Along the southwest coastal fields of Ecuador and in the offices of fair trade product distributor Equal Exchange ripens a movement to change the structure of the banana industry. The legacy of bananas in South America is a highly political one, though many U.S. consumers do not know that this nutritious breakfast fruit happens to be the symbol of twentieth century U.S. involvement in Latin America, the region’s capitalist transformation and intense popular struggle. We aim to produce a documentary film focusing on the first transnational effort to amend the course of these contentious legacies: a pioneering partnership between Equal Exchange, a Boston-based worker-owned cooperative, and two cooperative banana farms in Ecuador and Peru, El Guabo and CEPIBO. There is a dearth of research on such efforts, where the voices of producers are often “lost in the jungle...the reality of their lives hidden beneath marketing copy.” Our preliminary research in March in Boston, funded by the Academic URG program, will give us a strong base of knowledge and provide continuity in our perspective and our footage as we head to South America this summer. We will travel to Ecuador and Peru for six weeks in our project’s second phase to visit EE’s banana farming cooperatives. There, we will film the banana growing, harvesting and packaging processes and interview farmers to capture the producer story and highlight their perspective in this new fair trade supply chain. After our time in South America we will fly back to Boston to interview EE co-founder Rink Dickinson and Nicole Vitello, EE’s banana branch’s director. The third phase of this project will allow us to get footage of US-based operations and get answers to hard-hitting questions gained from our time spent at EE’s partner coops. The documentary medium is the best way for us to tell this story using our complimentary reporting skills and passions for visual storytelling. We hope to produce a film that not only informs U.S. consumers about where their favorite fruit comes from, but also deepens our understanding of the grassroots movements increasingly renegotiating our global food system. This project would be the ultimate practical application of all that NU has taught us, and we are eager to expand our international reporting and technical video experience through this independent project.

Small scale banana production has existed in Latin America since the 16th century, and bananas were first exported to foreign markets in the 19th century. The last hundred years turned Latin America into the world’s top supplier of bananas; over three fifth of world banana exports are sourced from the region, with Ecuador as the main supplier. Today, measured by value and volume, bananas are the major fresh fruit imported to the U.S., with a per capita consumption of 25 pounds annually. Three companies comprise 80 percent of the market share—Dole Food Company, ChiquitaFyffes (a new merger between Chiquita and Fyffes, Europe’s largest banana distributor) and Del Monte Fresh Produce. These banana exporting companies historically controlled large enclaves of land in Central American “Banana Republics” that kept workers under slave-like labor conditions. Contract farming in South America pushed out small farmers and created a cycle of dependency under the guise of autonomy. The literature surrounding the banana trade relationship between the U.S. and Latin America has largely focused on Banana Republics, and land and labor struggles. In “Banana Wars”, Steve Striffler and Mark Moberg acknowledge the diversity in the region’s experience of banana cultivation, revealing country-specific struggles with layers of exploitation embedded in the banana trade. Our summer research aims to use this historical framework to answer remaining questions about the impact of the banana’s loaded history on EE’s alternative trade model, the feasibility of its expansion across countries with different contexts and the farmer cooperative movement around bananas.

Equal Exchange was founded in 1986 by three food co-operative warehouse workers in Vermont and is credited to have pioneered the U.S. fair trade coffee movement. Fair trade developed in the US in the early 1990s largely through a strong Central American solidarity movement exposing the exploitative nature of the growing coffee industry. EE defines fair trade as a model for small farmers and producers who are democratically organized. The purpose of this model is to bring positive development and social benefit to the farmers’ communities, ultimately changing the
patterns of environmental destruction and social inequity that are built into the global food system. The company started by developing a successful fair trade Nicaraguan coffee brand, then expanded to tea and chocolate, adding bananas to its list of products in 2005. EE is the first and largest exporter of fair trade bananas to the U.S. The US fair trade movement developed largely thanks to pre-existing networks built by European alternative trade organizations. Fair trade products, including bananas, are much more common in Europe and sold at large grocery chains. In the U.S., in a similar way to organic certification, the fair trade label is unclear to most consumers who remain sceptics about the actual truth behind marketing campaigns. What began as an effort to prioritize small farmers has turned into an endeavor to minimize the cost for a maximized “social impact,” such as the effort to include plantation farming into certification. In literature about fair trade, researchers question the sustainability and modus operandi of organizations like EE. The little existing research on fair trade bananas specifically analyzes the potential lessons to be learned from the European models of fair banana trading and from the success of fair trade coffee branding. Bananas have presented a challenge to EE as the small farmer model in bananas is much weaker than in coffee and the product is highly perishable.

The mainstay of fair trade is the small-farmer cooperative. This organizational model, focused on democratic decision-making and shared ownership, is perceived as the seed of a fairer way small producers may successfully compete in international markets. Latin Americanists such as Marcela Vasquez-Leon have focused on the cooperative model’s potential for socio-economic and political liberation of historically marginalized farm workers, the model’s capacity to empower farmers to integrate the global marketplace and rebuild their perceptions of their own agency and identity, and the balancing of local autonomy and solidarity while integrating the international realm and meeting market quality standards. There is no research on banana cooperatives in South America because banana farmers in the area have not historically been organized that way. As Molly Doan points out in “Fair Trade and Social Justice: Global Ethnographies,” there is generally a need for a more in-depth understanding of these new ways farmers organize, and the differences in experiences and perceptions of the fair trade amongst producers, distributors and consumers. Significantly, there is just a handful of films focused on fair trade coffee (Black Gold, 2006) and the history of bananas (Bananas!*, 2009), and there is currently no documentary telling the new half of the emerging fair trade banana story, especially through the lens of the farmer cooperatives at its source.

For this part of our project, we will spend eight weeks in July and August embedding ourselves in the El Guabo and CEPIBO communities and extracting powerful individual farmers’ stories. We will identify “main characters” whose stories illustrate the various aspects of this transnational effort to organize into cooperatives and break away from conventional banana trading. We will follow a few families to grasp the day-to-day life and the inner workings of cooperative farming. We will counterbalance the perspectives of the cooperatives’ managements and EE that we will have gained in Boston in the spring with those of growers to fully understand how the fair trade model affects the various levels of its supply chain. We will prioritize the seldom-heard perspective of the farmers on their relationship to an alternative product distributor like EE, and the delicate relationship they hold with the politically-charged fruit they grow. We plan to supplement footage of the cooperatives, farmers and process with archival footage of the banana industry and Ecuadorian and Peruvian history/social uprisings, and the natural environment and ecosystem of the banana growing regions of this corner of South America. Finally, we will head to Boston at the end of the summer to hold follow-up interviews, informed by our research in South America, at EE headquarters with leaders and workers, and follow the banana branch’s typical operations for a week.

EE’s receptivity to our project has allowed us special access to El Guabo and CEPIBO, as well as its Boston-based staff and leadership. EE has put us in touch with CEPIBO general manager Wilmer Juarez and El Guabo’s coordinator Lianne Zoetewe. Both have identified families and key cooperative members in each community that are eager to tell their stories and will be particularly
insightful. Our first research phase in the spring at the Banana Conference will also allow us to establish more sources and build our relationship with the cooperatives. EE will facilitate our introduction to the El Guabo community in July, which will also allow us to capture the interaction between the producers and distributors on the grower’s turf, a counter picture from that which we will get in Boston in March when the cooperatives’ leaders are going to be at EE headquarters. We plan to split our time between the El Guabo and CEPIBO communities to compare the growth of the banana farmer cooperative movement in different contexts, and gain a complete picture of EE’s supply chain. EE has also agreed to speak with us in August upon our return.

For this documentary project, [Student A] will use her language and international reporting skills as the head interviewer. [Student A] brings initial vision and passion for the topic, extensive experience in and knowledge about Latin America and Spanish fluency, experience reporting abroad, and strong editing and cinematographic skills. [Student A] lived in Guatemala for nearly a year before going to college and spent time with a banana farming family in a Chiquita plantation in the Southwest region of Retalhuleu. There, she became aware of the exploitative relationships of conventional banana farming and began to seek alternative bananas in the U.S.. During Fall 2013, [Student A] made a 20-minute documentary on an island in the Bay of All Saints in the northeastern Brazilian state of Bahia, gaining an invaluable experience as a reporter embedded in a community for a month, reporting in a different language, and learning to deal with cross-cultural communication differences. Before setting forth for South America, [Student A] will also have completed her journalism residency in South Africa, working as a multimedia/video intern for the Mail & Katherine will leverage her technical skills and cinematographer’s eye to focus on video and audio operation for the interviews and b-roll footage. [Student B] also brings to the team Spanish language skills and an interest in social justice in Latin America. Her area of expertise lies in the visual and technical realms of DSLR cinematography and film editing, as well as documentary theory. [Student B] has shot and edited on three video productions for Inspire Media, a student group focused on creating socially conscious media, as well as a short documentary exploring issues of Cambodian American identity and hip hop activism in Uptown Chicago. Additionally, [Student B] participated in Northwestern’s 2012 Global Engagement Summer Institute in Cochabamba, Bolivia, which piqued her interested in grassroots community development initiatives similar to those of Equal Exchange. [Student B]’s experience with graphic design, web design, marketing and outreach will help realize the project’s vision to leverage online platforms to engage audiences around the intersections of the fair trade banana and cooperative movement. By working together, [Student A] can focus her full attention on the encounter and relationship with each interviewee, and [Student B] on the visual and technical aspects of the documentary medium. The collaboration will lead to a more comfortable, less intimidating conversation for the subjects, better follow-up questions, and a more aesthetically-compelling story.
Appendix:

Endnotes

Additional Bibliography