Fashion on the Frontier: Masculinity, Migration and Modernities in the Brazilian Amazon

Moda na Fronteira: Masculinidade, Migração e Modernidades na Amazônia Brasileira

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[abstract] In 1910, on the cusp of the rubber fever that gripped South America, New York photographer Dana Bertran Merrill was hired to document the transnational construction of the Madeira-Mamoré railroad, built deep in the Brazilian Amazon. His camera acted both as witness to, and abettor in, this imperial project of US capitalist expansion and exploitation of South America. Although Merrill was not employed to document the transnational clothing culture of the transient frontier society that sprang up around the construction of the railroad, his commissioned photographs overflow with visual information on dress: what people wore, and how they wore it, documented in extraordinary detail. Turning to fashion offers a revised lens into how Merrill's predominantly male subjects, who had journeyed to the Amazon from over 52 nations, used clothing to construct their identities and position themselves in relation to one another in the remote and uninviting location. Merrill's archive provides an unusual case study for the historian to critically evaluate the colonial and neocolonial devaluation of labour upon which early-twentieth century projects of industrial modernity such as the Madeira-Mamoré railroad were predicated. Grounded in the visual analysis of fashion, this article builds upon feminist philosopher Saidiya Hartman's revisionist method of 'critical fabulation', which deviates from traditional historiography in its efforts to overcome significant acts of erasure within the historical record. In bridging the visual and sensory aspects of fashion, it presents new insights into fashion's histories as well as those of photography at its intersection with global projects of industrial capitalism.

[keywords] **Masculinity. Migrant Labour. Photography Industrial Capitalism. Transnational Fashion**

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[resumo] Em 1910, no auge do ciclo da borracha na América do Sul, o fotógrafo nova-iorquino Dana Bertran Merrill foi contratado para documentar a construção transnacional da ferrovia Madeira-Mamoré, construída nas profundezas da Amazônia brasileira. A sua câmera atuou tanto como testemunha quanto cúmplice deste projeto imperialista de expansão capitalista americana e exploração da América do Sul. Merrill não foi contratado com o intuito de documentar a cultura do vestuário transnacional da sociedade fronteiriça masculina que surgiu ao redor da construção da ferrovia. Não obstante, suas fotografias transbordam de informações visuais sobre o vestuário: o que os trabalhadores usavam e como o usavam, documentadas em detalhes extraordinários. Voltar-se para a moda oferece uma visão revisada sobre como seus sujeitos predominantemente masculinos, vindos de mais de 52 países, usaram roupas para construir suas identidades e posicionarem-se em relação uns aos outros naquele local remoto e pouco convidativo. O arquivo de Merrill fornece um estudo incomum para o historiador avaliar criticamente a desvalorização colonial e neocolonial do trabalho manual, na qual se basearam os projetos de modernidade industrial do início do século XX, como a ferrovia Madeira-Mamoré. Fundamentado na análise visual de moda, este artigo baseia-se no método revisionista de "fabulação crítica" da filósofa feminista Saidiya Hartman. Este método desvia da historiografia tradicional nos seus esforços para superar atos de apagamento do registo histórico. Ao unir os aspectos visuais e sensoriais da moda, apresenta-se novas compreensões sobre a história da moda, bem como sobre a fotografia na sua intersecção com projetos globais do capitalismo industrial.

[palavras-chave] **Masculinidade. Trabalho migrante. Fotografia. Capitalismo industrial. Moda Transnacional.**

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Initial Threads

Take a single photograph captured deep in the Brazilian Amazon by New York commercial photographer Dana Bertran Merrill in 1910 (Image 1). This surviving glass plate negative, held by the Museu Paulista in São Paulo, sharpens our focus upon two of the anonymous construction workers of the Global Majority whose hard manual labour underpinned the transnational construction of the Madeira-Mamoré railroad, which was built between 1907 and 1912.[2] Consider the glass plate negative in light of Ariella Azoulay's assertion that to watch a photograph is to wonder what it is that addresses the viewer so powerfully with the tangible presence of an individual (Azoulay 2008).[3] Here, surely, it is the directness of the subjects' gaze, their 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. The photographer's monochrome palette renders in clarity the machine stitching that traces the form of the mass-produced, standardized denim dungarees on the left, but also illuminates the creases and folds of the tailored velvet waistcoat on the right, as it stretches and adapts to the shapes and movements of its wearer. Such an evocative dramatization of fabric and figure acts as a conduit for the researcher to probe at the identity of the anonymous subjects in lieu of biographical information. Their 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 form of viewing.[4] Sunhats, scuffed leather boots, and knives tucked inside trouser waistbands reinforce this performative vision of working frontier masculinity, as the subjects are simultaneously particularised and generalised by the physiognomic gaze of the camera.

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[2] Dana Merrill Collection, Museu Paulista, São Paulo. This collection can be viewed online at https://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lista_de_fotografias_de_Dana_B._Merrill_no_Museu_Paulista#Dana_B._Merrill [accessed 9 April 2024] although there is a level of detail missing that can only be discerned when examining the glass plate negatives using a loop in the Museu Paulista archive.

[3] 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, p. 23)

[4] David Green discusses Hiroshi Sugimoto's ongoing series of photographs *Theatres* in a similar way, as marking 'the embodiment of temporal duration' (Green 2006, p. 9)

IMAGE 1 - DANA B. MERRILL, [FOREIGN WORKERS - 1199], 1910,
GLASS PLATE NEGATIVE, 12.5CM X 17.5 CM.

SOURCE: Museu Paulista, São Paulo, Dana Merrill Collection, (1-20264-0000-0000) © Public Domain / Museu Paulista (USP) Collection[5]

[5] A note on captions: Merrill provided captions for many of his photographs that were reproduced in albums or reprinted as postcards. This article reproduces these photographs as they appeared within their original contexts. For those photographs that remain untitled by Merrill or the photographers who made them, descriptions provided by the archives that hold them have been included in brackets.

Fashion on the Frontier

The frontier, as articulated in 1893 by American historian Frederick Jackson Turner, is "the outer edge of the wave – the meeting point between savagery and civilization" (Turner 1893, n.p.).[6] Fluid and borderless, the frontier ebbs and flows, reminding us of the need for its boundaries to be continually delineated. This article considers not only how land was demarcated with the expansion of the American frontier in South America, but also how the contours of different ethnic and racialised bodies were delineated and articulated through fashion and via the pseudo-scientific medium of photography. It understands both photography and fashion, on the one hand, as tools of surveillance, classification, and control within the context of colonial modernity and global extractive capitalism, which have been used to categorise individuals in controlled situations according to 'type', grouping them by race, nationality and/or social status. It considers, on the other, the potential offered by photography to resist such asymmetrical dynamics of power; by recording a vast amount of data on unknown individuals, the camera also provides substantive evidence of their material and sensory encounters with dress, capturing modes of fashionable self-presentation and agency that offer a valuable connecting thread to marginalised subjects in the face of a considerable dearth of recorded information on them in existing historical sources.[7]

The indexicality of photography, as anthropologist Christopher Pinney articulates, is also the medium's surest guarantee "not of closure and fixity, but rather of multiple surfaces and of the possibility of "looking past" [...] it is precisely photography's inability to discriminate, its inability to exclude, that makes it so textured and fertile" (Pinney 2003, p. 6). Pinney's use of a textile metaphor underlines the latent possibilities that fashion provides to unpack the connections between looking, seeing, feeling, being and wearing when examining visual sources, not least to interrogate the relation of power in operation between the photographer, the subject, and the viewer. Pinney prompts a reading of Merrill's photographs that reframes these historical sources as layered and contingent, as opposed to static and fixed, containing a plurality of meanings that evade any attempts made by the photographer to control what is captured within the frame. To what extent can anonymous protagonists be understood through their fashion, which reveals the marks of labour imprinted on their clothing and in the bodily postures that they adopt? Where do the boundaries of iden-

[6] Turner's nineteenth-century use of the term 'savage' refers specifically to the Indigenous populations of North America and warrants interrogation.

[7] It is important to acknowledge my own vantage point from the outset. Rather than stemming 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, p. 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, however, my research has been committed to examining how fashion and photography, 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 exchange and unequal power relations.

tification and distancing lie when the camera's focus upon the body of the labourer can also be linked to his exchange value as a commodity to be regulated and exploited for maximum efficiency in the interests of "progress"?

This article grapples with the nuances and complexities of these questions by focusing on a historically specific case study: Merrill's thirteen remaining glass plate negatives, of which this photograph is one, which document the devalued workforce of the Global Majority that built the Madeira-Mamoré railroad but who have remained virtually non-existent in surviving sources and historical accounts.[8] Rather than candid reportage, the photographs follow a carefully prescribed formula: the subjects presented outside, centrally framed, and photographed either individually (Image 2), in pairs (Image 3), or in small groups (Image 4). The figures are captured in meticulous detail, with little apparent intervention by the photographer, who appears to have made no attempts to direct the action other than selecting subjects for inclusion and grouping them, which he appears to do by nationality. There are no captions identifying who the individual subjects are, nor the specific locations in which they have been shot, although Merrill systematically numbered the negatives on the right-hand side using India ink, in a series which runs 1194–1200, 1259, 1261-1264, and 1350.

These thirteen surviving portraits shine the spotlight upon the unskilled and semi-skilled workers who would have been responsible for the hard manual labour of culling the jungle, digging trenches, laying tracks and building bridges.[9] The topography of the Amazon exacerbated the difficulty of these tasks, with tropical vegetation obscuring the way and heavy downpours in rainy season encouraging mosquitos and disease as well as provoking mudslides and other natural catastrophes (Lamounier 2024). The captions provided retrospectively by the Museu Paulista during the archival process encourage an ethnographic and/or typological reading of the diverse subjects: 'Hindu Workers'; 'Antillean Workers'; 'Oriental Workers'.[10] Such an essentialising gesture of identification seeks to unify the photographic subjects within a fixed and measurable unit of visual information, yet this article pushes to the fore the complexities that are highlighted by feminist theorist Tina. M. Campt's pertinent point that a critical re-reading of photography reveals an "endlessly generative space of the counter-intuitive" (Campt 2017, p. 6). Whether Merrill's intent was to produce

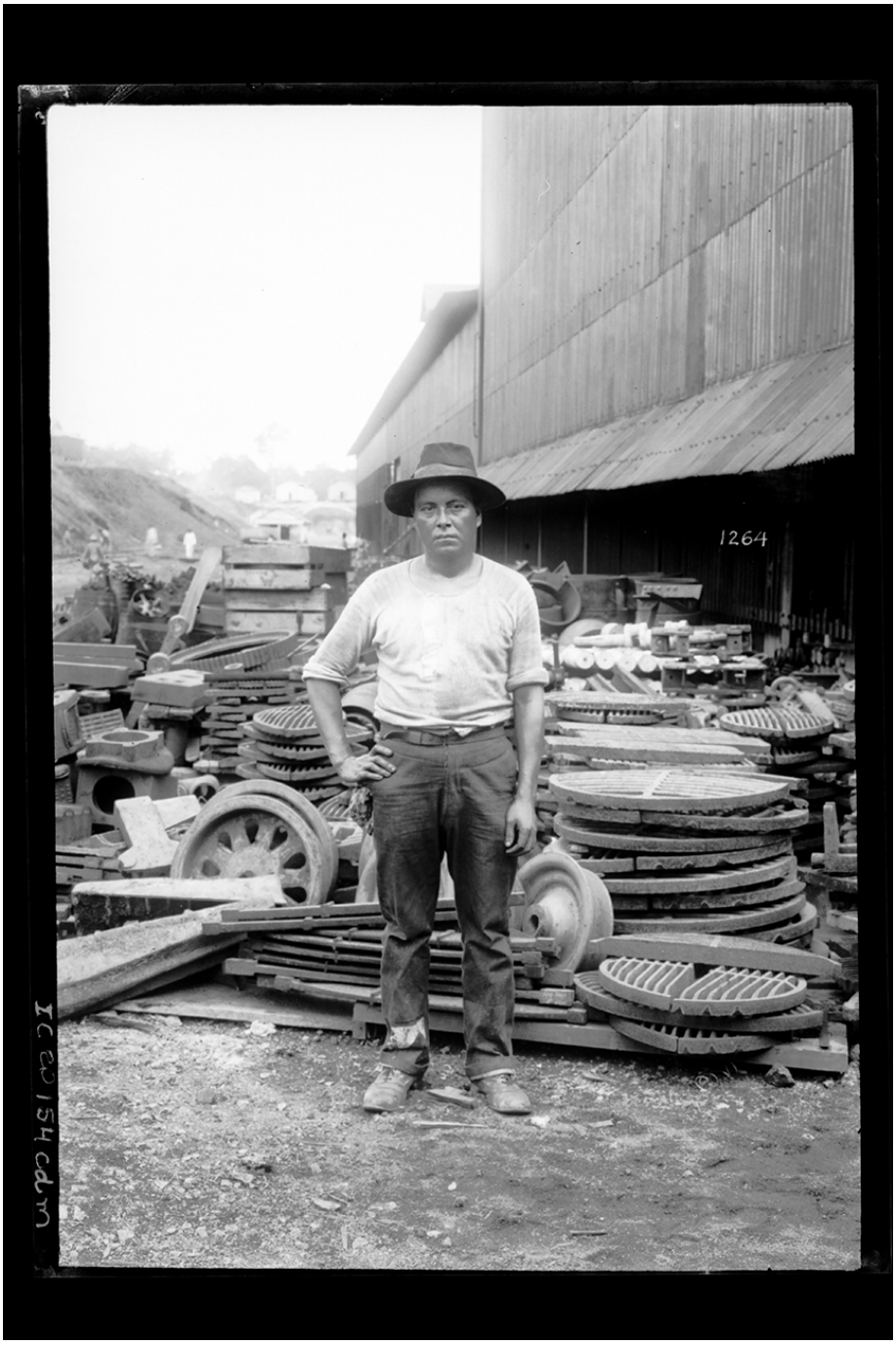
[8] See the following historical accounts of the Madeira-Mamoré railroad: (Hardman,1991); (Ferreira, 2005); (Moreira Neto, 2014); (Neeleman, 2014) (Hartenthal, 2018); (Carvalho, 2023)

[9] I use the word 'surviving' deliberately. Merrill's archive is fragmented, with only 500 of the estimated 2000 photographs that he took still in existence, spread in archives across this U.S. and Brazil. This is due to the Brazilian military government's decision in 1980 to burn all documents relating to the Madeira-Mamoré railroad, which until then existed in Porto Velho, Brazil.

[10] The implications of this post-Enlightenment desire for taxonomy and classification has 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 six hundred 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 organize the complexity of humanity into a coherent system of physiognomic and class-based categories that reached its apogee in photographs of inmates of Auschwitz. (Edwards 1990)

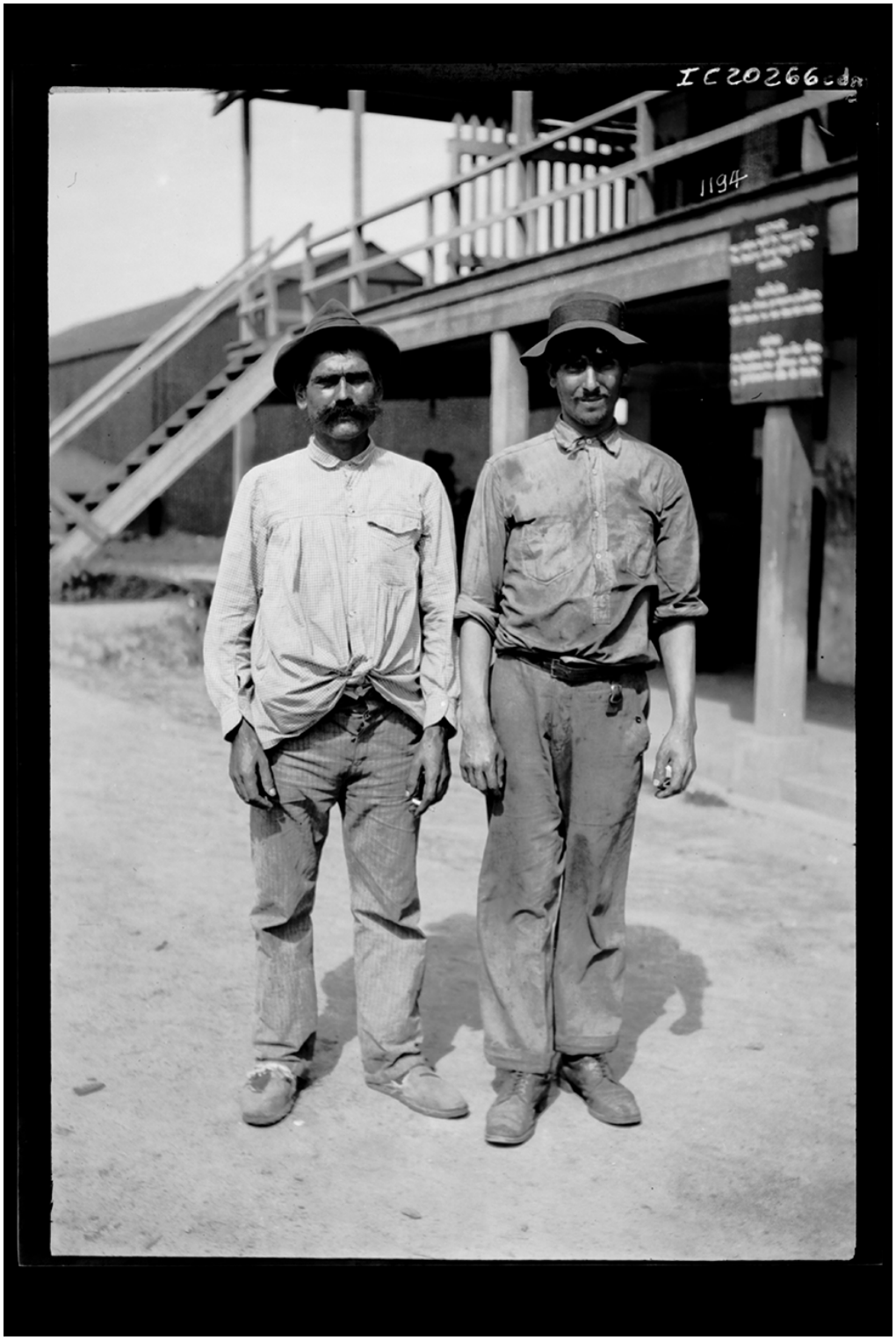
an aggregate vision of the migrant workforce as a competing set of nationalities remains undetermined, but the slow technology of his camera nevertheless recorded self-presentation and the emerging composition of a pose among individuals whose lived experiences in the jungle have otherwise gone undocumented.

IMAGE 2 - DANA B. MERRILL, [WORKER IN THE RAILROAD WORKSHOP YARD - 1264], 1910, GLASS PLATE NEGATIVE, 12.5CM X 17.3 CM.



SOURCE: Museu Paulista, São Paulo, Dana Merrill Collection, (1-20154-0000-0000) © Public Domain / Museu Paulista (USP) Collection

IMAGE 3 - DANA B. MERRILL, [FOREIGN WORKERS - 1194], 1910,
GLASS PLATE NEGATIVE, 12.5CM X 17.4 CM.



SOURCE: Museu Paulista, São Paulo, Dana Merrill Collection, (1-20266-0000-0000) © Public Domain / Museu Paulista (USP) Collection

IMAGE 4 - DANA B. MERRILL, [ORIENTAL WORKERS - 1197], 1910,
GLASS PLATE NEGATIVE, 12.5CM X 17.5 CM.

SOURCE: Museu Paulista, São Paulo, Dana Merrill Collection, (1-20141-0000-0000) © Public Domain / Museu Paulista (USP) Collection

Merrill's photographs thus provide an unusual case study for the fashion historian to critically evaluate the colonial and neocolonial devaluation of labour upon which early-twentieth century projects of industrial modernity such as the Madeira-Mamoré railroad were predicated, casting light upon the transnational political economy of labour that underpins the global fashion system today, such as the exploitation of workers in sweatshops in the United Kingdom and the Uyghur minority in Northwest China that has only recently reached public attention. His glass plate negatives also offer the opportunity to investigate the very nature of fashion beyond the epistemological frontiers of the 'West', by using fashion as a method to reconstruct the transient and isolated lives of unknown individuals, who coalesced in a male-dominated frontier society that was still over 500 kilometres from the main Amazonian city of Manaus.

Underlining my analysis of these glass plate negatives is an understanding that most everyday forms of dress, including workwear and occupational clothing, incorporate 'fashion'. I define fashion as a verb – the act of fashioning the body – in recognition that it occurs in all cultures, temporalities and geographies and as such can provide insight into the lived experiences of wearers who are recorded through gesture, expression, gaze, and pose (Jansen 2020, p. 815). A brief contextualisation of the Madeira-Mamoré railroad and

Merrill's involvement in the project sets the scene for the analysis that follows. Firstly, I describe the method of 'critical fabulation' that is employed throughout this article, drawing upon literary scholar Saidiya Hartman's revisionist methods that deviate from traditional historiography and offer a means to overcome significant acts of erasure within the historical record by suggesting a new route forward that might 'exceed…the constitutive limits of the archive' (Hartman 2008, p. 11). Secondly, I outline the asymmetric dependency of labour management that construction workers of the Global Majority were subjected to on the railroad by the American engineers in charge, as well as the scarcity of existing historical sources concerning these undocumented men. Thirdly, I make an in-depth analysis of Merrill's photographs, by tracing one material object – the velvet waistcoat that can be seen in Image 1 – which offers a tantalising clue into the possible life of its anonymous wearer, but also reinforces the global exchanges that clearly took place upon this 'commodity frontier'.[11]

The Late Arrival of "Progress" in the Amazon

The Madeira-Mamoré railroad was an imperial project of US capitalist expansion and exploitation of the Amazon. It was intended to speed up the global exportation of rubber and tropical commodities from landlocked Bolivia, by providing an outlet through the upper Amazon basin to the Atlantic Ocean and onto European markets. The project was spearheaded by Yale-trained engineer and entrepreneur Percival Farquhar, with the political backing of Brazil and under pressure from Bolivia. 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 its Southern neighbours. The railroad carved a line through impenetrable rainforest from Porto Velho, a shipping point on the eastern bank of the Madeira River in the Brazilian state of Rôndonia, to Guajará-Mirim, situated on the Mamoré river on the Bolivian-Brazilian border. Although covering a relatively short distance, it bypassed nineteen rapids and cataracts on the Madeira River, which made navigation by boat a time-consuming and near impossible venture. As American lawyer Neville Craig, participant in the first failed attempt to construct the railroad in 1872, penned in his memoir of 1907: "[the railroad] would shorten the time of transit between Baltimore and La Paz, the commercial emporium of Bolivia, to fifty-nine days, while it required one hundred and eighteen days, to make the same trip by the usual route around Cape Horn and over the Andes" (Craig 1907, pp. 20-21).[12] The project became memorialised in the US and Brazilian press as the "Devil's Railroad", due to the shocking death toll of its exceptionally diverse workforce, who had travelled to Brazil from over 52 nations including Britain, the United States, Germany, China, Greece, India, the Caribbean, Portugal, Spain and Japan. This workforce reveals, in microcosm, the spatial networks of industrial modernity that witnessed over three million immigrants arrive in Brazil between 1884 and 1920, supplying a huge demand for labour in the wake of the abolition of slavery that legally ended in Brazil in

[11] A commodity frontier can be defined as 'the processes and sites of the incorporation of resources (land, energy, raw materials, knowledge and labour) that have shaped the expanding capitalist world economy' (Beckert et al 2023, pp. 435)

[12] In 1872, American engineer and investor Col. George Earl Church made the first attempt to construct the railroad. A second attempt was made in 1877.

1888 (Lesser 2013). By the time of its inauguration on 1 August 1912, the speculative boom for Amazonian rubber had already crashed in favour of cheaper supplies from the Far East, rendering the Madeira-Mamoré railroad not just a late arrival, but already obsolete.

Merrill was hired in 1910 to capture the speed and progress of the concluding stages of the Madeira-Mamoré railroad, chronicling the hasty developments that would support US and British economic interests in the face of media reports detailing the monumental loss of human life that had garnered public attention. It was common practice since the late nineteenth century for the emerging medium of photography, with its purportedly scientific perspective, to be used in the realization and imagination of great civil engineering projects such as the railroads. By the very nature of their construction in an orderly succession of parallel tracks and perpendicular ties, railroads materialise a teleological narrative of progress. As a scopic regime, photography parallels the forward momentum of a locomotive, leading the eye towards a vanishing point on the horizon. Yet Merrill's camera was an ambiguous witness to developments taking place within the Amazon, where he stayed for just over one year. His photographic gaze acted as both an agent of modernisation, by emphasizing the linearity of industrial forms swiftly ordering the natural chaos of dense jungle, and an eyewitness to its contradictions, since he also recorded the various interruptions in the form of mudslides and unexpected environmental catastrophes that invariably delayed the project.

Add to this that very little is known about the photographer, who left no account of his work or politics on record.[13] Merrill clearly had a freedom to roam that was uncharacteristic of most commercial photographers employed to document large engineering projects on site. His roving photographic gaze captured not just industrial structures in varying stages of completion but also the changing modes of dress sported by US and Brazilian administrators and medical personnel, Brazilian rubber tappers, local Indigenous groups such as the Caripuna, Caribbean laundry staff, and anonymous construction workers from across the globe. Although Merrill was not employed to document the transnational clothing culture of the frontier society that sprang up around the construction of the railroad, his commissioned photographs overflow with visual information on fashion: what people wore, and how they wore it, captured in extraordinary detail.

Laborious Histories of Labour

Grounded in the visual analysis of fashion, this article builds upon feminist philosopher Saidiya Hartman's research method of 'critical fabulation', which provides a speculative approach to access the undocumented lives of commodified migrant labour on the Madeira-Mamoré railroad, who are known to us only through existing North American records that identify and quantify individuals as units of value.[14] In advocating for a critical re-reading of the archive to address the non-existent accounts of enslaved, marginalised or peripheral historical actors, Hartman writes

[13] Merrill was born in Grafton County, New Hampshire, in 1877, placing him at 32 or 33 when he travelled to the Amazon in 1910. The date of his death remains unresolved. (Hartenthal, 2018)

[14] See for example the following sources written by American engineers who worked on the Madeira-Mamoré railroad: (Ashmead, 1911); (Baylis, 1928); Cram, 1909); (Cooley, 1914); (Lome, 1910); (Jekyll, 1929)

> The intention here isn't anything as miraculous as recovering the lives of the enslaved or redeeming the dead, but rather *laboring to paint as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible.* This double gesture can be described as straining against the limits of the archive to write a cultural history of the captive, and, at the same time, enacting the *impossibility* of representing the lives of captives precisely through the process of narration (Hartman 2008, p. 11, my italics)

I emphasise the act of labouring, since Hartman considers the archival fragments that she encounters seriously, encouraging the historian to supplement them with additional primary and secondary sources in order to construct as full a picture of the anonymous individuals that they represent as possible. At the same time, Hartman recognises the impossibility of this labour, which has an inbuilt failure contained within its attempts to narrate the unnarratable through the discarded scraps that have survived history. As a scholar of African-American history and literature, Hartman is concerned with how to critically understand the lives of enslaved women who are not recorded within the archives of Trans-Atlantic slavery. This has meant that the historiography of the slave trade is based on market and trade relations, and on quantifying individuals through "the account books that identified them as units of value, the invoices that claimed them as property, and the banal chronicles that stripped them of human features" (Hartman 2008, p. 11). The point for Hartman is that the act of imagining does not come first, but rather after analysing what already exists. This is a process that queries authorised historical accounts and sequences of events by combining archival research with the use of the imagination in a critical way so as to engage new ideas and possibilities about what might have happened, or could have been said, through a process of critical questioning. Hartman makes a strength out of the significant absences and gaps that exist within the authority of official histories, since it is the act of attempting to listen to the voices of the voiceless that holds importance. This practice is an interventionist one of "staying with the trouble", as Donna Haraway articulates, and of learning to be 'truly present' as a historian by moving beyond historical critique or straightforward resolution to remain instead with the contradictions, knots, possibilities and questions that the archive invariably presents (Haraway 2016). In the context of Merrill's photographs, to stay with the trouble requires thinking beyond whether or not his images should be categorised as exemplars of ethnography or portraiture, but in deploying them in new ways that might enact the impossible process of imagining the individual lives of commodified migrant labour that they represent.

Asymmetric Dependencies of Labour Management

The survival of capital, as Rosa Luxemburg argued in her 1913 polemic *The Accumulation of Capital*, rests upon the ongoing expansion and displacement of the periphery, which is not simply a geographical entity, but includes anyone who is exploited in the process of generating new markets (Luxemburg 1913, n.p.).[15] The successful completion of Madeira-Mamoré

[15] Thank you to Serkan Delice for highlighting Luxemburg's relevance during a session on the MA Reimagining Fashion Histories course held in February 2024 at Central Saint Martins, London.

railroad relied upon the recruitment of an enormous quantity of unskilled and semi-skilled migrant workers from the periphery, who coalesced in another geographically peripheral location, where they have since remained peripheral in historical accounts. Despite over 52 nationalities being involved in the construction of the railroad, existing historical accounts focus in their entirety on the North American employees, who recorded their experiences in poems, diaries, newspapers, and memoirs. Reference to the diverse construction workers in historical sources and existing literature is rare and scattered, underlining the importance of Merrill's thirteen surviving photographs in providing representation of an enormous quantity of men who left behind no written records of their own. Isaiah Bowman's geographical review of the railroad quantified this devalued workforce as a homogenous body of labour in 1913: "More than 25,000 workmen have been employed since work was begun. The mortality among them dropped from 125 per thousand in 1909 to 70 per thousand in 1912" (Bowman 1913, p. 281). While in his 1914 memoir Martin Cooley marvelled at their sheer diversity: "Spaniards, Greeks, Portuguese, Italians, Germans, Swedes, natives of nearly every republic in South America, negroes from the French and the British West Indies, Turks, Chinese, Japanese and Hindoos" (Cooley, 1914, n.p.). The difficulty in accounting for individuals can be attributed to the fact that most of these migrant labourers were not employed directly by the Madeira-Mamoré Railway Company, but recruitment was contracted and subcontracted to bodies whose records no longer exist.[16] In addition, all files relating specifically to the Madeira-Mamoré Railway Company that remained in Porto Velho were destroyed by the local military government in 1980, contributing to what Brazilian artist Rosângela Rennó has articulated as a national 'historical amnesia' (Rennó 2022, n.p.). This poses a particular problem not just in tracing individual workers, but also in accounting for Merrill's photographs, of which only 500 or so remain, scattered throughout public institutions in the United States and Brazil as well as occasionally coming up for sale among rare book sellers.[17]

There is even less information available on the living and working conditions of these men, leaving us to rely upon accounts made by the Americans in charge, as well as visiting observers, both of which must be read 'along the archival grain', to use anthropologist Ann Laura Stoler's pertinent term. Stoler builds a compelling case for re-examining imperial archives as affective sites of anxiety and uncertainty concerning the very nature of imperial rule, rather than as stable evidence of biased accounts (Stoler 2008). In his 1912 travelogue,

[16] Business files held at the Baker Library, Harvard Business School, relating to the Brazil Railway Company of which the Madeira-Mamoré Railway Company was a small part, contain no record of recruitment.

[17] They can be found in the following libraries and archives spread across Brazil and the U.S.: University of Utah Libraries, Special Collections, J. Willard Marriott Library; Princeton University Library, Manuscripts Division, Firestone Library; Yale University Library, Manuscripts and Archives, Sterling Memorial Library; Brown University, Manuscripts, John Hay Library; Biblioteca Nacionale, Rio de Janeiro; New York Public Library; The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs; Museu Paulista, São Paulo; Museu do Imagem e Som, São Paulo; Casa de Oswaldo Cruz, Rio de Janeiro. His photographs are also available on the Brasilian Fotografia website. Available at: https://brasilianafotografica.bn.gov.br/?tag=dana-b-merrill. Last visited: 15 April, 2024
I also recently found a U.S. listing on Abe Books for 'Merrill, Dana, Historically Significant Collection of Two Albums with 79 Original Gelatin Silver Photographs of the Construction of the Madeira-Mamore Railroad'. Available at: https://www.abebooks.co.uk/photographs/Merrill-Dana-1877-after-1940-Historically/31757380426/bd Last visited: 15 April, 2024.

British journalist H.M. Tomlinson recalled a visit that he made in 1909 to Porto Velho, the American-built frontier town that served as the base of operations, where he encountered a fellow Englishman:

> ""Curious, this desperate haste, isn't it?" said the Englishman. "At every point of the compass from here there's at least a thousand miles of wilderness. Excepting at this place it wouldn't matter to anybody whether a thing were done tonight, or next week, or not at all. But look at those fellows – you'd think this was a London wharf, and a tide had to be caught. Here they are on piece-work and overtime, where there's nothing but trees, alligators, tigers, and savages. An unknown Somebody in Wall Street or Park Lane has an idea, and this is what it does. The potent impulse! It moves men who don't know the language of New York and London down to this desolation. It begins to ferment the place. The fructifying thought! Have you seen the graveyard here? We've got a fine cemetery, and it grows well. Still, this railway will get done" (Tomlinson 1912, p. 167).

The Englishman's hyperbolic language conveys the endless demands by those in charge to speed up the construction process of the railroad – by making workers labour faster, and for longer hours – underlining the dehumanisation and exploitation of labour according to the clock that lay at the heart of the project. His account recalls Marx's description of capitalism itself as a self-digesting, self-creating monster which "vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks" (Marx 1867, n.p.). Yet it was actually the malaria-ridden mosquito that posed the greatest force of arrest to the construction of the Madeira-Mamoré railroad, resulting in a chronic labour shortage that Percival Farquhar sought to overcome by implementing a sanitary service, a hospital upon the line, and a hygiene regime that required workers to take daily doses of quinine.

A case in point is the pamphlet titled *What Sanitation Means* (1912), produced by Dr Carl Lovelace, Chief of Sanitation for the Medical Department of the Madeira-Mamoré Railway Company, who oversaw the Candelaria hospital in Porto Velho (Lovelace 1912). He quantified the body of labour in terms of its longevity, as commodities to be regulated and optimised: "In April 1908, a careful examination of the records of arrivals and departures disclosed the alarming fact that the average duration of a labourer's stay on the railroad was a trifle less than three months" of the overall 10 and a half months for which men were employed (Lovelace 1912, p. 2). Lovelace expanded:

> During the Spring of 1908 from 70 to 90% of the inhabitants of Porto Velho were attacked with fever one or more times during each month. At the present time not more than four percent are attacked monthly. During the Spring of 1908, the loss of time in Porto Velho on account of sickness was about 30% every day, at the present time it is less than two percent. The average labourer was then a semi-invalid, and the value of his labour was not one-half the value of the daily labour of the average workman now (Lovelace 1912, p. 4).

Labour recruitment was a perennial problem on the Madeira-Mamoré railroad due to sickness, death and desertion; it was overcome, as American clerk Frank Kravigny describes in his 1940 memoir, by the "inducement of high wages [which] was applicable to labourers as well as executives of the railroad" (Kravigny 1940, p. 33). Yet it was the construction workers whose long and repetitive hours of labour were most closely accounted for in the organisation and administration of the railroad, which never formerly implemented Taylorism but drew upon Frederick Winslow Taylor's inhumane principles of labour management to calculate time in the workplace based upon a precise efficiency of workers' movements and activities (Taylor 1911). Taylor's dehumanising reduction of the body to machine – quantifiable entirely in terms of actions and how much time they take to accomplish – resonates in light of American engineer Ralph Bennitt's categorisation of workers based upon their productivity: "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).

Reframing the Periphery: Merrill's Portraits

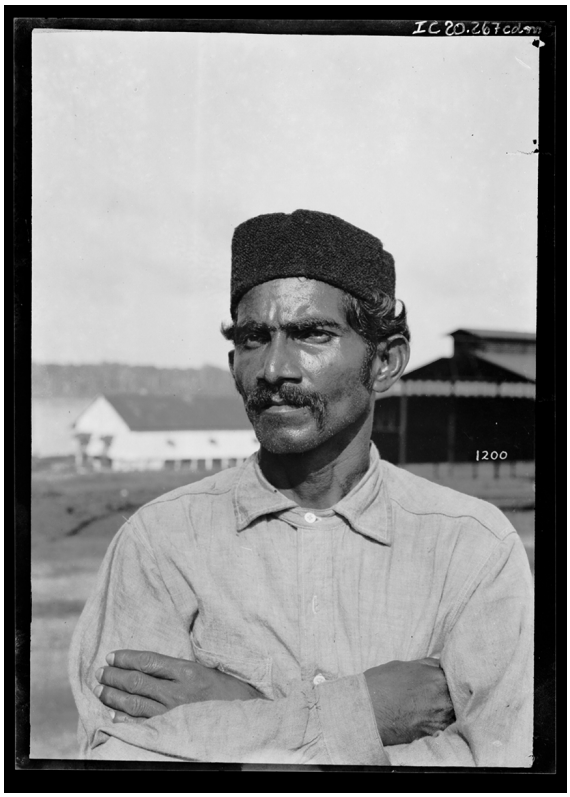
Whilst existing historical sources provide little information on the everyday experiences of workers on the Madeira-Mamoré railroad, nor the relations that they might have established among themselves, Merrill's photographs move these marginalised historical actors from the periphery and into the spotlight. Rather than social documentary, the mode of presentation chosen by the photographer leans towards the genre of portraiture, elevating these men to a higher social stratum by underlining Ludmilla Jordanova's point that "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" (Jordanova 2022, p. 68). We know that the camera that Merrill used was a conventional one,

> more appropriate for traditional photography with the subjects placed at medium distance from the camera, carefully framed, and most often posed, a result of the necessary use of a tripod due to long exposure times (Moreira Neto 2000, p. 29).

The click of the shutter here marked a literal pause in the working day, allowing time for the diverse subjects to pose, as the photographer's gaze was trained on those men whose bodies were quantified as resources to be regulated, exploited and optimised for maximum efficiency. The uniformity of the setting allows for variability in the resulting photographs to rest entirely upon the particularities and peculiarities of the individual subjects, who face the camera head on and gaze directly into the lens, displaying a seeming agency and deliberation in terms of their presentation. They appear, on the whole, clean-shaven and wearing what looks in some instances to be freshly laundered clothes, yet they are somehow also dishevelled, with shirts unbuttoned, sleeves rolled up, and the obvious signs of wear and tear marking their dress. These glass plate negatives provide evidence of people's appearances that can be tied to their exchange value: although dirty, the men are clearly able bodied and fit for work. Yet I argue that they also present an overwhelmingly humanistic portrayal, which stands in opposition to the key tenets of Taylorism that sought to dehumanise its workforce, a point substantiated by the fact that there is no evidence that the photographs were used for promotional purposes.

The portraits thus speak volumes in their silence, presenting us with the intense physical presence of unknown individuals, who have remained anonymous in historical accounts, but can be seen here to grapple with their own desire to pose (Image 5), or to avoid a pose (Image 6), which is arguably another form of pose, as they unwittingly insert themselves into history through gesture, expression, gaze and dress. What emerges from the series is how certain subjects adjust their bodies accordingly (Image 7), while others stand awkward and restless (Fig. 8) – dependent, ultimately, upon how comfortable an individual is with positioning his body before the camera, during the length of time that passes as the photograph is being taken. Most obviously (Image 9), each portrait serves as a reminder that fashionability for their protagonists is not just about clothing but equally how one stages the self through a range of bodily styles. Less obviously (Image 10), their subjects' cotton and linen clothing is illustrative of the profound material relationship that these anonymous wearers had with their immediate environment, as identity connects to surface in varying degrees of sartorial dilapidation: a scuffed boot; a sweat-stained shirt (Image 11); a patched-up pair of trousers (Image 12); a repaired sunhat (Image 13). This sartorial diversity 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 hard manual labour. Such subtle details of fashion 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 the men in advance that they would be photographed and they had dressed up for the occasion within the specific options that were available to them.

IMAGE 5 - DANA B. MERRILL, [HINDU WORKER - 1198], 1910,
GLASS PLATE NEGATIVE, 12.5CM X 17.4 CM.

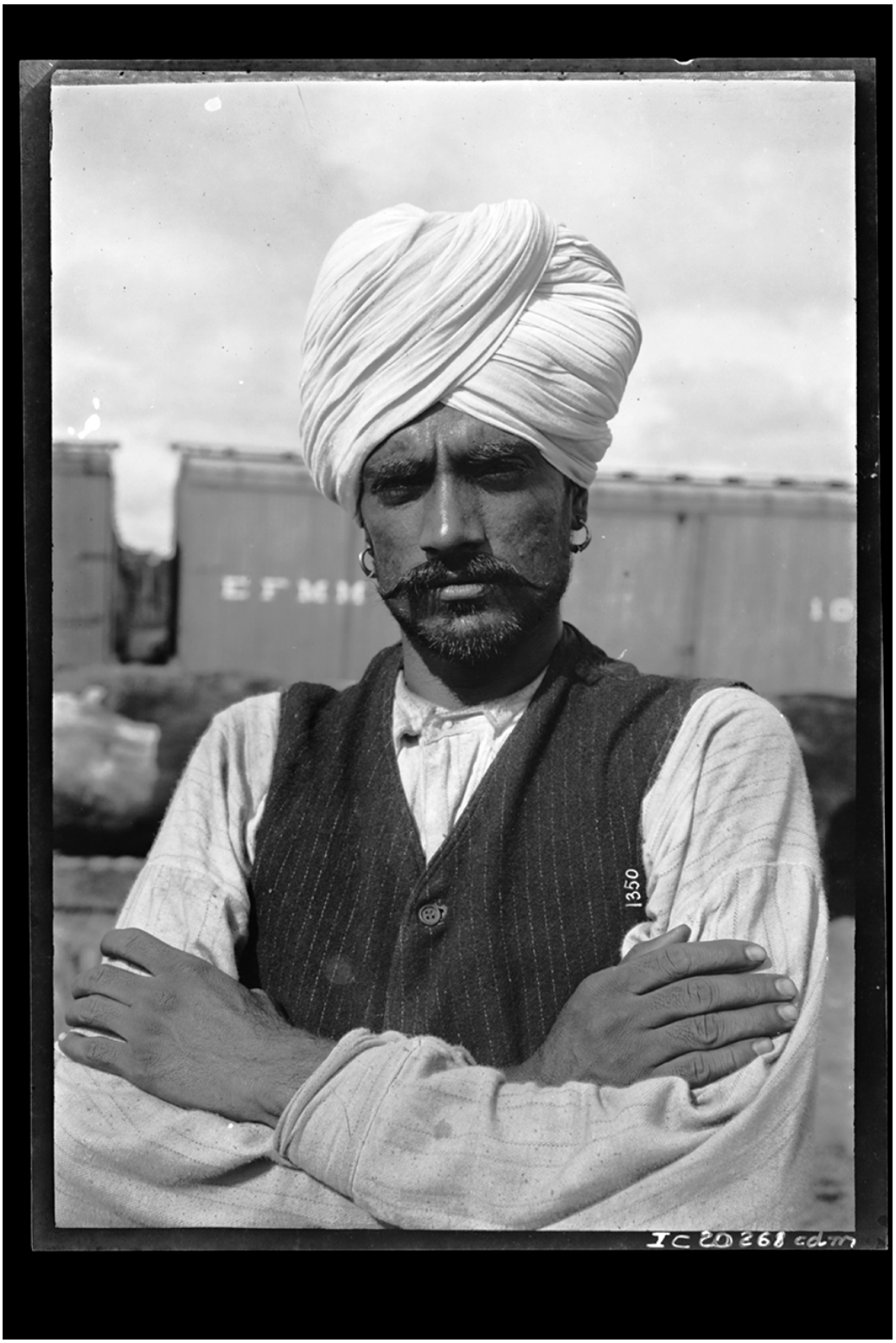


SOURCE: Museu Paulista, São Paulo, Dana Merrill Collection, (1-20267-0000-0000) © Public Domain / Museu Paulista (USP) Collection

IMAGE 6 - DANA B. MERRILL, [WORKER AT THE RAILWAY WORKSHOP IN PORTO VELHO - 1263], 1910, GLASS PLATE NEGATIVE, 12.5CM X 17.4 CM

SOURCE: Museu Paulista, São Paulo, Dana Merrill Collection, (1-20163-0000-0000) © Public Domain / Museu Paulista (USP) Collection

IMAGE 7 - DANA B. MERRILL, [HINDU WORKER - 1350], 1910, GLASS PLATE NEGATIVE, 12.5CM X 17.5 CM.



SOURCE: Museu Paulista, São Paulo, Dana Merrill Collection, (1-20268-0000-0000) © Public Domain / Museu Paulista (USP) Collection

IMAGE 8 - DANA B. MERRILL, [WORKERS ON THE MADEIRA-MAMORÉ RAILROAD - 1195], 1910, GLASS PLATE NEGATIVE, 12.5CM X 17.4 CM.

SOURCE: Museu Paulista, São Paulo, Dana Merrill Collection, (1-20299-0000-0000) © Public Domain / Museu Paulista (USP) Collection

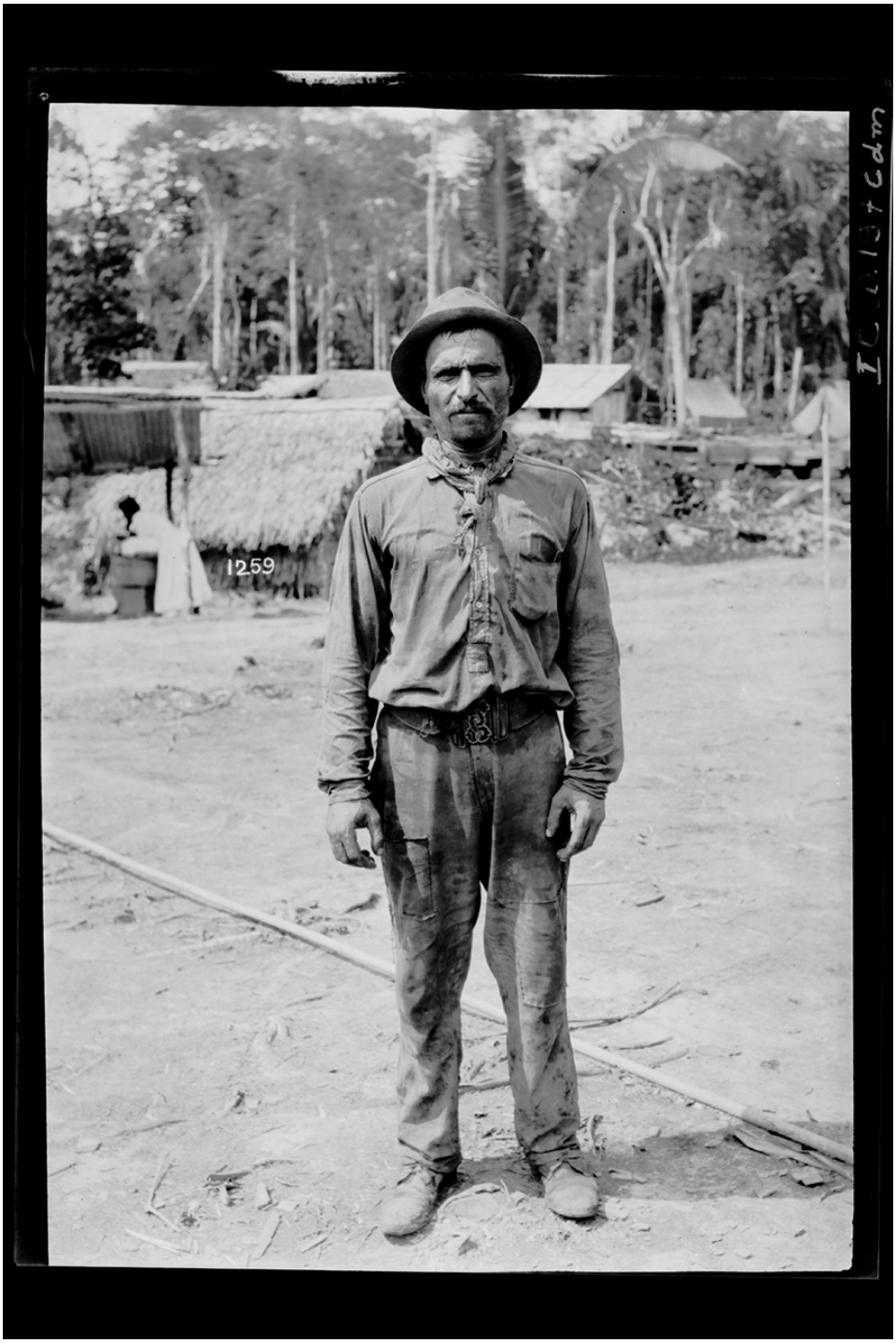
IMAGE 9 - DANA B. MERRILL, [FOREIGN WORKER - 1261], 1910,
GLASS PLATE NEGATIVE, 12.5CM X 17.4 CM.

SOURCE: Museu Paulista, São Paulo, Dana Merrill Collection, (1-20269-0000-0000) © Public Domain / Museu Paulista (USP) Collection

IMAGE 10 - DANA B. MERRILL, [WORKERS IN THE RAILROAD WORKSHOP YARD - 1262], 1910, GLASS PLATE NEGATIVE, 12.5CM X 17.4 CM.

SOURCE: Museu Paulista, São Paulo, Dana Merrill Collection, (1-20182-0000-0000) © Public Domain / Museu Paulista (USP) Collection

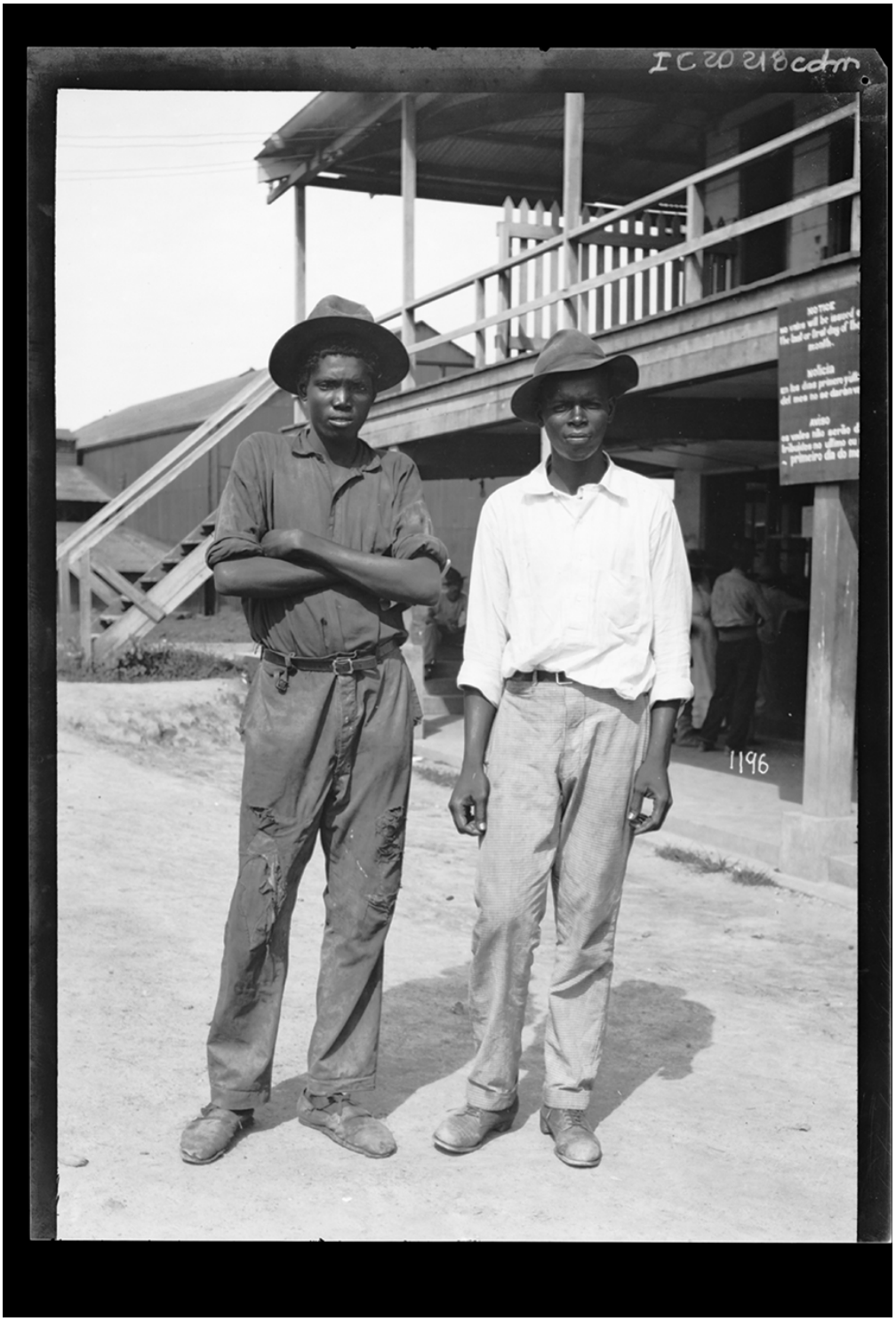
IMAGE 11 - DANA B. MERRILL, [WORKER ON THE MADEIRA-MAMORÉ RAILROAD - 1259], 1910, GLASS PLATE NEGATIVE, 12.5CM X 17.4 CM.



SOURCE: Museu Paulista, São Paulo, Dana Merrill Collection, (1-20197-0000-0000) © Public Domain / Museu Paulista (USP) Collection[18]

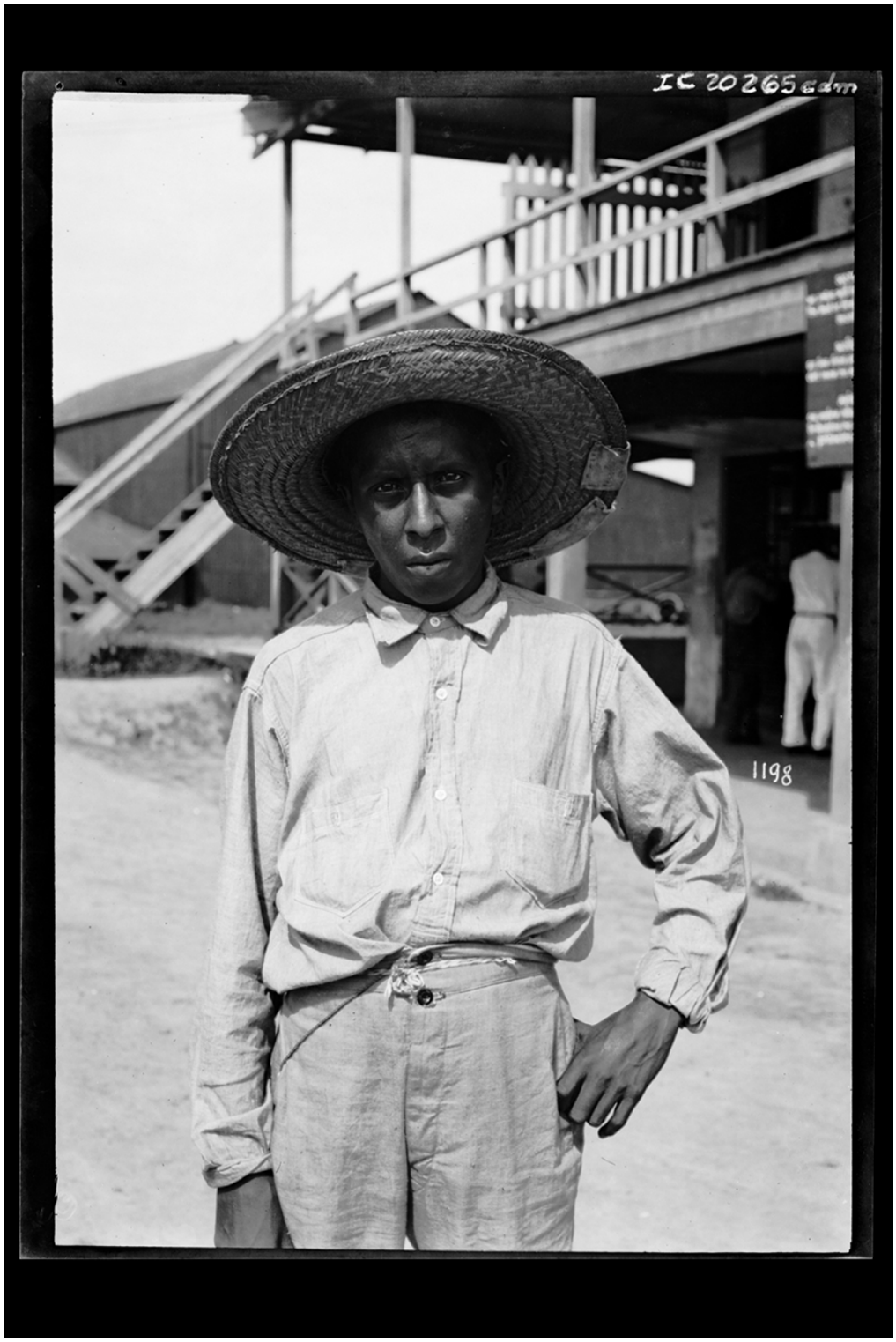
[18] Note that the archival scan of this glass plate negative is back to front

IMAGE 12 - DANA B. MERRILL, [ANTILLEAN WORKERS - 1196],
1910, GLASS PLATE NEGATIVE, 12.5CM X 17.3 CM.



SOURCE: Museu Paulista, São Paulo, Dana Merrill Collection, (1-20218-0000-0000) © Public Domain / Museu Paulista (USP) Collection

IMAGE 13 - DANA B. MERRILL, [FOREIGN WORKER - 1198], 1910,
GLASS PLATE NEGATIVE, 12.5CM X 17.4 CM.



SOURCE: Museu Paulista, São Paulo, Dana Merrill Collection, (1-20265-0000-0000) © Public Domain / Museu Paulista (USP) Collection

Given the lack of tangible primary sources of workwear and everyday dress in Brazilian and U.S. collections, the level of detail provided by Merrill's glass plate negatives thus provides an important analytical tool for the historian, who must continually locate new ways to explore fashion beyond its immediate frame of reference.[19] Charged items of fashion enshrine the particularity of their sitters, but also hint at the items that may have been brought along to act as a synecdoche for home, such as the distinctive waistcoat sported by the figure to the right of the frame in the photograph examined at the start of this article (Image 1). This waistcoat can be identified as Greek by contextualising Merrill's photograph with a 1927 colour autochrome from French philanthropist Albert Kahn's expansive project, *Les archives de la planète* (Image 14) that is titled 'Heraklion, Greece. A Cretan with a double-breasted and blue embroidered waistcoat'. Whilst we know that over one thousand Cretans worked on the Madeira-Mamoré railroad, there are no existing accounts of their lived experiences. Analysis of a similar "meidanogileko" (waistcoat) dated from 1930, which is held by the Benaki Museum in Athens (Image 15), reveals the extensive labour required to construct a garment that would have originally been intended for wear on special occasions, but which is now being sported by the wearer documented in Merrill's photograph as everyday working dress. The garment examined in the Benaki Museum archive is constructed from black felt and decorated with the applique technique called "terzidiko", comprised of ornate twisted cord embroidery in navy blue silk, wherein the cord is painstakingly attached with small stitches of the same thread to fix the pattern. Fashion historian Ioanna Papantoniou provides an overview of this technique, which continues to be produced throughout Greece in dedicated workshops called the "terzides". Master craftsmen known as "terzis" embroider, but also cut and sew, these thick woollen or velvet waistcoats, which are then tailored according to the individual specifications of the wearer:

> The "terzidiko" embroidery pattern is drawn on paper in the form of a single, simple or intricate line, which the embroiderer traces with the gold cord or a twisted cord of another type, only cutting it when he has reached the end. It is affixed to the fabric, following the twist of the cord, by a thread that is invisible in the final production (Papantoniou 2023, p. 228).

That objects with similar types of ornamentation and embroidery which are so fine they have remained in museum collections to date reminds us that this waistcoat is a luxurious item, which is being worn on the Madeira-Mamoré railroad in an unrelenting environment of extreme heat and humidity.[20] We might deduce that Merrill's photographic gaze was attracted to the waistcoat because of its sensual appeal, indicating exoticism and Otherness (Said 1978). His gaze can be likened to that of American clerk Augustus Frederick Sherman,

[19] My analysis of these glass plate negatives employed a method of slow looking that is not dissimilar to Ingrid Mida and Alexandra Kim's approach in *The Dress Detective* (2015). It was used to ascertain possible materials and means of production for the fashion worn by these anonymous subjects, and was later supplemented with analysis of workwear, and occupational and ceremonial dress in the Westminster Menswear Archive, London and Benaki Museum, Athens.

[20] A visit made by the author to the Madeira-Mamoré railroad in 2019 confirms the inhospitable nature of this isolated location

who systematically documented around 250 immigrants being processed on arrival at Ellis Island, New York between 1904 and 1924, thereby confounding cultural stereotypes by isolating individuals through the exotic difference of their fashion.[21]

IMAGE 14 - GEORGES CHEVALIER, *HERAKLION, GREECE. A CRETAN WITH A DOUBLE-BREASTED AND BLUE EMBROIDERED WAISTCOAT,* 1927, AUTOCHROME, 9 X 12CM.

SOURCE: Albert Kahn Musée departmental (A52142S) © Public Domain

[21] This reading is underpinned by the 2022 film *The Greek Bar Jacket: The Making of a Dior Cruise Collection*. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ymTZHspCNrk. Last visited 30 April, 2024. The film details Maria Grazia Chiuri's appropriation of the terzidiko technique to update the Dior bar jacket, showing European fashion's continual use of ethnic stereotypes to create cultural value.

IMAGE 15 - CRETAN WAISTCOAT, MADE OF BLACK AUSTRIAN FELT WITH BLUE TWISTED SILK CORD EMBROIDERY AND COTTON LINING, 47.5 X 40CM, MADE FOR MARIETTA PALLIS BY TAILOR EMMANUEL BALADINOS, OF CHANIA, CRETE IN 1930.

SOURCE: (EE_3512) © Benaki Museum, Athens.

Yet there are distinct limitations in categorising the nationality of the wearer in Merrill's photograph based entirely upon his dress, since written sources gesture towards the global exchanges of fashion that clearly took place upon this commodity frontier. American engineer Martin Cooley described the local economy of clothing that circulated throughout the camp:

> As soon as a man died out in camp or in the hospital, his clothing, money, and everything else of value was made into a bundle and sent to me by the doctor in charge, with a memo and a list of articles therein, for disposition. With a stenographer or clerk, as a witness, we carefully checked the bundles as they came in and disposed of the contents in various ways. We usually sold any wearing apparel in good condition to other employees, and made up a sealed package containing his money, jewelry or other articles of value, or such as we thought would be appealing to his family (Cooley 1914).

The waistcoat thus prompts several questions for the historian, centred on Hartman's method of 'critical fabulation', which works to unsettle the authority of existing historical accounts and "to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done" (Hartman 2008, p. 11). Does the item even belong to the figure wearing it, or has he purchased it second hand whilst in the Amazon, according to the conditions outlined by Cooley? If it does belong to the wearer, then why bring such a luxurious item to the jungle in the first place? Did the waistcoat mark a special connection to home, or did the wearer hope that there would be certain occasions of leisure time when it could be worn? Do the signs of wear and tear on the waistcoat that are clearly documented through the crispness and clarity of Merrill's reportage suggest that this was an item intended for occasional use, but which has since been adapted for everyday wear through necessity in the remote location? The railroad was still over 550 miles from the main Amazonian city of Manaus, rendering the possibilities for purchasing new items of dress was certainly limited. Perhaps the item was already worn and torn before it arrived in the Amazon, and this was part of the reason for the wearer bringing it along to be worn as everyday working dress in the first place, suggesting a lack of preparedness for the wearer? How was the waistcoat washed and maintained in the jungle, if at all? Did the subject sport it solely for the purpose of having his photograph taken, indicating a clear desire to self-present and self-fashion before the photographer's gaze, or was it being worn for work? Ultimately, this process of critical questioning encourages the historian to deliberate, which stands in opposition to the emphasis on speed and acceleration that underpinned the hasty construction of the Madeira-Mamoré railroad. Whilst there is an impossibility of knowing the exact conditions as to why and by whom this fashionable item was worn in the remote location, it nevertheless provides a tangible trace of how transient individuals shaped space in the jungle, offering a lens into the lived experiences of workers of the Global Majority in the face of a considerable dearth of recorded information on them.

Concluding Remarks

This article has shown that Merrill's remaining glass plate negatives that document the devalued workforce of the Global Majority that built the Madeira-Mamoré railroad can be used to begin to construct the impossible narrative that Hartman writes about. It has demonstrated that clothing can offer a narrative thread to speculate on the lives of anonymous wearers in the absence of biographical accounts. There is nevertheless a tension between the individualising tendencies of portraiture, and the repressive protocols of ethnographic photography, which permeates Merrill's gaze. In considering their use as source material to rethink asymmetric dependencies of power and agency on the Madeira-Mamoré railroad, one also needs to reflect upon the different 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 finally the subjects (who were not remunerated for their time but were, in fact, losing time, since these photographs are likely to have been taken on their break or at the end of a shift). Although Merrill's portraits encourage the viewer to linger, there is a privilege in that lingering and an inequality in the very act of how we interpret these photographs one hundred years on: were the photographed subjects to linger too whilst at work, it is certain that they would have been accused of malingering.

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