] As such, the Associated Press take on the events—their narrative, if you will—dominated the news coverage. Thus, even if Dos Passos had read about the strike and its violent dissolution, he would most likely have done so without any reference to United Fruit and as such would not have been able to connect it to the pattern of U.S. hegemony he was thematically inserting into the trilogy.

20 The way in which the Banana Massacre was divorced from the U.S. economic interests it was bound up with, and thus toned down in the public consciousness, both mirrors and validates the critique of mass media dramatized in Dos Passos's Newsreel sections. As we have already seen in the example of Debs and the railroads, Dos Passos was acutely aware of the ability of the mass media to obscure or drown out certain news items, and this is precisely what happened in the case of the Colombian atrocity, as United Fruit was conveniently omitted in the majority of news coverage. Although a handful of newspapers did mention the United Fruit connection, it would not have been enough to form a critical mass and enter the public consciousness. As such, and in line with Dos Passos's theory of mass culture, it was lost in the clamor.

21 From this follows that when Dos Passos was later scouring newspapers from the late 1920s for material to use in the Newsreels sections of *The Big Money*, he would most likely not have found one about the Banana Massacre that appeared relevant to his thematic concerns of U.S. domination in Latin America. Unbeknownst to him, the very editorial strategies of concealment and exclusion that he was criticizing in his work were keeping him from it—

not only literally, but also on an epistemological level. Later readers, however, may be familiar with the massacre thanks to Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), whose fictional representation of the tragedy brought it into the popular and historical consciousness.[10] These readers may well find the massacre hidden between the lines of the U.S.A. trilogy, as a natural albeit unexpressed part of the pattern of U.S. political and economic hegemony in Latin America. In this way, they may sense it beneath "Yes! We Have No Bananas," as if a dissonant counter-melody. For, as we have seen, the Colombian atrocity perfectly fits in Dos Passos's work, and would surely have been part of it—as words on the page—had the role of United Fruit not been whitewashed in the press at the time.

22 In looking back on the U.S.A. trilogy in his later life, Dos Passos highlighted its totalizing ambition: "I felt that everything should go in," he said, "popular songs, political aspirations and prejudices, ideals, delusions, clippings out of old newspapers" (qtd. in Chametzky 62). By casting such a wide net and running the material through his "four-way conveyor system," as he referred to the narrative modes, Dos Passos had created a literary engine capable of producing a wealth of meaning through allusion, implication, and juxtaposition (*14th Chronicle* 487). Granted, much of what he included in his compass was selective, chosen and arranged to make specific points or to steer the reader in certain directions. The thematic cluster on Latin America definitely falls into this category, as the frivolous "La Cucaracha" is made to resound through the Mexican portion of the work and take on greater meaning, at once illuminating and mocking U.S. interventionism. Yet the case of the Banana Massacre shows that Dos Passos's literary engine could also produce effects beyond the purview of intention. In fact, as I have suggested, it could even summon forth that which had been repressed in the public consciousness and kept from the author's own horizon of knowledge. It is a testament to Dos Passos's comprehensive chronicling of the time period, then, that the Banana Massacre in some sense manages to be present in the U.S.A. trilogy despite its absence.

Notes

[1] It should be noted that, at this point in the narrative, the production and use of marijuana was legal in Mexico, and as such it could rightly be seen as a national resource among others. It was criminalized in 1920 (Campos 200).

[2] In *War in the Shadows: The Guerrilla in History*, Robert B. Asprey addresses the issue of U.S. commercial interests in pre-revolutionary Mexico, stating that “American companies owned three quarters of the mines, half the oil fields . . . and vast cattle ranches in the North—all together, by 1910, an investment of some $2 billion” (240).

[3] The headline matches in large part the one put by the *New York Times* on an Associated Press story from August 28, 1926 (“American Marines Land in Nicaragua to Protect Aliens”).

[4] The source of the headline is an Associated Press story that was published in several newspapers nationwide, including the *New York Times*. It mentions that Pershing “danced the Argentine tango with the daughter of his host” while also “tast[ing] his first cup of yerba mate” (“Pershing Dances Tango in Argentina”).

[5] The headlines would seem to refer to Enrico and Dorothy Caruso expecting their first child, Gloria (born December 18, 1919), and the race riots in Knoxville, Tennessee on August 30, 1919, during which the Tennessee National Guard indeed used machine guns, killing two people.

[6] The differing font sizes of the headlines are present in the first edition of *The 42nd Parallel*, and are also reproduced in the Library of America edition of the trilogy. However, not all later editions of the U.S.A. novels preserve this important formal feature.

[7] The reason for the banana shortage in the song has sometimes been linked to the spread of Panama Disease, a fungus infection that plagued plantations in the period. However, while a survey of U.S. newspapers confirms that the disease was reported on in the early 1920s, it was by all accounts not part of the inspiration for the song. Frank Silver, one of the two songwriters, told the story behind the song to the *Hartford Courant* in July 1923, crediting the title phrase to a Greek fruit and soda stand operator on Long Island, who was fond of beginning sentences with the word “yes.” According to Silver: “It occurred to me that there was a good jingle in his ‘Yess [sic],—we have no bananas’ and Cohn [his co-writer] and I drummed it out.” As the author of the article points out, there was no deeper significance to the song: “The writer admits the number is meaningless” (“‘Bananas’ Writer Owes His Fortune to Fruit Peddler”). A United Press piece on the song from later in the summer makes clear that there was no general banana shortage to speak of that year: “ . . . the produce merchants claim sales have mounted so rapidly they almost have to say ‘yes we have no bananas today’—then another boat load arrives” (“‘Banana Boys’ Clean Up $60,000 On Their Jazz Song”).

[8] Whether Dos Passos picked up anything from the European press is unclear but unlikely, given that he was traveling through Poland and Germany whose national languages he did not master.

[9] A week after the massacre, the Associated Press put out an update on the events in Ciénaga, focusing on the human and material cost, but it saw less circulation than their original series of articles, appearing in only ten newspapers in my search. Here, United Fruit is actually mentioned, but symptomatically only as one among other parties that had incurred property damages as a result of the disturbances, with no reference to the company being the subject of the strike (“Strike Damage Exceeds Million”).

Notes

[10] Marcelo Bucheli comments on the importance of García Márquez's novel in bringing attention to the massacre: "[B]efore 1967, no serious historical studies had been written about the 1928 strike or about the social dynamics surrounding the banana industry in Colombia" (2).

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Biography

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