

“Bananas” by Lorna Dee Cervantes

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Global capitalism is heralded by many as a free and open economic system that unites people from all over the world to foster innovations in production, to facilitate exchanges of culture and knowledge, to introduce job opportunities in struggling economies worldwide, and to provide consumers with an ample supply of affordable goods. Nonetheless, global capitalism spreads consumerism as a way of life, which is fundamentally unsustainable. Already, the planet and its resources have been pushed beyond limits, and as consumerism expands to more newly developed nations via global capitalism, the depletion of earth’s resources, waste, environmental pollution, and the warming of the planet will escalate to catastrophic ends. So, while a select few enjoy the benefits global capitalism yields, others around the world—in fact, most—do not (Cole, 2009).

Throughout the poem “Bananas”, Lorna Dee Cervantes describes capitalism as seen through the eyes of impoverished people around the world. Cervantes is one of the major voices in Chicana literature, and her pieces evoke and explore cultural differences—between Mexican, Anglo, Native American, and African American lives—as well as the divides of gender and economics. At a young age, Cervantes was discouraged from speaking Spanish in order to protect her from racism; however, as time went on, she managed to incorporate her roots into her work (“Lorna Dee Cervantes”, n.d.). She does not restrict herself to writing about her home in California. In fact, she uses her poetry to travel across time and space in order to examine the consequences of oppression throughout history. In her poem “Bananas”, Cervantes uses bananas, a yellow fruit found in tropical countries, to depict and connect the destructive forces that global capitalism and consumerism pose in the lives and communities all over the world.

Cervantes' poem does not necessarily follow a chronological or a spatial order. Instead, the author breaks her poem into five stanzas, three of which are situated in different

countries. She does this to effectively demonstrate the presence and repercussions faced worldwide, in a variety of different time periods and geographies, as a byproduct of capitalism. The three countries featured are: Estonia, Colombia, and The United States.

Stanza II is dedicated to describing Colombia, specifically in 1928, when the Banana Massacre occurred in Ciénaga, Magdalena department, Colombia. Workers of The United Fruit Company, an American corporation, had been advocating for better working and living conditions since the late 1910s. In November 1928, the workers went on strike. At the beginning, the Colombian government sent seven hundred troops, and there was even talk about sending American warships because the strikers were exhibiting “subversive tendencies” (Vaughan, 2023). Several incidents, such as the sabotage against the national railway, which was a response to the military’s ban of the use of trains by the strikers, led the government to conclude that it was facing much more than angry farmworkers attempting to improve their conditions. On December 5th, the workers were summoned to Ciénaga in order to settle the strike, however, on December 6th, the military opened fire, resulting in the death of over a thousand individuals. (Vaughan, 2023). This event demonstrates how global capitalism permits multinational corporations, such as The United Fruit Company, to establish themselves in low-income countries and abuse local workers.

Cervantes references the Banana Massacre to represent the devastating impact capitalism has had on the peasant and working-class communities of rural Columbia in the early twentieth century. “A strip of lost villages between railyard / and cemetery” (21). Note how she utilized the term “railyard” instead of railroad or railway. Followed by “cemetery” this word choice can make a reader relate railyard and cemetery to a graveyard. These lines provide powerful and violent visual imagery of the assassination caused by the fight for basic rights. The words “cemetery” and “lost villages” introduce a gloomy and dark tone, as well as a feeling of loneliness, isolation, and abandonment, to highlight the misfortune capitalism

awakens. It is also important to recognize that these “lost villages” have not been misplaced. They have been destroyed by the violent greed of global capitalism. The author then proceeds to name the victims of this ideology. “Campesinos / replace Indians / Their hands, /.../ now twist into death, into silence / and obedience” (21). Campesinos and Indians appear as pawns of capitalism. The description of their “hands” symbolizes a reduction in their ability to work, and the revolting image of “death” alludes to the perception of being regarded as disposable and replaceable by business tycoons, or “jefes”, that wound and twist them into “silence and obedience”. Whether it be by colonizers of past centuries or business moguls of the modern world, these two minority groups have been historically exploited and forced into submission. This shows that even though hundreds of years have passed, the devastation and suffering caused by capitalism is still present.

In stanza III, the speaker lets the audience know that the setting is in the United States by mentioning that she visits a farmers’ market in Boulder, a city of Colorado. Additionally, the reader can infer that the location is in the US due to the reference to Labor Day, an annual US holiday. In 1894, Congress declared the first Monday in September a national holiday to honor the nation’s workers and their contributions to the well-being of the country. However, Labor Day carries a dark history. The harsh reality is that in the late 1800s, many Americans toiled twelve hours a day, seven days a week, often in physically demanding, low-paying jobs. Because of this, workers went on strike and President Grover Cleveland, in order to mitigate the crisis and not lose the support of the working-class, made Labor Day a national holiday. The importance of Labor Day in this poem goes beyond the stanza’s physical location in Colorado. As the speaker explains, “it is Labor Day and already / I am making up the guest list for my Día de los Muertos / altar” (22). Labor Day can be tied to the Banana Massacre because both events involved capitalism’s exploitation of laborers, which consequently led to workers going on strike and demanding better rights. On the other hand,

Día de los Muertos can be connected to the same massacre because it is a day separated for the dead. So, this quote can be interpreted as a way to honor the lives lost in the Banana Massacre from the previous stanza. Cervantes uses Labor Day and Día de los Muertos to explain how capitalism has made us regard these events as holidays, when in reality they are days to mourn and honor the people who suffered and fought against this oppressive economy.

Stanza III also communicates the environmental and health risks global capitalism has on the world. Bananas are grown on very large plantations and are one of the most chemically intensive crops harvested. Conventional bananas are heavily sprayed with synthetic insecticides, herbicides, and fertilizers to promote rapid growth. Studies have shown that the skin of a fruit is permeable, so no matter how protective it may be, toxins do end up inside the produce. Nonetheless, the use of these chemicals not only affects the consumer but also the environment and the workers exposed to them. For example, chlorpyrifos, an organophosphate neurotoxin, harms both farmers and the environment (The Dirty Truth About Pesticides and Bananas..., 2019). All these chemicals are used to maximize production and generate heavier monetary benefits. In other words, capitalism uses chemicals to boost and accelerate the growth of crops at the expense of the environment, and health of workers and consumers. The poet is expressing much more than a desire for organic produce when she articulates her preference for bananas with no chemicals. "I am shopping for 'no-spray' bananas ... all I desire / is bananas without pesticides" (22). In the context of her previous critique of the United Fruit Company, both lines can be read as a call to boycott the large companies that are toxic to the natural world. This denunciation could also be a way to pay tribute to the lives of both exploited workers lost in the Banana Massacre and consumers who suffer chronic illness due to their exposure to toxic chemicals. In a way, Cervantes points out

that the ordinary act of purchasing fruit cannot be isolated from the anguish profit-hungry businesses force upon agricultural workers.

The first stanza of the poem is located in Estonia in the early twentieth century, and it addresses a person the speaker knows. Estonia is a country in northeastern Europe that has been dominated by foreign powers throughout much of its history. After the Soviet Union recognized independence for Estonia, the country set about reorienting its economy toward market capitalism (Köörna, 2024). The consequences of market capitalism seem clear when the speaker describes a day in the life of her friend, Indrek: “In Estonia, Indrek is taking his children / to the Dollar Market to look at bananas” (20). Notice how the speaker says “to look at bananas” instead of to buy bananas. In Estonia, bananas appear to be a luxury, so it is not surprising that the impoverished cannot afford to taste the yellow fruit. Because bananas are grown in tropical countries, and Estonia’s winters are rather severe, they need to be imported. Their availability highly depends on factors such as trade relationships and market dynamics, also quantitative restrictions exist for bringing bananas into the country. Additionally, in the poem there is a subtle mention of the economic instability Indrek and his family experience. “There is not a chance / for a taste where rubles are scarce and dollars, harder.” (20). Rubles are a Russian currency, while the dollar is the basic monetary unit of the US. This section of the poem is situated in the period when the country was reorienting its economy towards capitalism, a moment of great instability. Climate, availability, monetary resources, economic instability, and the ideologies of global capitalism are all factors that contribute to a fluctuation in the cost of bananas and, consequently, the difficulties of acquiring them.

Cervantes knows capitalism and consumerism have devastating effects on the lives of low-income communities all over the world, which is why she gives us a means to fight back. “I am thinking of children in Estonia with / no fried plátanos to eat with their fish” (22). Showing consideration and empathy for others is the strongest mechanism the working-class

has to battle against global capitalism. Her desire to ship bananas to Estonia is a prime example of humanity, a lacking characteristic of this market. Due to laws and preservation difficulties, she opts for making and shipping banana bread instead. “I buy up Baltic wheat. I buy up organic / bananas, butter y canela. I ship / banana bread” (22). Made in Colorado, with ingredients imported from other countries, the banana bread is then shipped internationally. Sending banana bread to Estonia, where money is “scarce” and bananas are a privilege, transmits a visual image of support and symbolizes an act of union between diverse cultures. Interestingly, Cervantes’ tactic to fight against global capitalism appears to challenge the market with its same international strategy, only in this case she uses it to create harmony and working-class solidarity between the victims.

Bananas are the instrument Cervantes uses to inform us of the ways in which capitalism and consumerism threaten communities all over the world, as well as to emphasize perseverance and stimulate cultural solidarity. Her poetry exhibits the horrors this economy has had on the working class, and by referencing historical socio-economic events, the relevance conservation has on all parts of our lives. She expresses that we can be better together, that we can bounce back from the rapacity of global capitalism, and that communal unification can guide us to improve our lives.

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