

Fashion and the Devil's Railroad: Masculinity, Migration, and Modernities in the Brazilian Amazon

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DOI: [10.1386/9781835952238_14](https://doi.org/10.1386/9781835952238_14)

Unravelling initial threads

The anonymous subject ([Figure 12.1](#)) is positioned centrally in the frame and gazes intently into the camera's lens, one hand poised on his hip. His face is shaded by a straw hat, yet the photographer's attentiveness to his complex features – piercing eyes and strong jawline illuminated beneath the wide brim – invites extended study from the contemplative viewer.¹ The subject's expression is considered, guarded, or defensive perhaps of the photographer's analysing gaze, yet the low camera angle lends him greater stature. To watch a photograph, according to Ariella Azoulay's logic, is to wonder what it is that addresses the viewer so powerfully with the tangible presence of an individual ([Azoulay 2008](#)).² Here, surely, it is the directness of the subject's gaze, his awareness of the camera that is plainly demonstrated as eyes meet lens, and the overriding sense that a moment in time has been temporarily stilled. Our gaze rests upon the isolated body enveloped in worn items of utilitarian dress: a buttoned-up shirt made of durable cotton, with functional pockets and long sleeves to protect from the sun, accompanied by high-waisted linen trousers, fastened with two buttons and held up by a length of string. The subject's straw hat has been patched up by hand in two separate places with a thick abrasive fabric, a visual cue that hints at the necessity, whether financial or geographical, for the subject to repair and re-wear his wardrobe. The photographer's monochrome palette renders in clarity the machine stitching that traces the form of the subject's mass-produced shirt, but also illuminates the very individual creases and folds of the coarse fabric as it stretches and adapts to the shapes and movements of his body. Such an evocative dramatisation of fabric and figure acts as a conduit for the researcher to probe at the identity of the anonymous subject in lieu of biographical information. His worn clothing is a literal embodiment of time having passed, which resonates with the photographer's considered approach to documentation that seems to demand from the viewer an equally slow and measured mode of viewing.³



Figure 12.1: Dana B. Merrill, an anonymous worker on the Madeira–Mamoré railroad, 1910. Glass plate negative, 1-20265-0000-0000, Dana Merrill Collection, Museu Paulista. Archived as ‘Trabalhador Estrangeiro – 1198’ [‘Foreign Worker – 1198’]. © Public domain/Museu Paulista (USP) Collection.

This photograph is one of 13 13-by-18 cm glass plate negatives produced by the North American photographer Dana Bertran Merrill (1877–unknown) who, in 1910, documented the transient lives of unskilled migrant male labourers on the Madeira–Mamoré railroad built deep in the Brazilian Amazon between 1907 and 1912. The photographer followed a carefully prescribed formula: the subjects presented outside, centrally framed with minimal contextual detail, and photographed either individually, in pairs (Figure 12.2), or in small groups (Figure 12.3). The figures are captured in excruciating detail as a result of the camera technology but also due to the subjects’ apparent agency and attention to detail in terms of how they present themselves before the camera’s gaze. The mode of presentation chosen by the photographer leans towards the genre of portraiture, elevating to a higher social strata those men who would have been responsible for the hard manual labour of culling the jungle, laying the tracks, building bridges, and maintaining the right of way. As historian Ludmilla Jordanova describes, genre is important because it is a cultural form with recognisable conventions for the viewer; indeed, ‘the very act of making a portrait has significance. It suggests that the sitter and his or her appearance are worth recording, and that others will want to look at them’ (2020: 68). Not much is known about the white, male, middle-class North American photographer Merrill, except that at the turn of the twentieth century he owned a commercial studio in New York and later produced work for *Vogue*, *House and Garden* and *Vanity Fair*. Between 1909 and 1911, however, he swapped city for nature when he accepted a paid commission by the Brazil Railway Company to document the construction of the Madeira–Mamoré railroad, which carved a line for 224 miles (358 km) through impenetrable rainforest from Porto Velho, a shipping point on the eastern bank of Madeira River in the Brazilian state of Rôndônia, to Guajará-Mirim, situated on the Mamoré River on the Bolivian–Brazilian border. The railroad was a subsidiary of the Brazil Railway Company, set up in 1906 by New York businessman and Latin American industrialist Percival Farquhar (1864–1953), and intended to expedite the global export of rubber and other tropical commodities from landlocked Bolivia by providing an outlet through the upper Amazon basin to the Atlantic Ocean and onto the markets of Europe and North America. Such multinational contracts were not uncommon in the early decades of the twentieth century, a period of increased Pan-Americanism as North America actively sought to expand its commercial, social, political, economic, and military ties with South America, exploiting the commercial opportunities that existed in Bolivia, whilst fulfilling Brazilian aspirations to be recognised as a regional power. Although covering a relatively short distance, the Madeira–Mamoré railroad circumvented 19 rapids and cataracts on the Madeira River, which made navigation by boat almost impossible. It became memorialised in the Brazilian and US media as ‘*a Ferrovia do Diabo*’ (‘the Devil’s Railroad’) due to the shocking death toll of the anonymous workers captured by Merrill’s camera, who died from a catalogue of disease and disaster that included malaria, dysentery, yellow fever, wild animal attacks, and fights with one another and the indigenous peoples they encountered. By its inauguration on 1 August 1912, the demand for South American rubber had declined in favour of Malaysian markets, whilst new trade routes opened by the Panama Canal provided alternative means of transportation, rendering this ambitious project of US and Latin American modernities an almost immediate economic failure.



Figure 12.2: Dana B. Merrill, two anonymous workers on the Madeira–Mamoré railroad, 1910. Glass plate negative, 1-20264-0000-0000, Dana Merrill Collection, Museu Paulista. Archived as ‘Trabalhador Estrangeiro – 1199’ [‘Foreign Workers – 1199’]. © Public domain/Museu Paulista (USP) Collection.



Figure 12.3: Dana B. Merrill, four anonymous workers on the Madeira–Mamoré railroad, 1910. Glass plate negative, 1-20141-0000-0000, Dana Merrill Collection, Museu Paulista. Archived as ‘Trabalhadores Orientais – 1197’ [‘Oriental Workers – 1197’]. © Public domain/Museu Paulista (USP) Collection.

The abandoned remains of rusting locomotives and disused machinery that still haunt the contemporary Amazonian landscape today point to the contradictions and ambiguities of the modernising process, reminding us of the numerous failed and forgotten ventures that served as a testing ground for early twentieth-century success stories such as the Panama Canal. In a similar vein, Merrill’s quiet portraits sharpen our focus on the hitherto unacknowledged lives of the Madeira–Mamoré railroad’s exceptionally diverse workforce. This chapter unravels a selection of Merrill’s portraits to speculate on how they challenge the progressive, linear time of industrial modernity that the transnational construction of the railroad epitomised, not least the broader logic of time-space compression that an interconnected rail network gestured to (Schivelbusch 1986). Despite being taken by a relatively unknown photographer, of anonymous subjects working on a geographically inaccessible engineering site that was still situated over 500 miles away from the main Amazonian city of Manaus, the

portraits enable us to ask different historical questions because, in the words of historical anthropologist Elizabeth Edwards, they ‘cause a disturbance to what we think we know’ (Edwards 2022: 9). Whilst an unexpected resource for the fashion historian, these multi-layered photographs strike a delicate balance between the specific and the universal, the local and the global, the centre and the periphery, which chimes with contemporary concerns as migrants, nationals and internationals continue to meet at intersections, creating a distinctive set of images, textures and experiences. Art historian Christopher Pinney refers to the photograph as a ‘complexly textured artifact’ that conceals many different layers of meaning, inviting the viewer to assume numerous possible ‘standpoints – both spatial and temporal – in respect to it’ (Pinney 2008: 4–5). His use of a fabric metaphor is a tangible reminder that the unknown subject mediated through visual representation is not automatically flattened nor made immaterial by the omniscient photographic gaze but rather, engenders new forms of affective engagement with the fashioned body that are capable of moving its storytelling capacity to the fore. These portraits resonate in light of the urgent need for scholarship to draw attention to historically excluded spaces of production and consumption, as well as to speeds of dress innovation not previously understood as ‘fashion’. This viewpoint builds on sociologist Barbara Adams’ assertion that ‘any new perspective on the world entails a re-conceptualisation of the temporal relations involved’, and provides one means to challenge the Anglo-Eurocentric ideologies that associate fashion solely with rapid change, urban centres, and industrialised forms of manufacture (Adams 2004: 23).

The 13 glass plate negatives that are the focus of this article are housed in the Dana B. Merrill collection at the Museu Paulista, University of São Paulo and offer an interesting focal point to reflect on migrant masculinities, temporality, photography, and how everyday experiences and modernities are expressed through clothing choices. Within the male-dominated society of the Madeira–Mamoré railroad and its complex infrastructure, the fashioned body was an important tool to assert and construct social identities that intersected with race, ethnicity, class, and working position. Given the remote location of the engineering site, not least the masculine nature of such temporary workspaces that were largely devoid of women and existed in frontier societies where man confronted untamed nature, it was a privileged space for the performance of masculine public display through fashion (Turner 2012 [1893]). My analysis contends that most everyday forms of dress, including workwear, incorporate some aspect of ‘fashion’. Fashion is defined here in its broadest possible sense to encompass appearance, style and body modifications and/or supplements which, as anthropologist Joanne Eicher underlines, are subject to change and transformation in all geographies, cultures and temporalities: ‘Fashion is, after all, about change, and change happens in every culture because human beings are creative and flexible’ (Eicher 2001: 23). If fashion is a fundamental aspect of the performance of masculinity, then fashion history is a powerful form of storytelling, which ties together geography – telling stories about the land, nationality – telling stories about the nation, and identity – telling stories about the self.

The Amazon: ‘A pincushion of a million stories’

The story of the Madeira–Mamoré railroad is one that brought together a polyglot workforce from over 52 nations, including Britain, the United States, Germany, China, Greece, India, the Caribbean, Portugal, Spain, and Japan, who coalesced in the inhospitable location and hence reveal, in microcosm, the spatial networks of industrial modernity that witnessed over 3 million immigrants arrive in Brazil between 1884 and 1920 (Lesser 2013). Cultural geographer Doreen Massey provides an interesting lens to reflect on the micro society of the railroad, by urging us to re-imagine space relationally, which is far from an empty stage or a flat surface, but rather ‘a pincushion of a million stories’ (Massey 2013: np). Her allusion to the dressmaker’s quintessential tool resonates with her re-conceptualisation of space as process; it is ‘a simultaneity of stories-so-far’, in which places are ‘collections of those stories, articulations within the wider power geometries of space’ (Massey 2005: 130). Massey encourages us to stop thinking of space only in terms of conquest, exploration, voyages of discovery, and the pushing-out across land from the perspective of Anglo-Europeans, but rather, to consider cross-cultural encounters as ‘a meeting up with others who are also journeying, also making histories’ (Massey 2005: 130). Spatiality, Massey stresses, is far from devoid of temporality; if time unfolds as change, then space unfolds as interaction. Places are not only points or areas on a map then, but charged sites – a meeting-up of ongoing histories – which are imbued with stories, memories and events. It is an observation that chimes with Mary Louise Pratt’s understanding of ‘contact zones’ as ‘social spaces where cultures, meet, clash and grapple with one another, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like colonialism, slavery and their aftermaths’ (Pratt 1992: 7). The Madeira–Mamoré railroad was inevitably a site of social interaction and confrontation, a zone wherein different social, ethnic, racial, cultural and national identities coalesced to create a new social order, in which clothing would have been a tool to delineate, police and transgress the boundaries of identity construction. Merrill’s intricate documentation then of the workers’ overalls and dungarees, collarless cotton shirts, functional trousers and unstructured multipocketed jackets – punctuated with occasional localising accents, whether a Sikh turban, a Greek waistcoat, or a Mexican sombrero – are a potent reminder that the fashioned body is itself a contact zone, a meeting-up of ongoing stories that facilitates the individual in positioning himself within the world. These charged items of dress enshrine the particularity of Merrill’s male protagonists, hinting at the material objects that may have been brought along to act as a synecdoche for home, but also provide a focal point that sets the mind wandering as we speculate on how different migrant bodies coalesce, interact and exchange clothing at crossings.

As has been well documented, common labour on the Madeira–Mamoré railroad was drawn from many countries and the appalling death toll is estimated at roughly 20 percent of the overall workforce of approximately 30,000 men (and a very small number of women) who were members of the remote jungle society during the three attempts made at constructing the line between 1871 and 1912 (Ferreira 2005: 12). The North American physician Martin Cooley describes in his unpublished memoir the sheer diversity of the labour force, beyond the engineers, doctors and nurses who were predominantly North American: ‘Spaniards, Greeks, Portuguese, Italians, Germans, Swedes, natives of nearly every republic in South America, negroes from the French and British West Indies, Turks, Chinese, Japanese

and Hindoos' (Cooley 1914: np). By 1909, however, sickness, death and desertion had severely depleted the supply of labour, which was in continual need of renewal; as former North American engineer Frank Kravigny notes in his memoir *The Jungle Route* (1940), enticement was offered in the 'inducement of high wages [which] was applicable to labourers as well as executives of the railroad' (Kravigny 1940: 33). Like a 'huge kaleidoscope of the human race', as Gary and Rose Neeleman describe in their recent account of the railroad that privileges the day-to-day lives of North American workers, the men faced independent challenges depending upon where they had begun their journey to the Amazon from:

Some of them – like those recruited from the Panama Canal – were experienced in working in the tropics. Others, who came from countries in Europe and the United States in search of adventure and money, were not nearly as well prepared for the challenges of the jungle. (Neeleman 2014: 59)

The subjects' clothing presented in Merrill's portraits clearly hints at the different levels of preparedness the men had for the job in hand, as sitters wear a mixture of utilitarian work clothes and dress that looks too 'good' for such hard manual labour. These subtle sartorial details could suggest inexperience in terms of the job role, that some men were better fitted for the task than others, or even that the photographer had informed some of the men in advance that they would be photographed and they dressed up accordingly within the specific options available to them from what they had packed for their working adventure.

4

The daily grind

Although it was common practice from the late nineteenth century for the emerging medium of photography – with its purportedly scientific perspective – to be used in the realisation and imagination of great civil engineering projects, Merrill's portraits are distinct in that they deviate from usual conventions in their documentation of the everyday lives of an anonymous workforce (Brown 2005). We know that the photographer was familiar with the everyday activities of the employees of all levels on the railroad and his long-term stay, of over a year on site in the isolated location, distinguished him from his corporate photography peers. Indeed, more studies in portraiture than social documentary, these 13 photographs stand out significantly from the rest of Merrill's oeuvre for their meticulous composition and the quiet yet compelling stillness that pervades them. Most obviously, each portrait signals how crucial dress and appearance were to articulate a sense of identity and belonging within the jungle; fashionability for Merrill's protagonists is clearly not just about clothing, but equally how one poses the self through a range of bodily styles (Evans 2021: np). Less obviously, the clothing is illustrative of the profound material relationship that wearers had with their immediate environment, as identity connects to surface in varying degrees of sartorial dilapidation: a scuffed boot; a sweat-stained shirt; a patched-up pair of trousers; a repaired sunhat. Given the lack of tangible primary sources of workwear and everyday dress in Brazilian and US collections, the level of detail provided by Merrill's glass plate negatives provide an important analytical tool for the fashion historian, who must continually locate new ways to explore fashion beyond the obvious. This article interrogates the everyday as a concept that has been naturalised but which, in the specific context of the railroad, would have been experienced in intersectional ways by its polyglot workforce. Rita Felski describes the everyday as 'the most self-evident, yet the most puzzling of ideas'; although it is a key concept in subaltern histories, synonymous with the mundane, the ordinary, the taken-for-granted and the routine, by focusing upon the concept so intently, we invest it with an extraordinary significance and lose those taken-for-granted qualities so central to its definition (Felski 2000: 77). Perhaps instead, we need to think of the everyday as a way of experiencing the world; it is here that anthropologist Kathleen Stewart's poetic writing on the intensities of affect, which are manifest in everyday moments and spaces of encounter – much like those that took place on the Madeira-Mamoré railroad, which marked a site of social and cultural confrontations – comes into sharp focus (Stewart 2007). Merrill's portraits speak volumes in their silence, presenting us with the intense physical presence of anonymous individuals who can be seen here to grapple with their own desire to pose, or to avoid a pose, which is arguably another form of pose, as they unwittingly insert themselves into history through gesture, expression, gaze and everyday forms of dress.⁵ To pose is to position and to present the body, whether consciously or not; Erving Goffman wrote that the individual enters the social sphere and 'performs', presenting information that is solicited intentionally, and details that are given off unintentionally, but always by using the props, grooming, clothes, and body language immediately available to him (Goffman 1959). Merrill's photographs offer a glimpse into the lives of his diverse and transient subjects, whose experiences in the Amazon can be unearthed further by contextualising images with articles in the *Marconigram* newspaper that was published on site between 1909 to 1911, postcards sent to relatives by workers, and poems written about life in the jungle, all of which have been preserved in archives in the US and Brazil.

The click of Merrill's shutter marked a literal pause in the working day for his photographic subjects, although it is unclear whether his sitters – whose hallmark is their anonymity – were free to stop what they were working on without reprimand, or whether they were on a break. Azoulay has written extensively on the camera's shutter as an imperial operation that

draws three dividing lines: in time (between a before and an after), in space (between who/what is in front of the camera and who/what is behind it), and in the body politic (between those who possess and operate such devices and appropriate and accumulate their product and those whose countenance, resources or labour are extracted. (Azoulay 2019: 5)

As a white, middle-class male, Merrill's outsider gaze was more closely allied to the North American administrators, engineers, and technicians than to the polyglot workforce that he documented, and his reason for being in the Amazon was certainly to make money. Yet

there is nothing distanced nor objective about his approach. Individual attributes not only register difference but can also be seen to exceed the classificatory and essentialising imperatives to which photography has been used in the past, namely to prove the ‘scientific’ veracity of new disciplines such as ethnography. Whilst Merrill’s photographs enshrine difference, we should not lose sight of the fact that there was clearly empathy in place too, as dress, gesture, and expression become fundamental elements in the performance of his sitters’ masculine identities. What emerges from the series is how certain subjects adjust their bodies accordingly, whilst others stand awkward and restless – dependent, ultimately, upon how comfortable the individual is with positioning his body before the camera, during the length of time that passes as the photograph is being taken. By capturing extended time – literally, through the long exposure of Merrill’s large format, glass plate camera, which required his subjects to remain still for prolonged periods – the crispness and clarity of the portraits render visible the stitches and fasteners, creases and patches, wear and tear of his subjects’ working clothing, which resonates with Heike Jenss’ discussion of fashion as a material mode of ‘making time’ (Jenss quoted in

Evans and Vaccari 2020: 7). The photographs necessitate more attentive and contemplative modes of engagement from the viewer, who is encouraged to experience fashion as a process of sartorial adaptation and adjustment, but equally to take into account the distinctive poses, distinguishing features and physical attributes of their unnamed wearers. The materiality of the subjects’ ‘old’ clothes takes on a performative function that plays with photography as a time-based medium and stages a visual resistance to the regimented time regime of Anglo-European modernity and its valorisation of speed, progress and the ‘new’.

Fixed in time

A closer examination of Merrill’s portraits – as can be seen in [Figure 12.2](#), the story of which this chapter will unravel shortly – reveals a uniformity that is clearly prescribed by the prosaic simplicity of the photographer positioning the figures centrally in the frame, facing the camera head on, with minimal background interference. The photographer employs a wide aperture that produces a shallow depth of field, forcing the viewer to focus upon the subjects’ repeated gestures which migrate to the centre stage when the series is viewed in its entirety, as faces gaze directly back and arms hang loose by the sides, remain poised on hips, or rest folded across the chest. This serial approach to documentation yields patterns of similarity and multiplicity, but also provides room for individuality and specificity due to the figurative conventions that invite the viewer to read the photographs through the lens of portraiture. A tension exists between the unique and the uniform, the portrait and the prototype, which has its roots in the use of photography by anthropology since 1869, when British anthropologist J. H. Lamprey proposed that practitioners use a background grid of silk thread, hung in 5-cm squares on a large wooden frame, against which to photograph their subjects/specimens. The purpose was to diminish the uniquely individual characteristics that heterogeneous subjects embodied and to draw comparisons between diverse groups. This search for homogeneity was predicated, as Pinney has observed, on Lamprey’s assumption that ‘individual variation was an obstacle in the way of his desire for a complete visual knowledge that would assimilate bodies as data in a vast system of comparison’ (Pinney 2011: 26).⁶

We do not know the reason for Merrill posing his portraits in this way, nor do we know whether the purpose behind them was to create an aggregate vision of unskilled labourers as a uniform set of competing nationalities, or simply to document the men that stood before him with whom he would have interacted to varying degrees. Merrill systematically numbered the negatives on the right-hand side using India ink, in a series which runs 1194–1200, 1259, 1264, and 1350. The gaps in the sequence prompt us to contemplate those images and lives that have disappeared without a trace, articulating Saidiya Hartman’s pithy observation that ‘every historian of the multitude, the dispossessed, the subaltern and the enslaved must grapple with the power and authority of the archive and the limits it sets on what can be known’ (Hartman 2019: np). Contemporary written accounts of the railroad from a North American perspective made repeated attempts to categorise between the nationalities, not only when describing the unskilled workers but also by imposing that seriality upon their working conditions. For example, Ralph Anderson Bennitt, a North American engineer, observed that

One of the most important problems in constructing the railroad was to keep a large force of men continually at work. It was found that better work could be obtained if those of one nationality were allowed to work together. Probably the most efficient workers were the Spaniards, as they were as a rule more intelligent and energetic than those of other nationalities. (Bennitt 1913: 25)

Neatly splitting the men into racial types, Bennitt’s observation appears to mimic many visual representations of workers in the early twentieth century that saw a paradigm shift towards the increased documentation of their physical appearance. Photography emerged as an invaluable tool to provide ‘scientific’ evidence of individual character and efficiency. As historian Elspeth Brown articulates, within the visual image ‘workers’ heads and hands could be read for character and workplace loyalty, a physiognomic rhetoric that dovetailed with scientific racism to store up racialised classifications of appropriate work for various ethnic and racial populations’ (Brown 2005: 4). Merrill’s portraits can be contextualised with examples of social documentary but also ethnographic categorisation and typology prevalent in much of the visual imagery produced by colonisers of the colonised world for scrutiny by outsiders, which were used to establish hierarchies of power wherein Anglo-European masculinities were presented as hegemonic.

A stitch in time

It is worth pointing out that there is a superficial homogeneity to the subjects’ clothing, which is unanimously worn and weathered, and clearly distinguishes this anonymous migrant workforce from their North American and Brazilian superiors, who oversaw the administration of the project and were dressed in streamlined, white linen tailoring, complete with bow ties, cravats, starched collars,

high-waisted trousers, straw boaters, and even the odd bowler hat, all adapted from the ‘civilised’ city for the ‘primitive’ jungle. As ex-president Theodore Roosevelt observed in his account of ‘The Outfit for Travelling in the South American Wilderness’ from *Through the Brazilian Wilderness* (1914), his written description of the 1913–1914 Roosevelt-Rondon Scientific Expedition to the River of Doubt:

The lighter one can travel the better. In the matter of clothing, before the actual wilderness is reached the costume one would wear to business in New York in summer is practical for most of South America, except, of course, the high mountain regions, where a warm wrap is necessary, a white or natural linen suit is a very comfortable garment ... the South American seems to have a fondness for stiff collars. (Roosevelt 1919: 233)

The visual and material details of fashion worn by the unskilled labourers was starkly different to Roosevelt’s description of the sartorial conventions sported by his own milieu. Yet there was clearly still room for self-expression, as can be seen in [Figure 12.2](#), wherein Merrill has captured the two subjects in careful detail: on the left, mass-produced dungarees made of a lightweight cotton fabric for the purpose of manual labour are worn, the machine stitching on the left-hand pocket clearly delineated whilst the right-hand side hangs loose with the metal buckle visible, one arm slipped free. This aesthetic choice could be deliberate, since it exposes the tools of the subject’s trade: two knives in the subject’s waistband, a perfect trope of working masculinity, and a rather different accessory to the occasional umbrella seen in the hands of the administrative classes. The subjects’ trousers are rolled up, suggesting either, that this is a stylistic decision chosen by the subject, or, that these dungarees are standardised workwear and not quite suitable for his height, whilst his unstructured, machine-produced jacket is made of a coarse fabric with a herringbone weave, revealing a rip under the left armpit and deterioration on the right shoulder.⁷ In contrast to these mass-produced items of workwear, the subject sports a felt hat with a zig-zag pattern along the rim, possibly the customised handiwork of its owner. The subject’s brow is furrowed as he squints in the sunlight, his face not properly shaded by his headwear, which frustrates his attempts at self-presentation. It also gives some insight into the challenging working conditions of excessive heat, humidity, rain and mud that all took their toll on the male body and necessitated the construction of a hospital at Porto Velho and strict regimes on site to maintain health. His counterpart on the right, meanwhile, has dressed with more attention to detail: an ornate display of fashion in the form of a heavily worn velvet waistcoat with intricate tassel detailing and a distinctive diagonal fastening across the body, complemented with a neckerchief, and worn over a shirt with tattered cuffs. A comparison with the colour autochromes of French banker and philanthropist Albert Kahn in his expansive project *Les archives de la planète* (1908–1931) enables us to locate the cultural specificity of the waistcoat, which originated in Greece. It is a sartorial clue that provides the researcher with a hint at the distance the highly individualised yet anonymous body of labour captured in Merrill’s portraits had travelled and an aesthetic choice which, far removed from the setting, could suggest an inclination to dress up for the camera, or to forge a sense of identity and belonging to home through localised aspects of dress.

The subjects’ worn clothing is a manifest theme of these 13 portraits, which break free of the categorisation and essentialisation so frequently associated with ethnographic photography, to perform instead as both a signifier of time’s duration and a record, as Ellen Sampson writes, of how ‘transitory bodily experience is made manifest and material in the things we wear’ (Sampson 2020: 6). A clear example can be seen in [Figure 12.4](#), as two men are captured outside the main office in Porto Velho, where workers would receive their monthly pay check. The man on the left crosses his arms in front of his body and his dark shirt, possibly made of a thick cotton, has the sleeves rolled up with visible fading on the arms. His trousers are a similar colour and have been patched-up in various places and held up with a leather belt that provides a clear example of how readymade clothing has been individualised through wear but also suggests he may have lost weight on the staple diet of meat, beans and rice, that was supplemented with fruit to prevent ailments (Kravigny 1940). His canvas plimsols are worn and scuffed and do not appear adequate for a job in such challenging terrain. A hat perched on the top of his head shades his face from the sun, although both men squint slightly in the gaze of the photographer. His companion – also clean shaven which suggests some of these men took care of their self-presentation, and is perhaps at odds with the idea of rugged masculinity that we might expect in such a location – gazes directly at the photographer, wearing what looks to be a crisp, clean and freshly laundered shirt. His clothes appear less dishevelled than his companion’s and the finely chequered trousers that he wears look of better quality, not intended for workwear in their original function, but probably manufactured for a purpose other than manual labour. There is a paradox in the attention to detail provided by the intricate documentation of their working clothing, despite the anonymity of their identity. Art historian Tamar Garb articulates this strain between the portrait photograph and the ethnographic ‘type’ when she acknowledges that ‘where the ethnographic deals in types, groups and collective characteristics, portraiture purports to portray the unique and distinctive features that unnamed subjects, whose social identities become a backdrop for individual agency and assertion’ (Garb 2011: 12). The stillness of the photograph provides a depth, antithetical to taxonomic classification which seeks simplistic groupings by type; instead, Merrill’s focus on the creased, patched-up and otherwise improvised clothing of the itinerant labourer communicates the complexity of the individual in the face of his inconspicuousness. Sampson advances the argument that it is through use that individuals and the items of clothing that they wear become entwined, hence ‘examining and recording the marks of use as indexical traces has the potential to render the habitual, the mundane, the everyday as auratic’ (Sampson 2018: np). There is a close connection between the individualising tendencies of portraiture, which in capturing an outer likeness seeks to tell us something of the subject’s inner personality, character and essence, and what Sampson articulates as the auratic qualities of worn clothing – a form of material memory that relates directly to the wearer’s life.

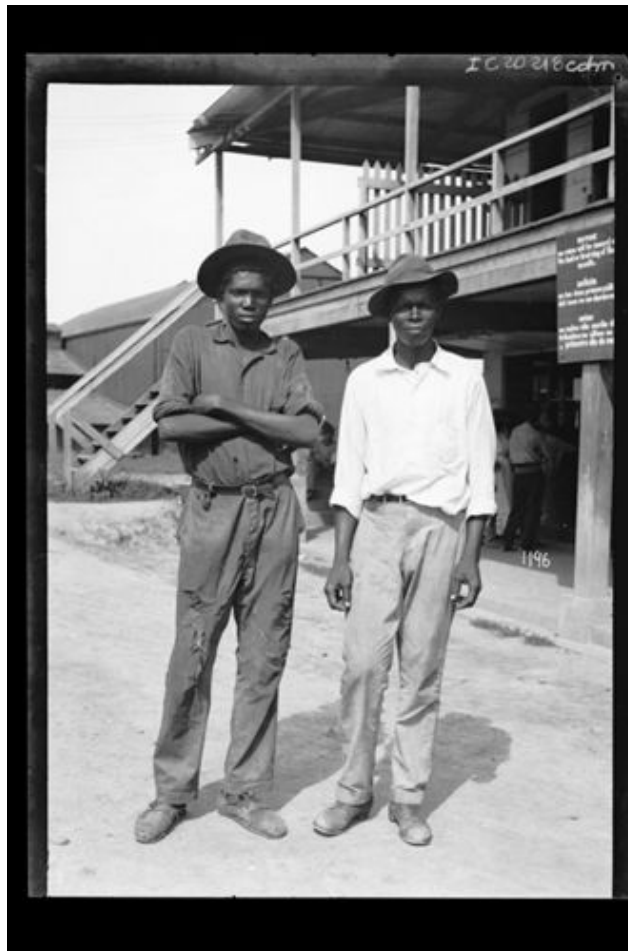


Figure 12.4: Dana B. Merrill, two anonymous workers on the Madeira–Mamoré railroad, 1910. Glass plate negative, 1-20218-0000-0000, Dana Merrill Collection, Museu Paulista. Archived as ‘Trabalhadores Antilhanos – 1196’ [‘Antillean Workers – 1196’]. © Public domain/Museu Paulista (USP) Collection.

Take your time

Other photographs in Merrill’s series ([Figure 12.5](#)) follow the typical conventions of a head-and-shoulder portrait: full frontal, with his arms folded in front of his body and clean fingernails clearly visible, the subject gazes directly into the camera lens. The orchestration of the portrait frames the subject carefully against a blurred background from which we can just make out a metal container imprinted with the letters EFMM (Estrada-Ferro Madeira-Mamoré), and he exudes a silent dignity that recalls Tina M. Campt’s assertion that ‘the quotidian is not equivalent to passive everyday acts, and quiet is not an absence of articulation or utterance’ ([Campt 2017: 4](#)). He adopts a similar pose to another man in the series, suggesting that the photographer may well have been interested in organising typologies according to race or nationality, rather like August Sander was interested in organising social types through his fixed format that moved physiognomy to the fore, as was popular during the period, in which it was believed that the face and head told outward signs of an inner character or personality. The subject wears a buttoned-up shirt made of thick cotton with a pale pinstripe running through the weave, a pinstriped waistcoat, a turban that suggests he practises Sikhism, and ornate gold-hooped earrings that may have Indian origins. His facial hair is carefully manicured, whilst his clothing appears too good for work clothes, suggesting that he may have had advance notice that he was going to be photographed, but also implying an agency in the desire to look ‘presentable’ or ‘good’ that is not necessarily limited to the moment the photograph was taken. There is an overriding sense that the subject has an awareness of himself as an image, and has become complicit in the act of representation, performing his identity and representing himself to the camera. Posing is a self-conscious act of holding oneself in stasis for the photographer, as Roland Barthes wrote: ‘I pose, I know I am posing, I want you to know that I am posing’ ([Barthes 1993: 67](#)). The sense of an extension of time is palpable in the image which, far from capturing a brief and transitory moment in the construction of the railroad, instead demands of the viewer, as film scholar Mary Ann Doane articulates, ‘the leisure of contemplation’ ([Doane 2006: 29](#)). My analysis moves beyond Doane to suggest that ‘seeing becomes a form of labour’ within these portraits, since the activity of the subjects depicted is transferred to the viewer, who is required to exert effort and attention in the practice of a responsive spectatorship. Karl Schoonover, writing about the idea of a spectator who values slowness, in a way that bears resemblance to Azoulay’s insistence on ‘watching’ photographs, argues that ‘the dilation of time encourages a more active and politically present viewing practice – an engagement commended for the intensity of its perception. Seeing becomes a form of labour’ ([Schoonover 2012: 66](#)).

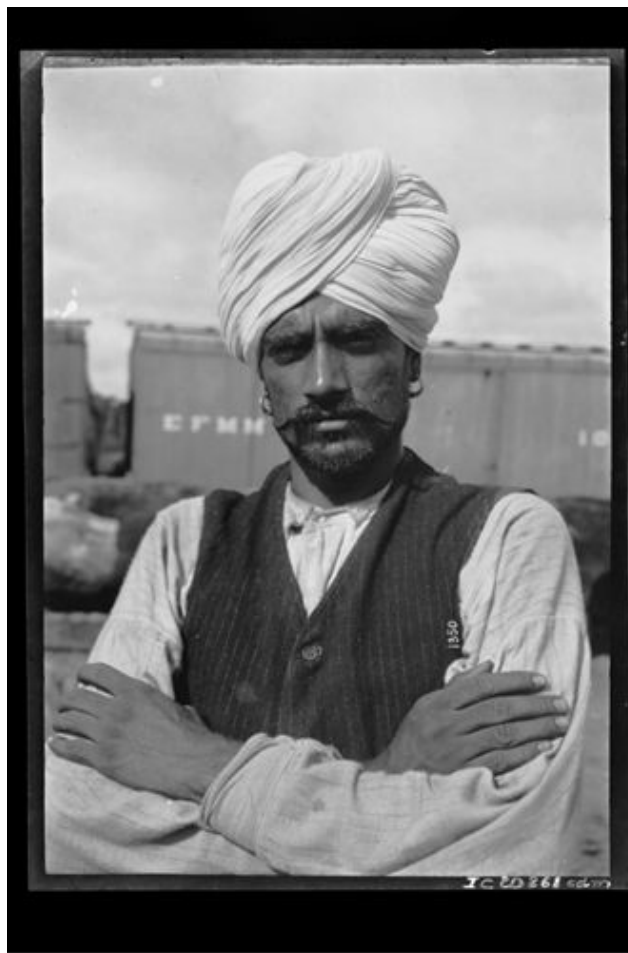


Figure 12.5: Dana B. Merrill, an anonymous worker on the Madeira–Mamoré railroad, 1910. Glass plate negative, 1-20268-0000-0000, Dana Merrill Collection, Museu Paulista. Archived as ‘Trabalhador Hindu – 1350’ [‘Hindu Worker – 1350’]. © Public domain/Museu Paulista (USP) Collection.

If Marx insisted that capitalism had mystified and concealed from our view the value of labour, then we could argue that Merrill’s 13 portraits push it instead to the fore. The clothed body presents time as a process, rather than the body as an instrument of action. As we observe life experience weigh heavily on these bodies, the comportment and physicality of the men present a vision of masculinity that ‘performs without performing’ since it is already writ large on the body surface (Schoonover 2012: 66). By showing the materiality of labour so frequently hidden, we might understand Merrill’s photographs to resist modern notions of temporality that privilege progress, linear narratives and teleology, because instead they compel the viewer to slow down and understand the value of the human subject at its core. In drawing the viewer’s attention towards the physical attributes and distinctive traits of the individual, Merrill used a camera more appropriate for traditional photography, which required a tripod due to lengthy exposure times (Ribeiro Moreira Neto 2014: 187). Martin Lister has made a distinction between the time ‘in’ and the time ‘of’ a photographic image. Whilst the former refers to the specific moment of exposure that is centred on the camera technology and the temporality that invests a photograph in the instance of its making, the latter refers to the time of photographs as physical objects in the world, how we put photographs to use and ascribe certain meanings to them (Lister 2012). Whilst the time ‘in’ the photographs here refers to a sense of an extended temporality that is constitutive of Merrill’s slowed down means of production, the time ‘of’ the photographs speaks to a laboured mode of perception, which invokes a heightened attentiveness and highly emotional engagement with the subjects that also capitalises upon the affective qualities of worn clothing to collapse the linearity of time.

Out of time

This literal slowing down of time in front of the camera because of the photographic equipment is clearly visible in several portraits, as the subjects appear restless and awkward – impatient that the process is taking so long and eager to leave the stage. Certain gestures become imbued with an awareness of time’s passing, such as a cigarette in the left hand waiting to be lit (Figure 12.6), suggesting the subject’s mind is on other things, which invests the portrait with a discernible temporality that chimes with Henri Bergson’s understanding of time as duration (*durée*) in which ‘heterogeneous moments permeate one another’ (Bergson 1913: 128). Here, the subjects appear slightly thrown off balance as conflicting qualities become visible: poise and concentration on the left, with the shirt tucked in, a deep breath to straighten the back, a direct gaze towards the photographer, versus uncertainty and self-consciousness on the right. Perhaps the subject is thinking about his tea-break which may be about to end, or whether he is going to have his pay docked for this waste of time.⁸ Picturing the world from the outside always enshrines difference in the gaze of the photographer, yet this article has explored the relationship between the affective power of worn clothes within these 13 portraits – those creases, folds, scuffs, stains, patches, improvisations, and general imperfections so palpably present on the body surface that are rendered visible through the camera’s discerning gaze – and slowness, which it suggests constitutes a more subjective understanding of time and exists outside of the industrial

productivity of modern construction exemplified by the Madeira–Mamoré railway. What is striking within these portraits is the self-presentation of Merrill’s subjects, and an overriding sense that these men have dressed up, within the specific options made available to them, before the camera’s lens. The men are largely clean-shaven, with manicured facial hair, shirts tucked in and an overall sense that aspects of their clothing have been freshly laundered, despite its obvious wear and tear. Their worn clothes can be analysed as a vehicle of transitory lived human experience, participating in the pictorial history of the railway through the bodies of their unnamed wearers. Merrill’s portraits ultimately engender a connectedness between viewer and subject by giving visibility, through the individual details of dress, to the cultural specificity and individual biographies of these rarely considered lives.

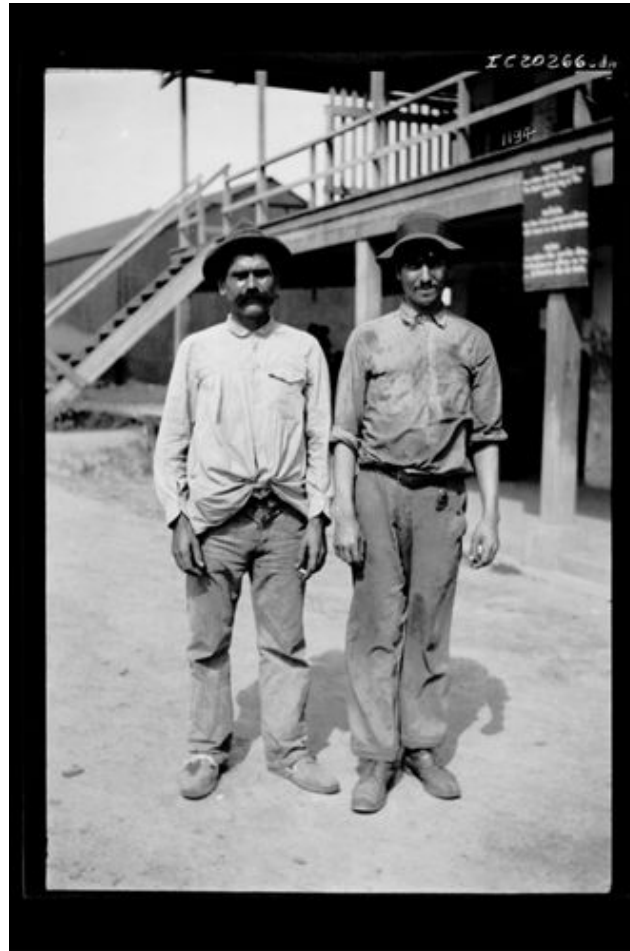


Figure 12.6: Dana B. Merrill, two anonymous workers on the Madeira–Mamoré railroad, 1910. Glass plate negative, 1-20266-0000-0000, Dana Merrill Collection, Museu Paulista. Archived as ‘Trabalhadores Estrangeiros – 1194’ [‘Foreign Workers – 1194’]. © Public domain/Museu Paulista (USP) Collection.

What is clear in Merrill’s portraits is that the everyday becomes belated, lagging behind the historical possibilities of ‘modernity’; this delay is centred on the worn clothes sported by the protagonists and the slow approach to documentation, which suggests a moment in which time and itinerant lives have been temporarily stilled. Ellen Sampson writes that worn clothing is both a signifier of time’s duration and a record of how ‘transitory bodily experience is made manifest and material in the things we wear’ (Sampson 2020, 6). His photographs present then an irony: although slowing down modernity through the limitations of the camera technology, the bodies on display – with their worn and weathered fashions, which have adapted and transformed in response to the hot and humid environment and to the demanding nature of the job – in fact bear witness to the irreversible direction of time as it marches on. The affective pull of these portraits is not just the tension that they present between the categorising tendencies of ethnographic photography and the figural protocols of portraiture, but also their simultaneous posing of the linearity and repetitive nature of time. Merrill’s photographs introduce doubt into the veracity of the portrait, but they also reveal the uneven experiences of time from the perspective of the viewer (who can linger over these seductive images, taking as much time as she likes), the photographer (who was reimbursed for his time and could wander freely, experimenting with different camera angles and the long exposure times of his camera and tripod), and the subjects (who were not remunerated for their time but were in fact losing time, if we consider that these photographs may well have been taken on their break or at the end of a shift). Although Merrill’s portraits encourage the viewer to linger, there is of course a privilege in that lingering and an inequality in the very act of how we interpret these images 100 years on: were the photographed subjects to linger too, especially within the context of their working day, since it is well known that Percival Farquhar was a hard taskmaster and employed a strict time regime in the administration of his railroad, it is likely that they would have been accused of *malinger*ing.⁹

Notes

1. It is important to acknowledge my own vantage point from the outset. Rather than stem from an autobiographical impulse, this is about self-reflexivity as a historian given that the context of my gaze inevitably informs my interpretation of primary sources.

Ludmilla Jordanova articulates the point well when she notes that ‘There is no such thing as unbiased history, but there is such a thing as balanced, self-aware history’ (Jordanova 2019: 5). As a cultural historian based in the Fashion Department at Central Saint Martins, London, but trained in art history and visual culture at the Courtauld Institute of Art, London, I remain deeply interested in how the material dimensions of fashion are mediated through the visual. I’m a white, European woman of British and Polish citizenship, educated in the United Kingdom. For the last ten years, my research has been committed to examining how fashion and photography (largely within the context of the United States and Brazil) can be integrated in historical practice as a tool to understand colonialism’s complex webs of global transnational exchange and unequal power relations. ↵

2. Azoulay writes that, ↵

One needs to stop looking at the photograph and instead start watching it. The verb ‘to watch’ is usually used for regarding phenomena or moving pictures. It entails dimensions of time and movement that need to be reinscribed in the interpretation of the still photographic image. (Azoulay 2008: 23)

3. David Green discusses Hiroshi Sugimoto’s ongoing series of photographs *Theatres* in a similar way, as marking ‘the embodiment of temporal duration’ (Green 2006: 9) ↵

4. Different accounts of dress and its use on the line can be found in the following diary extracts and memoirs that exist in the Herbert R. Rose Papers at the John Hay Library, Brown University and thus help to breathe life into the visual: Martin Coolley, ‘The Making of the Madeira-Mamoré’, January 1914. Unpublished Memoir; M. Krueger, Railroad Construction in a Brazilian Jungle, 1912. Unpublished Memoir; A. B. Cram, ‘The Record of Bolton’s Party. The Making of the Preliminary Surveys for the Location of the Madeira-Mamoré Railroad’, 4 January 1909 to 4 March 1909. Diary Extract. ↵

5. This is in stark contrast to the predominantly North American engineers, technicians, doctors and nurses who have been identified, or were privileged to contribute their own written accounts of their time spent in the jungle. Two examples are Kravigny’s book *The Jungle Route* (1940) and postcards sent from engineers that are archived in the ‘Madeira-Mamoré Expeditions Collection 1875–1914’, Firestone Library, Princeton University. ↵

6. The implications of this post-Enlightenment desire for taxonomy and classification has since been widely discussed with reference to German photographer August Sander’s (1876–1964) well-known portraits of men and women that he began producing in 1911 – one year after Merrill took his portraits – which in 1925 were formulated into his ambitious lifelong project *People of the Twentieth Century*. In total, Sander produced over 600 portraits that drew on nineteenth-century classical conventions and were divided into seven categories – ‘The Skilled Tradesmen’, ‘The Farmer’, ‘The Woman’, ‘Classes and Professions’, ‘Artists’, ‘The City’ and ‘The Last People’ – betraying a sympathetic desire to portray different sections of society, yet also an impulse to organise the complexity of humanity into a coherent system of physiognomic and class-based categories that reached its apogee in photographs of inmates of Auschwitz. ↵

7. My examination of these glass plate negatives using a loop in the Museu Paulista, São Paulo brought these details to the fore, and I employed a method of slow looking not dissimilar to Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim’s approach in *The Dress Detective* (2015) to discern possible materials and means of production to the extent that it is possible through the visual, supplementing my analysis with object analysis of workwear at the Westminster Menswear Archive, London. ↵

8. A speculation that has not yet been corroborated through written texts but is put forward by the author in light of Frederick Winslow Taylor’s inhumane reduction of the human worker’s body to machine, quantifiable entirely in terms of how much time certain actions take to complete, published in his 1911 text *The Principles of Scientific Management*. ↵

9. The fragmentary remains of Merrill’s archive are the result of one potent intersection of the visual and the material in 1980, following the Brazilian military government’s decision to burn all documents relating to the Madeira-Mamoré railroad, which still existed in the offices in Porto Velho. Although Merrill took approximately 2000 photographs, only around 500 remain scattered in institutions throughout Brazil and the US M. W. von Harthenthal, ‘Labouring Faces: Railway Portraiture and the Human Geographies of Amazonia, 1907–2017’, PhD Thesis, Meadows School of the Arts, Southern Methodist University, 2017. It is therefore possible that additional photographs of this polyglot workforce were originally taken. Other photographs produced by Merrill of the railroad can be viewed at https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lista_de_fotografias_de_Dana_B._Merrill_no_Museu_Paulista ↵

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