two slightly different iterations, has been reproduced countless times, appearing in YouTube videos, Wikipedia, and Google Images as well as in scholarly books and articles.

From the studio format and the suits and ties, the five men evidently sought out a photographer who could make a group portrait for them. Once a local artisan-entrepreneur made their likeness, they may have each kept a copy as a memento of the bond they were forging in a shared struggle. Against a backdrop of infinite black space, these workers came together in their best—and, perhaps, borrowed—clothes. They do not appear to be downtrodden. Instead, they represent themselves as serious and dignified. But the conventions of bourgeois portraiture are not enough to contain a few aberrant details, recorded in a light-sensitive emulsion that froze a fraction of a second in 1928. Those details disrupt the serene image of accomplished men.

In the center, wearing a white linen suit, sits Raúl Eduardo Mahecha. He fixes his gaze off to one side of the camera and has a fountain pen in his breast pocket. His companion with the number "3" written onto his image is Nicanor Serrano, a banana worker near Ciénaga, who furrows his brow and slightly tilts his head, yielding a countenance that bespeaks worry. At the time that the United Fruit Company manager affixed this photo to a memorandum that he sent to others within the company’s internal network, Bernardino Guerrero, the young man labeled number “1,” was serving a prison sentence of fourteen years. But here, prior to being locked up, he looks into the lens of the camera with patient, gentle eyes. Meanwhile, the manager reported that number “5,” Erasmo Coronel, “was killed in the fighting at Sevilla.” With skin darker than that of his companions, Pedro M. del Río, labeled number “3,” calmly looks straight into the camera. Faintly visible on the surface that bears the image of man number “3,” the photographer impressed the name of his studio. At every turn, this photo reminds the viewing subject of the temporality of the photographic space. Erasmo Coronel had, at the moment this picture was taken, looked at a photographer who took his picture. The photographer, in turn, saw a live human being. But those who received the company memo with this photograph attached saw the image of a man who was no more.

This image is worth examining because we have it (that is rare) and we know something about how the United Fruit Company used it. Al-
though the company made extensive use of photography, we have few pictures of actual workers—most are of cars, bananas, buildings, and the construction of irrigation works. Furthermore, we should analyze it because it can stand for other images that we would like to see and that would enhance our understanding of the company’s labor relations in Latin America. But nearly all of those images have been kept secret, hidden from generations of laborers, researchers, and the general public. With this solitary image that was liberated from an archive of capital, we can begin to imagine the other images like it that exist, or once existed, but that we will not be allowed to see. Such images invite us to reconsider the struggle of these workers while also revealing the violence exercised by the Colombian government and the United Fruit Company. This photo invites us to look at those that the company did not want to see and to listen to those whose voice it considered noise and not speech. From the stray fragments that have leaked out of an archive that refuses to let us in, we can begin to retrace the images that we cannot see and the futures that capital and the state violently cut short.

This photograph of friendship, a moment of male bonding between co-workers who later got caught in the snare of a violent and distinctively American form of imperialism, also helps us explain two important processes. First, the photo reveals how five working people sculpted themselves for a camera, projecting themselves to unknown viewers as respectable people at home with the comforts that the formal studio setting staged for early-twentieth-century cosmopolitan imaginaries. Second, the photo, with the numbers inscribed upon it, exposes one way that imperial sovereignty was challenged and reasserted. The workers went into the studio as self-conscious strike leaders, seeking to fashion a way of producing bananas that was consistent with Colombian labor laws. In that regard, this is a photograph of Colombian self-forging in an imperial contact zone. But the numbers written on that image are those of an identifying, selecting, and disciplinary gaze that sought to eliminate those workers and the local sovereignty that they nurtured. Thus this single photo tells a larger story about how working people contested neocolonialism, forcing the United Fruit Company and the Latin American state in which it was operating to decide whether or not to uphold the laws of Colombia or to use violence to restore the imperial relations that obtained in the banana zone. By focusing on how the striking workers put the question of local and national sovereignty into play, I show how merely insisting that the laws on the books should be enforced was interpreted as a revolutionary, anti-imperialist act that challenged the spatial and legal exceptions that the company had carved out in the tropics of Latin America and the Caribbean.

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"Memorandum, Colombian Division." United Fruit Company, March 8, 1929.
The Archive

During the early 1980s, anthropologist Philippe Bourgois was conducting fieldwork on the United Fruit Company's plantations in Costa Rica and Panama. One day, an aging warehouse foreman pointed him to an attic full of papers that the company probably thought had been destroyed. Bourgois managed to salvage nearly two thousand pages from the tens of thousands of documents that filled "four to five dozen unnumbered, mildewed, and rodent-eaten cardboard boxes." About twenty-five years later, as I was conducting research in a banana-company town in Honduras, I was reading Bourgois's work and saw the picture of the Colombian labor leaders.

The United Fruit Company did not intend for images like the one from the historic strike in Colombia to be seen by those outside its own management team and the security forces upon which it relied. Consequently, historians have few such images to interpret and to draw upon as evidence that would allow photographs to fulfill their nineteenth-century mimetic function of providing immediate indices of particular moments. Photos like the one of the five Colombian labor leaders fit within a panoptic drive that Michel Foucault argued, in his early work, was emblematic of modernity and which now plays out in police and military surveillance programs. For these reasons and more, historians have an obligation to attend to the photographic traces left by imperial power in its encounter with workers. But with so few images available, how might we go about interpreting the images that have managed to break loose from a visual archive of power?

Phototivist Ariella Azoulay gives us tools for considering images like the one of the Ciénaga strike leaders. First, in positing what she calls "the civil contract of photography," she argues that nobody owns photographs. Private individuals and organizations can temporarily care for photos. But, ultimately, photographs belong to everyone who engages with them, to every citizen in "the citizenry of photography." The citizenry of photography is not governed by a sovereign or limited by territoriality but is, instead, made up of anyone who addresses others through images or who takes the position of a photo's addressee. Second, as spectators, we have a duty to interpret these images. Third, we must exercise what she calls "civil imagination" to think about the photographs not taken and about the photographs not seen. Reading the image of the labor leaders in the Ciénaga strike in combination with the internal memorandum that it accompanied, we can infer that there were other, similar images. In fact, from just the papers that Bourgois recovered, we have several examples of the kinds of images that the company used to surveil its workforce.
Inscriptions

Born in 1884, Raúl Eduardo Mahecha joined the military of Colombia’s conservative government and rose to the rank of captain. When Theodore Roosevelt shaved off part of Colombia to secure U.S. interests in building an interoceanic canal, Mahecha found himself in the newly created nation-state of Panama. In 1917, he settled in Medellín, where he founded two newspapers, *El Baluarte* and *El Luchador*, both of which sought to orient workers and to provide a space for them to voice their complaints.

Mahecha then became active in the three most important strikes in Colombia in the 1920s. In October 1924, nearly all of the workers of the U.S.-owned Tropical Oil Company went on strike. Within a couple of weeks, the government arrested Mahecha, who was serving as the vice president of the first Colombian socialist congress and had been helping to organize support for the strike through the publication of a leaflet demanding an increase in wages. Then, in early January 1927, Tropical Oil’s workers put forward a list of demands that were similar to the ones that they had unsuccessfully made a couple years earlier: a salary increase of 25 percent, an eight-hour day, and screens on the windows of company housing. But the company was unwilling to negotiate. Meanwhile, the police shot two workers dead. The government declared a state of siege, arresting and deporting Mahecha and the other labor leaders.⁵

In February 1928, Mahecha and two other representatives of the Partido Socialista Revolucionario (PSR), Ignacio Torres Giraldo and Maria Cano, went on a lecture tour of the banana zone. Torres Giraldo described the fever of support that Mahecha inspired as “mahechismo.” He described Mahecha as “bordering on forty” and as having “some vulgar manners that pleased the common people.” Torres Giraldo also noted that Mahecha’s speeches betrayed “a near total absence of knowledge of the Soviet revolution, but drew from his rich arsenal of memories of popular struggles in Colombia.”⁶

While Mahecha is the outstanding figure in the photograph, the workers struck less because of him and more out of frustration with the contract system, the long hours, and the daily abuses to which they and their families were subjected by company employees and large growers.⁷ One worker, Aristides López Rojano, remembers: “We worked from six in the morning until eleven and then from one in the afternoon until six... The contractor paid the salary and reserved up to thirty percent for himself.” In each of the strikes that led up to the big one in 1928, the banana workers insisted that the subcontract system be eliminated and that they be granted direct contracts with the company. Regarding the indignities that manual laborers suffered, José Maldonado, who worked for a Colombian grower who sold bananas to the UFC, reported that he used to work day and night to earn one and a half or two *pesos* a day. But he earned that wage only when he brought his children with him to help harvest the bananas and his wife to wash clothes or to make food for the workers. Maldonado complained that often the workers’ wives or daughters were taken by the grower as his own private courtesans, indicating that the banana workers and their families remembered suffering intimate forms of violence that derived, in large part, from their structural position vis-à-vis the large growers.⁸

On the evening of October 6, 1928, the workers’ delegates gathered to discuss their grievances and demands. Erasmo Coronel (the one wearing the bow tie in the group portrait) spoke in favor of a strike.⁹ At around five in the morning, the workers agreed on their list of nine demands, summarized here by historian Marcelo Bucheli:

1. Collective insurance (which they defended using Law 37 [1921] and Law 32 [1922]).
2. Indemnification for work-related accidents (according to Law 57 [1915]).
3. Hygienic dwelling places and one day of rest every week (Law 46 [1918], Law 15 [1925], and Law 76 [1926]).
4. A 50% increase for lower-paid workers.
5. Discontinuance of the company’s commissaries.
6. Elimination of the use of credit slips in place of money.
8. Replacement of subcontractors with direct contracts with the company.
9. Establishment of hospitals in sufficient number and the proper sanitation of camps.¹⁰

These were not the demands of communist dupes. The workers’ long-standing concern about the lack of formal contracts, along with the moderate demand that the company recognize them as its employees,
indicate that the strike was, as Buchel argues, a worker-initiated effort to modernize existing labor relations. In other words, the workers did not have to appeal to a communist or “subversive” imaginary. Rather, from the legal framework of 1920s Colombia, they took an already existing inscription of equality and demanded that it be implemented and enforced.

In repeatedly citing the Colombian constitution, the workers were demanding that the company comply with the laws already on the books, thus drawing attention to the nucleus of sovereign power in Colombia: the United Fruit Company. So despite the fact that the banana zone was not a bounded enclave, the UFC succeeded in placing itself outside the juridical order, choosing which laws it had to obey and which it could disregard. In the face of a massive strike, the company would soon reassert itself as the very definer of that order, summoning the repressive power of the Colombian state to do its bidding against a group of Colombian citizens in its indirect employ.

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On the morning of October 7, the plantation workers appointed their negotiators: Erasmo Coronel, Nicanor Serrano, and Pedro M. del Río. The three men then traveled to Santa Marta to present the workers’ demands to the company. The United Fruit Company’s general manager, Thomas Bradshaw, declined to meet with them. Meanwhile, using a printing press that they brought with them to Ciénaga, Mahecha and Bernardino Guerrero publicized the workers’ activities by printing fliers and the Vanguardia newspaper. On October 28, the delegation of workers tried again to meet with the company’s management. But Bradshaw refused to negotiate, citing a 1925 decree from the Colombian government that stated that contract workers were not employees because there was no “juridical link” between the workers and the company. Then, the Colombian Congress passed a law sponsored by the Ministries of War, Interior, and the Treasury to curtail strikes, restrict freedom of assembly, and to allow censorship of the press. The “Law for Social Defense” (Law 69, October 30, 1928) allowed for strict surveillance and narrowed the parameters of what could count as legitimate public discourse. This law created an official frame for political surveillance, an activity that, for the UFC, was ongoing in the banana plantations.

On November 6, the executive committee of the Unión Sindical de Trabajadores de Magdalena issued the company an ultimatum: negotiate or the workers strike. Even the governor of Magdalena sought, to no avail, to persuade the company to negotiate with the workers. On November 11, the negotiating committee and representatives of sixty-three banana farms convened in Ciénaga. The workers declared a general strike, effective the next day.

The workers argued that the UFC “was not obeying even one of the labor laws of Colombia, and had declared itself to be in open rebellion.” Furthermore, “the workers of the Banana Zone comply with all of the laws of the country and, today, in declaring a strike, they obey the law to vindicate their rights, violated daily by the powerful Fruit Company, who looks at the worker with indifference as he wears himself out with ulcers, malaria, tuberculosis and other diseases, without even a humane sentiment that would move the company to comply with the labor legislation.” In other words, the workers were protesting the fact the Boston-based company had created an extrajudicial space in which it could exploit them. Within a few days of this declaration, thousands were withholding their labor.

The shopkeepers, for their part, resented the monopoly that the UFC enjoyed through its company stores. United Fruit paid its workers partly in vouchers valid only in its commissaries. The company also prohibited the entry of outside merchants into its plantation work camps. The merchants helped to formulate the list of nine demands and the fact that the workers included a call to eliminate the company stores helped them to secure the support of local storeowners. As Salvador Bornacelli recalled, “It was the merchants who practically sustained the strike. They gave us money, paper, medicines, and foodstuffs.”

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On the first day of the strike, the commander of the Colombian armed forces appointed General Carlos Cortés Vargas as the military chief of the Plaza of Santa Marta and the banana zone. By the second day, Cortés Vargas was in Ciénaga with a battalion and relying upon, in his words, “the secret agents that we had throughout the Zone.” Those “secret agents” were likely the United Fruit Company’s paid informants. From the start, the military used the UFC’s trains to transport soldiers
throughout the zone. When the Colombian government’s own labor inspector judged that the strike was legal, Cortés Vargas immediately had him jailed.\textsuperscript{16}

The United Fruit Company and the Colombian military coordinated their response to the strike. The merchants in the banana zone noted that soldiers who only earned about 120 pesos monthly were suddenly arriving in their shops with 500-peso bills, which only the UFC distributed, evidently to break any real or potential solidarity between the soldiers and the striking workers.\textsuperscript{17} Employees of the company rode the trains, indicating who should be arrested.\textsuperscript{18} In the memories of workers, the bond between the company and the military was even more intimate, as Adán Ortiz noted: “For many nights in a row, Cortés Vargas had been meeting with the manager. There was an extravagance of liquor, food, and orgies with Colombian women and foreigners and even they got drunk with the soldiers. Everybody knew it, especially those in Ciénaga.”\textsuperscript{19}

But sovereignty in the banana zone remained contested, both by the workers and by the local officials who did not take kindly to the commands of newly arrived General Cortés Vargas. Santander Alemán, a foreman in the UFC’s railroad division, recalled that he and about eight hundred other workers were traveling from one banana camp to another when the soldiers stopped them and asked who was in charge. The workers replied that they were all in charge (“todos éramos jefes”).\textsuperscript{20} The soldiers then arrested and turned over 413 prisoners to Governor José María Núñez Roca. On November 13, the governor wrote to Cortés Vargas, informing him that the next day he would be receiving Erasmo Coronel, Pedro M. del Río, and Nicanor Serrano to settle the strike. But since Cortés Vargas had arrested Serrano, the governor unilaterally decided to release him so that he could serve as a representative of the workers’ executive committee. After a few more days in the Santa Marta jail, the governor of Magdalena released the rest of the men that Cortés Vargas had sent.

The mayor of Ciénaga, a traditional Liberal Party stronghold, was even more outspoken in his solidarity with the striking workers and in his opposition to the militarization of the banana zone. On Saturday, December 1, an express boat arrived in Ciénaga with two hundred soldiers who immediately occupied the offices of the municipal government, converting them into barracks. The mayor of Ciénaga, Vic-
tor Manuel Fuentes Jiménez, complained in at least two newspapers, La Prensa of Barranquilla and El Diario of Córdoba, that the municipal buildings were property of the municipality and that “the federal government had not contributed one cent toward their construction.”\textsuperscript{21} He stated that he had not been consulted about this unlawful occupation and, under no circumstances, would he have permitted it.

With tens of thousands of workers defiantly withholding their labor and with local political leaders publicly criticizing the heavy-handed military tactics, Cortés Vargas had reason to worry about his tenuous hold on the region. He could not even trust his own troops. On December 4, 1928, La Prensa reported that a contingent of three hundred soldiers had just arrived in Santa Marta; the regiment was “made up exclusively of antioqueños, requested by the Commander of the zone, who feels that the soldiers from the coast do not provide any security at all, given that many of them are linked to the strikers. Almost all of them are former banana workers.”\textsuperscript{22} The general and military commander of the banana zone saw that the successful use of brute force was intimately bound to questions of loyalty. He worried that his underlings who had once worked for the UFC would side with the strikers and disobey the orders of their superiors. Command could be undone, Cortés Vargas worried, by affective ties and a sense that one was not fighting on the side of justice. Put differently, Cortés Vargas feared class solidarity.

Tensions escalated when the United Fruit Company paid strikebreakers to begin cutting fruit on December 4. The strikers sought to thwart the attempt by the company and the government to circumvent the strike. At eleven in the morning, the UFC train left the Ciénaga station carrying the regiment of antioqueños who were sent to accompany the strikebreakers as they worked in the plantations near Sevilla. From here, the stories diverge. Salvador Bornacelli recalls that the workers “explained the reasons for the strike and the soldiers comprehended those reasons and accompanied some of the guys up to the union house where the workers served them food.” But Cortés Vargas claims that his soldiers had been assaulted by the workers and that his first concern was “to rescue the soldiers and their weaponry: the rifles and the cartridges of 250 rounds that each soldier carried.”\textsuperscript{23} Cortés Vargas returned with his men and took “hundreds” of the strikers as prisoners. With the strike in its fifth week, the banana zone militarized, and having lost the sup-
port of the local shop owners, whose revenues had dried up, the workers were increasingly frustrated. To block the trains loaded with fruit (and soldiers) from continuing to the port, women and children sat on the tracks.

On December 5, the workers received news that the governor of Magdalena had summoned them to Ciénaga to settle the strike. They began to gather by the thousands. Then, at just before midnight, Cortés Vargas received a telegram with Decree Number 1, the government’s official declaration of a state of siege (estado de sitio) in the banana zone. Not content with an abstract document granting him emergency powers, Cortés Vargas set out the specifics in a separate decree:

Article 1: In compliance with Legislative Decree 1 of 5 December 1928, I peremptorily order the immediate dissolution of any meeting of more than three individuals.

Article 2: The government forces are ordered, with legal precautions, to strictly comply with this Decree, firing at the multitude [la multitud] if necessary.

Article 3: No person can move after the military bugle sounds.24

As the government suspended the rule of law in the banana zone, the capacity to decide who had authority in the particular region was indeed fluid, with strikers impeding the movement of the trains and even depositing the police inspector of Riofrio, placing labor activist Manuel Campo in charge.25 The gathering crowd converted Ciénaga’s train station into an impromptu amphitheater, with the parked railcars as its main stage. Mahecha and Mayor Fuentes mounted the freight cars to address the workers. Here again, the accounts diverge. Cortés Vargas wrote: “the orators, in incendiary harangues, inspired the people to remain firm, given that the hour of sacrifice had arrived with the declaration of the state of siege.” In contrast, several of the workers recall that, as early as 10 p.m., Mahecha began exhorting the strikers to return home. But the workers called Mahecha a coward and told him to go home himself. Mahecha warned them that the military was setting them up.26

According to Cortés Vargas’s own richly documented and self-exculpatory account, at around 1:30 a.m. on December 6, he ordered all of his troops, “with their machine guns,” to march to the train station. Surrounded by armed soldiers, the “mutineers” (amotinados) intensified their shouting. The military played the drums for five minutes and then Captain Julio Garavito read both Legislative Decree 1, which placed the region under a state of siege, and Cortés Vargas’s own military decree.27 While the putative reason for reading these decrees before the strikers was to inform them of a legal decision that the government had taken, I would suggest that the public reading of these decrees was not really intended for the workers. Rather, before using violence to reconstitute the social order under the command of the military, the federal government, and the United Fruit Company, the act of reading worked to bind the soldiers together and to the sovereign powers that issued those decrees.28 In keeping with Walter Benjamin’s insight that the sovereign decision is always an act of revolutionary violence that institutes a new juridical order, in the moment just prior to when the military fired upon the rebellious workers, Captain Garavito read the decree that suspended the guarantees of the law and Cortés Vargas’s new rule about freedom of assembly and its consequences.29 With Cortés Vargas still unsure of the loyalty of his troops, the act of reading these decrees served to counteract any remaining affective ties that the infantrymen may have felt toward their old buddies and fellow magdaleneses, organizing the men into proxies of the sovereign.30

Unperturbed, the workers refused to disperse and instead shouted out to the soldiers to come over and join them. Cortés Vargas ordered the bugler to call the troops to attention. In a scene that sat dormant in Cortés Vargas’s 1929 memoir until 1967, when Gabriel García Márquez pulled it out of a past that threatened to be forgotten, the captain ordered the crowd: “You have five minutes to disperse.” The workers stayed put. Five minutes later, the bugle sounded again. “One more minute and we will open fire.” Another bugle call. No one moved. General Carlos Cortés Vargas described the scene:

During the course of this last minute, we shouted: “People, disperse, we will open fire!”
“We’ll give you the remaining minute!” a voice shouted from the tumult.
We had complied with the penal code. The last bugle call ripped through the air; the multitude seemed stuck in the ground. It was necessary to comply with the law, and we complied: “Open fire!” we shouted.
The human mass fell like a single man, the clash of the discharge drowned out the shouting.31

In One Hundred Years of Solitude, García Márquez altered this scene by adding one word, so that the voice from the crowd addressed the soldiers directly: “Bastards, we’ll give you the remaining minute!”

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In the dark of night, the firing guns were like so many flash bulbs, illuminating the plaza and arresting the movement of those at the other end of the barrel. Those who could flee, fled. They moved beyond the gun sights, outside the frame lit up by the discharges of the Lewis semiautomatic machine guns.32 Those who were cut down lay dead or wounded in the plaza at the railroad terminus. Photography is a script of light. The traces of the bullets through the plaza etched a new script that went straight from the muzzle flash, burned through the early morning in this public space, and tore apart the body of a person who had gathered to change how he was treated by the banana company.33 “They fired on anything that moved. They even killed donkeys that night,” recalls Adán Ortiz.34 This writing with light went on for several minutes, inscribing the sovereign decision upon the bodies of the workers.

When Cortés Vargas called a halt to the firing, the dark of night returned. As Hernando Varela Oliveros remembers, “We heard the garbage truck going by in front of our house and then the boat tooting its horn. The next day, we realized that the truck had been transporting the dead bodies behind the hospital, where they loaded them onto the Pichincha barge to throw them into the sea.”35 Another witness, Santander Alemán, recounts what happened at daylight: “At six in the morning, I was witnessing (presenciendo) the gathering up of the cadavers. The soldiers tried to prevent the townspeople from seeing, but the people wouldn’t go away. The people wanted to see.”36 But of the hundreds that the people of the banana zone insisted that the military killed that night, when daylight broke, there were, according to popular memory, just nine dead bodies lying in the plaza. Josefa María, who worked from Ciénaga to support the strike, noted that the military deliberately left each body as a signifier: “They had only left nine dead bodies, equal to the nine demands that the workers made.”37

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Nine demands and nine corpses. A mass movement but no photos that would allow the masses to see images of themselves acting in concert. Flashes from machine guns. Memories of the massacre written upon bodies and minds but not on photographic paper. A photograph with numbers written upon it and a memo that reads like a hit list. Bodies disposed of under the cover of darkness. Archives with thousands of photos but none of the strike. These are the mechanisms through which sovereign violence constituted a field of vision. What we cannot see in the documentary and photographic record, we cannot use to generate knowledge of the past. The violence of December 6, 1928, reversed the strike and reestablished the Colombian government’s control over the region. The law-making violence of December 6 was then covered up. Bodies were buried in mass graves and hundreds of people were never seen again. In the archives, the violence of that night mutates into law-preserving violence.38 Official archives contain little to no record of the massacre and the private archives that may contain records of this neocolonial violence remain inaccessible to researchers. By imagining the photos that could have been taken and by reconstructing the story of the Ciénaga massacre around the few photos that we do have, we might begin to restore the potentiality of the archive and the contingency of history. Arresting these images of the past as they flit by, thereby taking up the task that Benjamin set before us, we might radically historicize a moment in which sovereignty and demands for recognition were truly in play in early-twentieth-century Colombia.

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While the United Fruit Company and the Colombian military had incessantly raised the specter of violence from the workers, it was not until the declaration of the state of siege that the banana zone was converted into a space outside the law. By eight in the morning of December 6, the military destroyed Mahecha’s printing press, burned three thousand
copies of the daily newspaper La Nación, and began stealing from the cooperative store and ransacking the houses of labor leaders. The U.S. Consulate in Santa Marta cabled Washington to request “the presence within calling distance of an American war ship.” Many workers fled the banana zone to find refuge in the mountains. But some stayed and sought to avenge the killing of their companions.

The workers exacted the heaviest price in Sevilla, as recounted by the chief of police, Salvador Fuentes. When Fuentes got word that the workers had just looted the company store in Orihueca, he met with the UFC’s superintendent in Sevilla to see how they could defend the company’s property. They decided that Fuentes and twelve policemen would move into the UFC’s engineering quarters, where twelve North Americans and three Colombians were already hiding out. Soon, the workers arrived, armed with machetes, rifles, and revolvers. Fuentes and Lieutenant José María Quintero begged the workers to stay calm, but they would not listen, for just as with the workers’ speech, in which the United Fruit Company heard only “blah, blah, blah” and not meaningful words spoken by people who deserved recognition, now the workers heard only “blah, blah, blah” from the authorities. Fuentes continued: “A voice from the multitude ordered: ‘Fire!’ Immediately shots were fired and Lieutenant Quintero fell at my side, mortally wounded.”

According to the official report, the police fired back at eight hundred workers. They killed several, and the workers began to take cover behind the railroad cars while also looting the company store and setting the company’s other buildings on fire. A couple hours later, the military arrived and the workers dispersed. The workers had killed Lieutenant Quintero, while the military and police had killed twenty-nine workers, including “Erasmo Coronel, the communist ringleader.” Years later, Álavo Girón reminisced: “Erasmo Coronel was a muchacho that we raised here. He was simple and good.” The next day, soldiers managed to shoot Mahecha, wounding him as he escaped.

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On December 7, the U.S. Embassy in Bogotá reported: “Situation outside Santa Marta City unquestionably very serious: outside zone is in revolt; military who have orders ‘not to spare ammunition’ have already killed and wounded about fifty strikers.” Violence exercised through Colombian proxies would be sufficient to restore the status quo. But first, U.S. citizens had to be removed from the zone so that when the military repressed the strikers via a “general offensive,” there would be no danger of “repercussions.” On December 9, a troop train arrived in the banana zone of Santa Marta “with all American citizens,” according to a telegram from Vice Consul Lawrence F. Cottie. He continued: “No Americans killed or wounded. Guerilla warfare now continuing in the zone but military forces are actively engaged in clearing the district of the Communists. [...] All danger to American citizens is now past.” Americans are protected. Communists are banned and excluded. Sovereign authority is being restored.

Vice Consul Cottie reported that “property belonging to the United Fruit Company, Colombian employees of the Company and private planters was destroyed.” Furthermore, he described how the striking workers had been discursively transformed into the enemy: “The troops are still vigorously pursuing the main bands of communists—as the strikers are now called by the military—and excepting for occasional sniping by small groups throughout the entire zone, the situation is controlled by the army.” The sovereign’s power, which had been briefly suspended, was now being vigorously reasserted. But the photograph of the Colombian labor leaders testifies to the fact that the laborers envisioned another way of being, thinking, and working.

And so it was in Santa Marta, as a crowd formed in response to the sovereign’s attempt to reassert his (and it was always “his”) power. The U.S. State Department narrated this crisis of authority, noting that “looting and killing was carried on from the moment the announcement of a state of Martial Law was made and the fact that the American residents in the Zone came out of it alive is due to the defense they put up for six hours when they held off the mob that was bent upon killing them.” The U.S. consular officer rightly traces the popular indignation at the state’s extraordinary reaction—the suspension of the rule of law—to the workers’ demands that the company obey Colombian laws. The workers had forced the imperial model of the United Fruit Company into crisis. The sleight of hand by which the company pretended that it was not really in charge had to be abandoned. The actions of the workers made this neocolonial enterprise unstable precisely
because their very presence always threatened to call into question the most fundamental political and economic relations that underpinned foreign-controlled commodity production. Thus, the strike exposed and upset the relations of imperial sovereignty that normally obtained in the banana zones.

The U.S. consular officer continued: “Santa Marta was a stretch of territory that was under the control of mobs of armed men and women.”

In other words, the workers had succeeded, for two days, in creating an autonomous zone that was not subject to the authority of sovereigns in Boston, Bogotá, or Washington. This is the constant threat that constituted power sees in the constitutive energy of a multitude. This is the threat that the United States saw in the “mob” that threatened to rearrange a “soft” colonial relationship, forcing the United Fruit Company to choose between obeying the laws of the host country or openly revealing that this political and economic order rested not on consent, or even compliance, but on the barrel of a gun.

Proper power relations were restored through state violence, as conveyed by the U.S. Embassy: “The legal advisor of the United Fruit Company here in Bogotá stated yesterday that the total number of strikers killed by the Colombian military authorities during the recent disturbance reached between five and six hundred; while the number of soldiers killed was one.”

A few weeks later, U.S. officials upped the estimate: “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.”

In spite of the unrelenting violence directed against the laborers, many remained defiant. The workers continued to publicly denounce banana imperialism by displaying the connection between the Colombian government, its military response to the strike, and the way that banana production was now associated with death. The fruit company had fashioned itself as an agent of science bringing progress to the backward tropics. But through the strike, the workers forced the multinational corporation and the Colombian government to take the instrumental reason that underwrote industrial banana production to its absolute limit. The workers openly challenged the company’s representations of itself as an engine of progress. As the U.S. Embassy noted: “The manifestations against the Government of yesterday and the day before were conspicuous for the number of inscriptions carried by manifestants relating to the fruit workers’ strike, denouncing the Government and especially General Cortés Vargas for the manner in which the strike was put down; also, skeletons and skulls adorned with bunches of bananas were freely displayed.” The public linking of death and bananas was not the branding that United Fruit would have chosen for itself. By making that link, workers publicly laid claim to their space and to the local meaning of cultivating this fruit. The strike was about dignity. But even more fundamentally, it was political, in accord with Jacques Rancière’s description of politics as the staging of a dispute by those who have no recognized part in the community. That is, the workers were deidentifying as déclassés who could be expected to tolerate any abuse and to continue working without being recognized as rights-bearing employees. By repeatedly raising the issue of direct contracts, the workers went through a process of subjectification as workers, with the same rights as any other worker, and as citizens, with the same rights as any other citizens in Colombia.

Even after the massacre, the military had yet to disperse the laborers and their families. Workers continued to gather. They continued to contest the treatment they were receiving. The banana workers showed that although they had been placed into a state of exception, they refused to stay in that juridical space of abandonment. For demanding recognition that they were indeed UFC employees and that the company should obey Colombian laws and provide better compensation, the United Fruit Company marshaled the repressive force of the Colombian military. In other words, the company was the de facto sovereign in this region of Colombia and its local power was contested by labor, which proposed that banana plantation workers be incorporated into the political community of the nation by making the “radical” demand that the laws of the country be enforced.

Imagining a Civil Archive

The United Fruit Company Photograph Collection at Harvard University contains more than 10,400 photos, at least 369 of which are from the company’s operations in Colombia. Absent from this official archive is the photograph of the five strike leaders and the memorandum that
accompanied that image. Also absent are photographs of the 1928 strike. But there are several photos in the official UFC archive that do document the destruction that workers wrought upon the company's stores, living quarters, bodegas, and telephone lines.

So, what to make of the presence of the photos of the burnt company stores and engineering quarters in the UFC archive at Harvard? Let me respond by recalling that the photo of the five workers that was circulated among company managers does not contain any violence in the image itself. It is the memo that suggests the violent purposes to which that image was put. That image-text initiates a movement of prosopopoëia in which the figures of the labor leaders depicted in the photo are put forth only to efface them, to disfigure them as they are withdrawn by the managers' recontextualization of the subjects depicted and by the numbers and the word "out" written onto the surface of the image. The photo memo distances the company from violence, taking the load off of the communicator by placing the unfavorable ascriptions of "leaders of the recent disturbances," "serving a term of fourteen years in the federal penitentiary," and "one of the most dangerous communist leaders" onto the men whose class status is disguised by the genre of studio portraiture. And then the UFC kept this photo out of its official archive.

In contrast, the photos of the burnt commissaries document violence—the violence that the workers carried out. The photo of the burnt company store also shows how the workers rejected the constituent violence of the Colombian military and the United Fruit Company. Hiding the photo of the five workers and the memo is one aspect of an ongoing law-preserving violence. Hence, this photograph needs to be read in conjunction with the photo of the five labor leaders. The death that links them is the presence of Erasmo Coronel in the first and the absence of any life in the second, which is more like a crime scene photo, devoid of life and establishing evidence. The way that these two images appeared in the two UFC archives—one not intended to be seen by the public and the other donated for researchers—suggests the ways that photos can be used to perpetuate violent sovereign acts that continue to regulate the visual field. By rescuing one of the photos from an archive of power and by reading it in conjunction with an uncensored image, we exercise what Azoulay calls "civil imagination" and begin to transcend the points of view of the United Fruit Company and the Colombian government.

Before closing, I would like to introduce another iteration of the studio portrait of the five labor leaders. It is the same exact portrait as the one that Philippe Bourgois found in the UFC's archive in Panama. But the numbers and the penmanship vary from one photo to the other. In 1929, General Cortés Vargas published a book in which he gave his official account of the strike and the role of the military in Magdalena. The original 1929 edition of his book contained several photographs, including the studio portrait of Bernardino Guerrero, Nicanor Serrano, Pedro M. del Río, Raúl Eduardo Mahecha, and Erasmo Coronel. Although the order of the numbers varies, both photos were captioned such that each number correctly corresponded to the person denoted in the picture. Here's my supposition: At one of the meetings between Cortés Vargas and the UFC manager, each of them had a copy of the photo. The company had its own photographers and they could easily make copies of
emerged more than fifty years later, from a secret company archive in the early 1980s, there is one more visual link worth highlighting. Cortés Vargas also provided a photograph of the engineers’ quarters in Sevilla after those buildings were destroyed in the fighting on December 6, 1928. That exact same image now sits in the United Fruit Company Photograph Collection at Harvard University. As the company documented the destruction of its property, it evidently made extra prints, some of which Cortés Vargas obtained. The same picture, in two different places and times, marks the place where Erasmo Coronel was killed. His corpse is not in the image. The only violence that the image depicts is that perpetrated by the workers. Erasmo Coronel was buried separately from the other workers killed in Sevilla. But he was also buried in the studio portrait and marked “out.” He was then entombed in a company archive.
in Panama. Anthropologist Philippe Bourgois began a process of exhuming his body, breaking the pact that kept the photo memo, and the violence it suggested, hidden from public view. By retracing the violence that buried this image and by imagining the other photos that we don’t get to see, we might begin to interrupt the law-preserving violence that keeps such images secret. In that way, we might begin to bring back the dreams and possibilities that the five men who posed for this picture held fast. We might restore the potentialities of the archive and put it toward more civil ways of being together. But even after the massacre and despite the fact that the archive of it has been mutilated, the striking workers still managed to inscribe equality into a radically unequal neocolonial order. That inscription continues to be cited by Colombian workers and campesinos struggling to be seen and heard in a political community that often refuses to recognize them and dismisses their speech as noise.

Labor Exposes Spatial Exceptions

In closing, I would like to explain how my reading of this photograph from 1928 recasts basic historiographic questions about the intersection between labor and empire. By tracing the itinerary of this photo, I have attempted to offer some transportable analytics and methods that scholars of imperial constellations in other places—from South Asia to sub-Saharan Africa—might engage to radically historicize moments when sovereignty was in play.

Historian Paul A. Kramer called for “a U.S. historiography of spatial exceptions: extraordinary power exercised at and through the interstices of sovereignty, often underestimated by essentialisms of race, gender, and civilization.” The American Zone in Magdalena was just such a spatial exception. The banana zone decoupled a section of Colombian territory from its national laws, carving out a juridical space in which the company effectively ruled. By protesting the fact that the company flouted Colombian legal codes, the workers challenged the continued existence of an exceptional space that was designed to extract their labor under the guise of bringing modern, scientific agricultural techniques. After being placed into a state of exception and being subjected to extreme violence carried out by the company’s surrogates in the Colombian state,

the workers physically assaulted UFC property, burning a company store that sold them the material objects of Euro-American consumption. The enclave and its emblematic “American Zone” had long represented themselves as harbingers of progress that kept tropical disease at bay to purportedly establish a model of modernity in the heart of backwardness. But the strike not only challenged the legality of UFC labor practices and the fabrication of an extrajudicial imperial hamlet, it also challenged the moral and aesthetic codes that preserved this spatial exception.

The photo of the strike leaders, the strike itself, and the company’s writing over the strike leaders: each illustrates the ways that the spatial exception was a legal netherworld that is characteristically visual. Hence I would suggest that the spatial exception is best understood as a theatrical stage created by imperial power. It creates that stage to extract natural resources and labor, on the one hand, and to perform its self-declared civilizational virtues on the other. But most importantly, it is an exceptional space precisely because it is where decisions are made. It is a space in which neither the laws of the metropole nor the laws of the colony are in full force. In the spatial exception, the United Fruit Company created a stage upon which it could freely exercise its will, unencumbered by local laws, which it saw as mere obstacles, like swamps, that it could rework in the service of increased profits from banana production. But this also meant that Colombia’s banana-exporting region was also a stage upon which all of the actors could improvise, occasionally doing something unexpected.

In the spatial exception, the company and the workers, as well as the U.S. and Colombian governments, were each actors, producers, and spectators. In this space between law and its absence, each actor/producer/spectator had a degree of freedom about how to hurl oneself into the future. The powerful company felt entitled to force the objectively less powerful workers to accept the terms of employment that it laid out. But the workers felt that the company owed them something more, that they had become its creditors, and it, their debtor. When the company failed to repay them for their work with wages that they considered fair and treatment that they considered decent, the workers decided to seek compensation. In doing so, they forced the company up onto the stage. But this time, the company was no longer playing the role of a collective enterprise of U.S. scientists and engineers whose reworking of local
landscapes and livelihoods was legitimated by a discourse of modernization. With the strike, the workers forced the company and its production methods to take center stage, visible for all to see. But just as the workers put the spotlight on the company’s imperial labor practices, the United Fruit Company exited, bringing the Colombian military into the picture.

Thus U.S. imperialism worked most brutally and definitively in the very moment in which the United Fruit Company and the U.S. government attempted to recede from view, allowing the Colombian government to reassert its sovereignty and to become a more effective surrogate of U.S. power. Thinking through this photograph has allowed us to see how the 1928 strike tested whether or not the United Fruit Company had a reproducible model for how the American imperial state could continue to exert power through its ad hoc network of corporations, missionaries, and mercenaries backed by the military and diplomatic power of the U.S. government. Excavating the making of this photo of five workers, along with the subsequent uses to which this image was put, has allowed me to argue that this picture should be seen as an allegory for the internal contradiction between self-forging and imperial overwriting that always stirred within U.S. neocolonial projects. Despite the rhetoric of liberalism, universality, and modernization, the Boston-based United Fruit Company created a vertical corporate structure that allowed it to exploit labor and natural resources throughout the tropics of Latin America and the Caribbean. But doing so entailed negotiating not only with various local and national claims to sovereign authority, it also meant repeatedly interacting with individual workers who had their own ideas about how they should be treated and how they wanted to live their lives and provide for their families.

Vast material inequalities, local aspirations to self-government, externally imposed corporate discipline, and discourses of race and modernity that cast locals as representatives of barbarism in need of the UFC’s civilization: for each of these reasons and more, workers could suddenly emerge to assert another sense of themselves and to claim their rights. The actions of the workers and even the local merchants made the company-administered spatial exceptions unstable and unworkable, nearly prompting the U.S. Navy to intervene. In short, the workers’ demand that the company operate within the framework of Colombian labor laws was radical precisely because it prompted an extraordinary response, one that revealed that violence maintained order in the spatial exceptions carved out by the company.

Retrieving this photo from a violence that is preserved in the archive allows us to rescue the history that puts these workers—Raúl Eduardo Maheca, Nicanor Serrano, Bernardino Guerrero, Pedro M. del Río, and Erasmo Coronel—in the center of a struggle over local and national sovereignty that exposed the violence exercised by the United Fruit Company and the governments of Colombia and the United States. The photo allows us to hear what the company tried to silence, to see what the company sought to keep invisible. Reclaiming this photo allows us to tell a story of worker-driven self and national forging that banana progress tried to obliterate.

NOTES
9. Ibid., 55.


27. Reflecting confusion about who had the constitutional authority to decide on the use of emergency powers, it is significant that Cortés Vargas first notes that the declaration of a state of siege was done through "Legislative Decree 1" and then, two pages later, cites "Executive Decree 1." See Cortés Vargas, *Sucesos*, 63 and 65.


30. Cortés Vargas, *Sucesos*, 65; the U.S. consulate in Colombia also reported: "Feeling against the Government by the proletariat which is shared by some of the soldiers is high and it is doubtful if we can depend upon the Colombian Government for protection," Gray, "Telegram from U.S. Consulate in Santa Marta," December 6, 1928. I have posted digital copies of the original declassified U.S. State Department cables that I cite in this chapter on my website; see http://kevincoleman.org/the-1928-massacre-of-banana-workers. They were originally available at http://www.icdcm.com/~paulwolf/columbia/cotie6dec1928.jpg.


32. Ibid., 65–66.


34. Arango Z., *Sobrevivientes*, 79.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid., 91.

37. Ibid., 97.

38. Azoulay theorizes this process in *Civil Imagination*, 230–231.


42. Cortés Vargas, *Sucesos*, 96–97 and 103–104.


46. Ibid.


49. Ibid.

50. Ibid.


54. I thank Sebastian Carrasai for bringing this point to my attention. See Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 36.