



Figure 1. Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, *View of the Boulevard du Temple*, ca. 1838. Bayerisches Nationalmuseum. The ghost in the machine makes labor into a ghost. This is the image that *Life* magazine published in 1988, prompting Allan Sekula to analyze the obfuscation of contemporary capitalism such that work becomes apparently unrepresentable.

Photography and Work

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In this introduction to an issue of the *Radical History Review* dedicated to photography and work we will make two arguments: one for historians and another for a broader public. Our argument for historians would not be necessary for an audience of scholars of art history, photography, or visual culture. We will ask what makes photographs different from other kinds of documents that historians use to explain and narrativize the past? What can photographic images do that other documents cannot? Could we not write these histories of labor without photographs? In a word, what is the payoff? And if there are intellectual payoffs, what traps lie in wait for the historian using the visual record? Our more fundamental concern, however, is with the capacity of photography to capture labor and capital. Photographs are of the concrete and specific, but capital abstracts, rendering equivalent that which was once concrete. Can photography picture labor? Can photographs help us to see how capitalism works?

Perhaps because historians tend to prefer to work with the textual record, or maybe because most early photographers were anonymous (as were most of their subjects), photographic archives have long been neglected by historians. And when they are used, visual sources tend to be poorly studied. Ignoring this archive, as most historians do, is an oversight. Treating it as an unproblematic source of information, as the first generation of visual historians did, is a methodological mistake. This issue of the *RHR* attempts to address both these problems. As a number of scholars are beginning to recognize, photographs are a unique kind of artifact, at once a historical document, a site of affective investment, and an aesthetic object.

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The contributors to this issue seek to understand the ways that photography has been central to both the expropriation and exploitation of labor and to the artistic critique of these practices.¹

A photograph is at once mechanically and artistically produced. It results from laws of physics, optics, and chemistry that are independent of the photographer, the photographed subject, and viewers. This insistence on the indexicality of the photographic image—the idea that each photograph points to an object that was once in front of the camera’s lens—is as old as the medium itself. Talbot famously described it as “the pencil of nature,” underscoring the writing with light that is the very name for this practice. Indeed, some historians have started and stopped here, assuming that the photographic archive offers an expanded empirical, evidentiary base, an additional source of knowledge of customs and information about the past.²

Yet the photograph is also the result of a particular framing of the world, and so it seems to immediately complicate its promise of offering unmediated access to aspects of the past. The intentionality of the photographer is crucial, as are the interpretive desires of viewers. And in the case of human beings, the photographed subject’s negotiation of how he or she is depicted also impacts how he or she might be viewed. Within the photograph itself, moreover, signification occurs in at least two ways that go beyond indexicality, through iconicity (the object depicted resembles an object in the world) and symbolism (which is more like the way language works in that the sign bears no resemblance to its referent).³ Consequently, historians who want to bring the same general skepticism to the photographic archive that they would bring to any other archive often fail to distinguish between the ways that photographs signify in different registers. A historian wanting confirmation of a social historical fact will be unfailingly disappointed by, if not downright hostile toward, the scholar who thinks through these other registers of photography. But the failure to move beyond a fetishistic notion of the historical “document,” one that implicitly either brackets out the photographic record or treats it positivistically, loses the opportunity to discover how some photographs allegorically condense within them larger social and cultural processes.⁴

In addition to the different rhetorical devices through which photography persuades or fails to persuade, the photographic archive is vast and varied. The interpretive strategies appropriate to analyzing the archive of the surveillance state, for example, will prove inadequate when confronted with vernacular uses of photography.⁵ A prime example of this is found in the memories of Anita Semenas, an immigrant to the Argentine meatpacking community of Berisso. Semenas recalled that in the late 1930s, her mother used to receive letters from her family left behind in rural Lithuania:

Upon the arrival of letters from Lithuania, my mother would erupt in sobs brought on by the warmth of the distant bond, the yearning for the old village

with its peasants tilling the soil. But sadness invaded her entire being, causing her to tremble with grief when those letters were accompanied by a photograph of a dead relative, indisputable document that brooked no possible misunderstanding. There framed in the black and white of the image rested a loved one, dressed elegantly for their journey to eternity. Around them, dressed in the obligatory clothes of mourning were persons, candles, and flowers assisting in their earthly farewell.⁶

The handwritten letters evoked warmth—enough to make her mother sob—but the photographs caused her to tremble in grief. In referring to photograph as an “indisputable document,” Semenas takes it as a certificate of presence. The letters most likely conveyed the news of the death of a family member; yet it was the photograph that “brooked no possible misunderstanding.” Photos serve as objects of remembrance in ways that differ from even the most intimate textual records. The picture of a dead relative generated powerful emotions from across the oceans, telescoping time and space through a familial logic rather than a capitalist one.

In her own way, this Lithuanian woman in the meatpacking city of Berisso is offering us a version of the way that photographs of the dead function in a Freudian sense to aid in completing the work of mourning. The way that she was thinking about the image forces us to confront the problem of taking a purely indexical approach to family photos. Photographs both remind us of the departed one while also enabling us to redirect our desire for the lost loved object from which we’ve been separated. Photos offer a plausible substitute, a recognizable image of the loved one; that is, they signify iconically. But no matter how much we direct ourselves toward them, photographs of the dead are ultimately unsatisfactory, and it is their unsatisfactoriness that enables us to move on. If photographs really could look back at us, as Walter Benjamin once suggested, then that would hamper the work of mourning.⁷ But as they cannot, we can allow the lost loved one to safely retreat into the realm of memory.

As a *memento mori*, family photographs become central to some intimate mnemonics.⁸ Photographs of dead loved ones can thus be said to have a dual function. It’s not just that the photograph is calling up the remembrance of the lost object, but rather it is that the very static, frozen-in-time quality of a photo reminds us that the lost loved one is really dead. The photograph functions rather like a wake. One of the cultural tasks of a wake is that it is supposed to generate a warmth of remembrance, to aid those grieving in recalling a cherished past; but it also confronts mourners with the absolute deadness of the dead. The coffin is there, and is sometimes open. The photo, in the absence of the dead person, functions therapeutically like a wake. We might, as historians, start thinking about the ways that photos of dead loved ones function in our own lives. From this critical engagement, we could begin to apply that logic to the objects of our own research.

Photography is an ever-present part of our lives and daily existence in a way that many other archival sources are not. In a sense there is a certain otherness about many of the primary sources that we rely upon as historians. In contrast, through their very ubiquity, photographs acquire an almost doxic quality, lulling us into thinking that we intuitively understand how they work, signify, and mediate social relations. This insistent, quotidian familiarity tends to induce a certain inability to think critically about photographs as source material, leading to an unwillingness to seriously consider, on the one hand, the metaphorical, allegorical, and fictional forms that the medium employs and, on the other, the social relations that condition the very production and circulation of such images within distinct economies of affect, capital, faith, and law.

In addition to cardboard boxes of family photographs, there are multiple other archives of photographic images relevant to writing new histories of labor and capitalism. Corporate collections are the most obviously relevant first place to look. The Baker Library at the Harvard Business School has extensive photo archives from industry; according to the library, “The collections include more than 32,000 photographs, daguerreotypes and stereographs of factories, manufacturing techniques, business leaders, and people at work in industrial settings ranging from automobile plants to paper mills. Researchers will find photographs documenting US industry and business operations in Central and South America, Europe, Africa, and Asia, dating from 1855 to the present.” The United Fruit Company Photograph Collection alone, for example, contains more than 10,400 photos of the company’s operations in Latin America and the Caribbean from 1891 to 1962. Or, consider the George Eastman House, established by the Kodak company, which “comprises more than 400,000 photographic objects dating from the introduction of the medium in 1839 through to the present day,” offering a dense archive and museum of photographic technologies and image-making processes.⁹

From police units to national institutes of health, from departments of interior to space agencies, states photograph their subjects, territories, and even the planets. The photographs created by scientific commissions, news agencies, advertisers, and government offices are integral not only to historicizing the ways that capital enlists photography in its drive to rationalize the use of land, plants, and labor but also to tracing how people and nature have struggled to maintain themselves without being fully subordinated to logics and practices of accumulation. From the American Southwest to Paris, from Buenos Aires to Berlin, the anthropological archives of the early twentieth century contain tens of thousands of racial type photos.¹⁰ Across different colonial and postcolonial settings, the making of these photographs reflected larger social structures. Scientists teamed up with locals who had state, religious, or economic authority that enabled them to coerce indigenous peoples into having their bodies measured and photographed. These were processes of “visual primitive accumulation,” Jens Andermann’s term for describing

the way that late nineteenth-century Brazil and Argentina conquered their indigenous populations on the frontiers and registered that conquest in the visual terms demanded by emerging capitalist nation-states.¹¹ The multiple facets of a territorialized global capitalism generate archives through imperial, racialized, and gendered encounters that are not only registered photographically but also serve to naturalize and mystify those very moments of conquest and appropriation. Yet the meanings of photographs are inherently unstable, and thus the amassing of photos from the late nineteenth century to the present might be understood as an attempt to counteract that very instability.

The archives of photojournalism constitute an enormous repository of images covering every conceivable aspect of public life around the world from the early 1900s to the present. Founded by Augustín Casasola in 1911, the *Agencia Fotográfica Mexicana* accumulated over five hundred thousand prints and negatives of Mexican social, cultural, and political history, most all of which have now been digitized. Historian John Mraz used this archive to write a photographic history of the twentieth century's first and most radical revolutionary movement, the Mexican Revolution.¹² In our own era, as anthropologist Zeynep Gürsel shows, digital infrastructures of representation have given rise to "image brokers," professionals who manage the selection and circulation of news images.¹³

In the United States, bringing photography and the lives of working peoples together is not new. Beginning in the 1890s with the work of Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine, social documentary photography wove nonfictional words and images together to highlight the plight of ordinary people, turning readers into witnesses of deplorable social conditions that required urgent and concerted attention. Riis and Hine used the camera to help jolt and train the eyes of ordinary citizens who had become inured to sights of homeless boys sleeping on the streets or child laborers subjected to dangerous working conditions. During the Great Depression, the genre was expanded as part of a project to portray social life with a realist aesthetic that could reveal sociological truths about hardships and everyday life across the United States. In the work of the photographers of the Farm Security Administration, the documentary tradition tapped the tenets of modernism and the aesthetics of photojournalism to advocate for large-scale sociopolitical reforms, to cite only prominent examples from the United States.¹⁴ The FSA archives contain "175,000 black-and-white film negatives and transparencies, 1,610 color transparencies, and around 107,000 black-and-white photographic prints."¹⁵

The international range of this movement to capture the realities of working-class life and labor was on display in a 2011 exhibition in Madrid by curator Jorge Ribalta. Titled *Recorrido por una luz dura, sin compasión: El movimiento de la fotografía obrera, 1926–1939*, this exhibition contextualized photography produced for, and occasionally by, workers, from the mid-1920s to the early Stalinist years of the Soviet Union to the Weimar Republic in Germany, and from images of the Spanish Civil War to those of the FSA and the American Photo League. These politically

committed professional and amateur worker photographers developed new and challenging aesthetic techniques to effect what Ribalta refers to as “the socialist transformation of reality.”¹⁶ This international aesthetic-political movement valorized the amateur snapshot, seeing this perspective as crucial to depicting everyday life from the point of view of the working class. Perhaps the most famous example of this project, one that pioneered the photo-essay as a genre, is “Twenty-Four Hours in the Filippov Family.” In 1928, under the direction of Lazar Mezhericher, a well-known photo critic and director of Soyuzfoto’s foreign sector, photographers Max Alpert and Arkady Shaikhet spent five days documenting the life of the Filippov family. Filippov was a worker at the Red Proletarian Plant in Moscow. The two photographers claimed that they did not stage a single photograph in this series. The main method of the shoot was “photographic observation,” a term coined by Sergie Tretyakov, which aimed to produce an unadorned photographic record of a worker’s family over a long period of time. Versions of this photo-essay were repeatedly published in the 1930s. The German illustrated magazine *Arbeiter-Illustrierte Zeitung* (*AIZ; Workers’ Illustrated Newspaper*) published fifty-three of these photographs in 1931, and that version was republished the same year in the Soviet Union in *Proletarskoe Foto*.¹⁷ What’s in play here are a set of aesthetic categories, including montage and serial photography. The visual and cognitive effect of a procession of photos, and its ability to carry a narrative, diminishes the importance of a singular image. Ribalta took the title for his exhibition from a phrase by Edwin Hoernle, a contributor to another German workers’ magazine. “It was necessary,” Hoernle argued, “to proclaim proletarian reality in all its disgusting ugliness, with its indictment of society and its demand for revenge. . . . We must present things in a hard, merciless light.”¹⁸

In recent decades perhaps one of the most interesting debates within studies of photography has centered around the issue of the medium’s capacity to represent the political economy of global capitalism. This debate has revolved around two competing claims. A group of critical photographers and theorists has attempted to make the workings of capital visible by rearticulating the social documentary tradition embedded in the history of photography since the nineteenth century.¹⁹ Meanwhile, another group, more closely associated with fine art, has insisted on the importance of aesthetic form and abstraction as the most effective way to critically picture the structures of neoliberalism. At stake in this debate is the issue of photography’s capacity to make visible an increasingly globalized and abstract economic system of appropriation.

But even at the apogee of the social documentary tradition in the 1930s, cultural critics began to question the capacity of photography to adequately represent capital. As Bertolt Brecht asserted, “A photograph of the Krupp Works or AEG reveals almost nothing about these institutions.”²⁰ Is this a problem that has to do with the nature of capitalism or with the fundamental features of photography?²¹

We are faced with two problems. One has to do with the object or process that we are trying to understand: capitalism and its modes of expropriation and exploitation. The other has to do with this material technology of representation: the photographic camera and the ontology of photography.

Among others, photographer and essayist Allan Sekula has argued that the photographic medium has always been haunted by human labor. Work was what was required to transform minerals into a box and lens that could record images. And in making such images, the work of the photographer was sometimes not even required. In a reading of Daguerre's first image depicting a human body, Sekula argues that the ghost in the photographic machine is the blurred and almost completely obscured worker, a shoeshine (see fig. 1). But there are two ghosts here. One ghost is in the machine, erasing the role of the labor that built it. The other ghost, the worker shining the shoes of the bourgeois, gets erased in photographic capture. The result is a photograph that obscures how our world is made. Here's Sekula: "What is celebrated? The static moment of consumption, the fashionable pose. What is obscured, denied, disavowed? The productive moment, the energetic blur of that other body, unacknowledged, the working body, the invisible shoeblack."²² Sekula projects this originary scene into the early twenty-first century. The man getting his shoes cleaned is the prefiguring of post-modern subjectivity, the enlightened shopper. "The vaporized shoeblack is the complementary, negative prefiguration of the contemporary transnational elite's geoeconomic restlessness in scouring the globe for newer, cheaper, post-Fordist labor markets."²³

Labor was not the only thing erased by Daguerre's machine. When he set in motion the process of producing an image on a polished metal plate, Daguerre trained the lens on the busy Boulevard du Temple, circa 1838. But the long exposure time effectively eliminated the throng in movement. The collective was gone. The shoeshine was erased. The lone consumer was all that remained. More than an allegory for late capitalism, from the very first mechanically recorded image, Sekula finds in photography "a privileged and insidious signifying institution."²⁴

As it pertained to the world of labor and capitalism, Sekula's critical realism eschewed the romanticization of formal work. That is, the task of picturing work, and waiting for work, involved neither the sentimentalizing view of labor inherent in liberal capitalist discourse nor the heroization associated with socialist realism. Nor was Sekula interested in a cynical portrayal of white collar boredom, anomie, distraction, or a mocking of aspirational pretense. Defining his own project in contrast to those of the documentarians of the 1930s and his contemporaries who continued working in that same vein, Sekula said,

The social documentary tradition is strongly anchored to a utopian claim for the positivity of labor: its productiveness, its "human dignity," and so on. This

tradition is nowadays most explicitly sustained by the photographer Sebastião Salgado, in a spirit that owes a great deal to liberation theology. My path, on the other hand, has been to follow the always present shadow line between work and non-work, between work and unemployment, which is also non-leisure. In other words, how can one regard work as a positive self-sufficient “presence” for the camera or otherwise—when every moment of work is haunted by capital’s ability to move anywhere else in the world?²⁵

Capital’s mobility requires an artistic practice that is adequate to it. It’s not that our era is characterized by deindustrialization, rather it is that the global shipping industry has made possible the manufacture of widgets in China for consumption in higher-wage spaces across the oceans. The Sunday supplements, no less than the walls of fashionable art galleries, feature landscapes of industrial ruins. While summoning the sympathy of viewers, such arrays do little to explain the sources of this poverty. In the face of the global dispersal of production to sites in search of the cheapest labor and raw materials, many artists and social theorists retreat to fragmentation, and critique any attempt at representation, let alone explanation, of the larger processes. Sociological theorist Alberto Toscano puts his finger on Sekula’s project as one of “seeing it whole: staging totality in social theory and art.”²⁶

Even if one has access to the traditional sites of labor, we might still ask what the camera can capture. Can photography depict the worker as both an individual and part of a larger political and economic process? If a photograph manages to represent labor, does that entail abstracting out the lived experience of a particular historical subject? Consider, for example, a fine art photographer like Chris Killip, who was commissioned in the late 1980s by the Pirelli tire factory in England to photograph on its shop floor. He was given *carte blanche* by the company and several months to complete the project, yet he still struggled to photograph what capital itself wanted to reveal. As Clive Dilnot notes in a reading of Killip’s Pirelli photographs, work is a durational activity; yet photography freezes only select moments. This, however, is not a problem specific to capitalism but to photography; all work, including noncapitalist modes of production, unfolds in time, just as all photographs capture only slices of time. In a factory without any natural light, Killip faced technical problems of staging. He also grappled with how to both keep their work in the frame and render the workers as individuals, without reducing them to social types, defined by their role in the production process. Nor did he want to reduce the workers to the product that they were producing. These were problems presented by the technology of photography. And each of these issues relates to Killip’s desire to represent something of these workers’ subjective experience. The intended result is portraits of workers, not documents of work.²⁷

Another artistic attempt to address the photographic representability of capitalism is to be found, according to literary critic Walter Benn Michaels, in the work

of a prominent group of post-1980s photographers. In contrast to the efforts of Sekula and Killip to picture the workings of capital and the experiences of the employed and the unemployed, Michaels finds in the work of this new generation of photographers a potential class aesthetic in art that is not necessarily socially committed but, instead, is concerned above all with being art. In the current cultural and political conjunction, photography is the most crucial artistic form, uniquely capable of showing how the world is structured by capital. Michaels argues that art that prompts us to imagine the structures that produce inequality is politically helpful and aesthetically autonomous.²⁸ By the “autonomy” of a work of art, Michaels means that it is internally coherent, intentionally produced, and is neither dependent upon the beholder nor upon its subject matter. He builds on a notion of what art critic Michael Fried has called “the ontological fiction” inaugurated by Diderot that seems to seal out the beholder as if the subject depicted was completely immersed in what she was doing, that is, as if she weren’t there for the spectator.²⁹ The key here, for Michaels, is that such autonomous works of art do not require the beholder to identify with the subject depicted. From this aesthetic argument, he makes a political one. Michaels maintains that, in an era dominated by neoliberal identity politics on both the Left and the Right, only an artistic practice defined by autonomy and an overriding concern for form can break our interpellation by a “neoliberal aesthetics” of recognition. Such art, then, enables us to understand the structure that produces inequality, and that also enables us to imagine possibilities outside that structure.³⁰

For a century and a half, social democratic projects have been premised upon the worker as the fundamental agent of change. Yet, this issue of the *RHR* will be published in the United States at a moment in which the decline of organized labor, and more generally the diminished social presence of the worker in our political landscape, is abundantly clear, and our primary relation to the industrial past is, perhaps, now through nostalgia. Committed to the radical egalitarian promise of class politics, Walter Benn Michaels and Daniel Zamora consider how two fine art photographers, Chris Killip and LaToya Ruby Frazier, have pictured neoliberalism. They argue that Killip and Frazier, in contrast to Sebastião Salgado in his monumental *Workers*, set themselves outside a humanist tradition of philanthropic photography whose purpose is to show pictures of suffering to excite sympathy, identification, and gestures of material support. Killip and Frazier make empathy between the depicted subject and the beholder impossible. The political message of their images makes irrelevant what the actual beholder feels when they look at their photographs. Through the internal relay of looks in Frazier’s *Mom Making an Image of Me* (see fig. 8 in the article by Michaels and Zamora), for example, the content and the structure are entirely consistent. In a domestic setting signaled by the radiator and the cardboard box at the edge of the frame, Frazier pictures herself with her mom looking at themselves, and photographing themselves, in a mirror. The beholder does not

seem to matter for them. These photographs radically question a politics of empathy, such that the attempt to seal out the beholder is not a neutral act but confronts the viewer with a structure to understand rather than a person with whom to identify.

Extending their argument, we might ask how the question of form plays out in nonartistic photography. For example, what do we do with beautiful pictures from a corporate or military archive? We might also wonder whether the question of form is not predicated upon a priori notions of the beautiful that are in fact culturally constructed and historically specific. If the question of whether photography can picture labor is unresolved in the case of fine art photographers who have devoted their practice to documenting the working class, then of what possible use might the archives of corporate, studio, scientific, journalistic, and family photos be to the historian of capitalism? To further complicate matters, we might consider how the technology of photography is itself changed in colonial encounters.³¹

Because capitalism functions through states that enforce contracts and legally encoded hierarchies of race, gender, and class, an enormous portion of the photographs that will be useful to historians will have been made not as artistic objects but as documents for a bureaucratic end. Beginning in the late nineteenth century and picking up intensity every year since, each arm of governments the world over has been making photographs and storing them according to a logic peculiar to its need to know a territory or population, human or nonhuman. Such images are integral to the construction and maintenance of an infrastructure within which capital can continue to accumulate. Likewise, capitalism works in and through cultures that are not wholly determined by it but nevertheless are imbricated in its development and function. Patriarchy, racism, and conceptions of non-human nature as somehow created for human use undergird, and subsidize as the “externalities” that capital requires to generate surpluses, capitalist accumulation. Periodicals, family photo albums, studio portraits, postcards, and social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter each contain traces not only of the dominant ideas and practices of the day but also of continued acts of visual accumulation. It is through the mostly unremunerated, unmonetized networks of kin and community that are registered in these vernacular archives that we find traces also of what capital forgets and conceals, the unpaid work and care that goes into social reproduction and the maintenance of available, cheap, and vulnerable work forces.³² And it is precisely in these archives that many of the contributors to this issue find material for writing new histories of capital and labor, studies in which nature, empire, and race are the geographical and cultural fields through which capital circulates.

In this complex concatenation of images and archives, the medium specificity of photography begins to blur. And as we move outside fortress North Atlantic, the privileging of photography as a uniquely indexical, veridical trace-making practice suddenly appears as a projection of a certain Enlightenment discourse rather than an adequate description of how the medium actually works. An increasing body of

work by scholars of South Asia reminds us that photographs are but one way of making lifelike images. Anthropologist Christopher Pinney has shown how the word *photo* in Indian vernaculars refers not to photographs but to printed chromolithographs of paintings and painted photos, many of deities. Pinney also describes cultural practices of bodily engagement with images that are premised upon notions of *darshan*, or seeing, that European notions of aesthetics cannot easily account for.³³ Art historian Kajri Jain makes an argument about “vernacular capitalisms” centered on the calendar art sold in Indian bazaars. She theorizes the efficacy of mass-circulated sacred images. The “vernacular capitalisms” that Jain describes are aspects of the constitutive outsides of global capitalism, part of a two-way process whereby local constituencies are incorporated into global capitalism and global capital is adapted to local, religiously inflected circumstances.³⁴ Historians turning to the visual archive primarily in search of information or confirmation of a fact will likely miss not only the ways that images accrue value through their circulation in religious, libidinal, and commercial economies but also the ways that capitalism and labor are constitutively enmeshed within noncapitalist practices.

One such constitutive outside was Canada’s northern frontier. Photography visually chronicled and materially transformed this region, opening the woods to industrial capitalist development, as art historian Siobhan Angus argues in these pages. In “El Dorado in the White Pines,” Angus focuses on the genre of landscape photography as fundamental to the crystallization of ideas of natural resource abundance and untouched wilderness. She explicates a visual rhetoric of “not-yet-commodified nature.”³⁵ Anchored in two mining and wilderness vacation communities in Ontario, Angus’s work shows how the conventions of landscape painting and photography provided the means by which capitalist domination over nature was naturalized. These conventions, in turn, encouraged the Canadian public to envision a place where commerce, industry, and art could be conceived, in part, as an overarching nation-building project.

From a settler colonial nation’s pursuit of cheap nature, this issue turns to examine photographic archives of imperial labor. While scholars have rightly interpreted such images through analytics of coercion and resistance, finding a visual replication of the colonial conquest already understood through a broader regional historiography, historian Adrian De Leon suggests that we might think about colonial photographic encounters as negotiations over the terms of labor. He means this both concretely, in the ways that indigenous subjects in the Philippine Cordilleras negotiated payment from their American photographers, and conceptually. In the mountains of Northern Luzon, De Leon finds that the tripartite relationship between photographed native subject, colonial photographer, and North American spectators might best be understood as a labor negotiation. Photographers studiously avoided picturing Igorots working in American-owned gold mines and instead preferred to capture them unclothed performing their primitiveness. “The

racialization of Igorots as human resources in the extractive economy of the Cordilleras is not only present in the visual archives,” De Leon writes, “this racialization also created the structure of the archives, and the knowledge derived from it.”³⁶

From here, our authors shift from an examination of official photographic documentation of ethnographic others and the imperial administration of colonial subjects and territories to consider the ways that workers and allied photographers mobilized the unique power of the camera for union, political, and more intimate needs. Increasingly in the 1930s, at an international level, labor unions and working-class institutions were becoming aware of the importance of constructing an image world adequate to their class needs. One powerful example of the scale of these efforts to create a visual alternative to company and mainstream press narratives can be found in Larry Peterson’s study of the Chicago steelworkers’ organizing drive of the mid-1930s. Having learned from prior experience of the inadequacies of commercial photography for their needs and seeking to take advantage of the new visual media possibilities heralded by the emergence of mass-circulated magazines such as *Life* and *Look*, the steelworkers’ union forged alliances with local studio photographers, professional photojournalists, and a growing network of amateur camera clubs. The union’s newspaper, *Steel Labor*, used a variety of visual rhetorics from the existing repertoire of genres, including didactic photo-essays that showed readers how to organize a local against even the most anti-union companies as well as montages that elicited resistant readings of company publicity photos. In doing so, *Steel Labor*, which had a circulation of one hundred thousand in 1936 and over a million after WWII, created new ways—new aesthetic *forms*, we might say—for workers to visualize themselves as active historical subjects. Peterson summarizes, “Taken separately, the photographic types and styles and the graphic design used to communicate these messages were unremarkable. But, through selection and combination, *Steel Labor* and other CIO newspapers developed a distinctive new kind of photography, quantitatively and qualitatively unlike anything its American labor—or European counterparts—had ever seen.”³⁷

In this issue, historian Carol Quirke shows how another US labor union used photography not only to advocate a civil rights position but also to demonstrate a real, lived experience of racial equality. The idea that a union could turn a 1930s documentary movement into campaigns for racial equality demonstrates the importance of camera practice for union and working-class activism. Quirke argues that the Local 65 United Warehouse Workers Union in New York City had an “unusual commitment to cultural activism, including photography.”³⁸ Drawing on links to the Communist Party and its Photo League, the union promoted photography with a camera club and a member-edited newspaper, *New Voices*. From 1940 to 1955, Quirke writes, “the union utilized photography to normalize the role of African American members within the union and to advance a civil rights and antiracism agenda.”³⁹ By materially producing a vision of interracial class solidarity, Local 65

sought to overcome a racialized segmentation of their own membership while also undermining the more pervasive visual narrative, and social reality, of racial segregation in the mid-twentieth century United States.

When workers were not documenting themselves, photojournalists continued to picture them. Braceros, noncitizen guest workers from Mexico brought to toil in the agricultural fields of the United States between 1942 and 1964, became the photographed subjects in a battle of images, as historian Erica Toffoli argues in this issue. The dominant narrative lined up with the official description of the program as one of class uplift, transforming rural Mexicans into modern patriarchal breadwinners, satisfied wage laborers, and avid consumers. But in the photo-essays produced by Leonard Nadel, for example, braceros were depicted as active political subjects, protesting the effacement of their labor. Given the transitory and usually unseen nature of their work, Toffoli demonstrates that the presence of migrant laborers in the visual record is doubly important. As she puts it, “In its ability to fix presence, photography enables mobile, often unseen laborers to cement fragments of their histories.”⁴⁰

Following contemporary logistical chains back to where so many of today’s consumer goods are being produced, photographer Tong Lam pursues similar themes of migration, mobility, and temporariness in a photo-essay on construction sites in rural China. Inside these construction compounds, Lam photographs workers in between shifts. This is the other side of deindustrialization in the United States, Canada, and the UK. Here you will find six of his quiet, atmospheric photographs. In Lam’s pictures, the makeshift, provisional environment that migrant construction workers in China inhabit is epitomized in temporary film screens and ephemeral gatherings in the projected light of an outdoor screening at night. While these workers from peasant communities are celebrated in the films and official nationalist rhetoric as the vanguard in a previous generation’s struggle against capitalism, within the bleak surroundings of their portable, container-like dormitories they appear unpersuaded as they distractedly watch the patriotic films.

But what, then, of a hypervisible laborer, one who deliberately bends cultural assumptions of putatively authentic racial, ethnic, and gendered lives? Such is the case of the celebrated African American model Maurice Hunter. In these pages, Clare Corbould examines Hunter’s embodied performance of masculinity, class, and entrepreneurship within diasporic black America. From the 1920s to his death in the 1960s, Hunter worked as a model for artists and advertisers, and he was known for his ability to perform a wide range of social characters, from tuxedoed waiters to Orientalized and racialized people of color from around the world. In her consideration of Hunter’s work, Corbould pursues three lines of analysis: how he curated his own image; his self-fashioning as an ideal worker and body type; and his popularity among African Americans. As Corbould demonstrates, “by paying attention to the breadth of Hunter’s work as a model and performer, we can see

he trod a line between caricature and respectability that enabled him to win significant admiration among African Americans, and that any claim to virtuosity was itself a product of the racialized capitalist and market forces in which he lived and worked.”⁴¹

The visual record of empires is scattered far and wide, held in museums, university libraries, and private collections throughout both colonies and metropolises. Fueled not only by the desires of knowledge production, imperial governance, and Orientalizing spectacle but also by the search for new frontiers of untapped energy, labor, and markets, these archives are material traces of capital’s imperial drive. To offer some sense of the different approaches that might be used in these archives, we include a series of short interventions under the heading “Reading Photos.”

The first of these tightly focused articles is Ian Bourland’s “Handsworth Song: Working People and Black Radical Photography,” a tour de force reading of a single picture by British photographer Vanley Burke. Anchored in a photograph titled *Siffa Soundsystem*, Bourland’s work examines Burke’s broader documentation of Caribbean musicscapes in urban England during the 1970s. Bourland attends to a number of elements at once—the composition of the photograph, its circulation, and what he calls the “roving counterpublic” that it both represents and helps to construct. He writes, “*Siffa Soundsystem*, in turn, is a reminder of durable strategies of defiance using the corporeal terrain of individual style, to be sure. But that corporeality extends to the gathering of bodies in real space, with sound and physical presence shifting one’s attention from the primarily visual and simulacral space of the digital toward the production of community and shared consciousness as an embodied, tactical procedure.”⁴² Sound systems and the photographic communities around them, Bourland shows, generated space for working-class migrants from the West Indies.

Moving on from this vernacular archive of black life in England, historian Rick Halpern considers a selection of photographs from the National Archives of the United States. The Records of the Bureau of Insular Affairs, Photographs of the Philippine Islands, 1898–1935, is a truly massive collection, containing 12,059 photographic prints, 171 photographic negatives, 852 lantern slides, and 1 poster.⁴³ Halpern offers a glimpse of the archival logics through which photographs accrue meaning and documentary authority. We might invite historians to consider the lantern slides in this collection as devices for projecting colonial desires and anxieties to audiences back home.⁴⁴

Our third short experiment in reading photos comes in Oliver Coates’s consideration of the British Army’s *RWAF News*, a newspaper printed in Bombay for the army’s more than seventy-three thousand West African troops stationed in South Asia during WWII. Coates uses this rare visual record of African military service overseas to examine the leisure practices of these soldiers in India. Coates sheds light on an unexplored photographic archive of African life in the mid-twentieth

century, arguing that these photographs of West African soldiers, despite their publication in a colonial paper, challenged the very racial and power disequilibrium that structured colonial rule.

Finally, in an interview with historian Tina Campt, one of the most innovative scholars of photography, Kevin Coleman asks about her most recent book, *Listening to Images*, and the kinds of care required to keep vulnerable black lives going despite ongoing threats of violence, expropriation, and exploitation. Campt began her career by using oral history interviews to consider the lives of black Germans under the Third Reich, and in this interview she discusses the connections between oral history and working with archives of photographs. Campt describes how practices of dispossession link up with the ways that capital and the state operationalize race, arguing that “quotidian practices of refusal” can be read, or, better, heard and felt, in even the most objectifying photographs.⁴⁵

To varying degrees, all of the photographs featured in this issue might best be understood as presenting aspects of “capitalism’s constitutive outsides.”⁴⁶ That is, with a few notable exceptions, these photographs do *not* directly picture the workings of capitalism or labor. Rather, they document and artistically figure the various things (e.g., natural resources, work, and caring communities) that capitalism needs to create surpluses, including cheap lives. If Michaels and Zamora are right in arguing that LaToya Ruby Frazier’s *Mom Making an Image of Me* is a picture of a class aesthetic, one that helps us get beyond neoliberal fantasies to understand how lives are structured by capitalism, then the historian of labor would also be right to describe this as a picture of the relationship between the photographer and her mom. And that makes it about the kind of caring that is done in families, work done in the house so that one can work outside of it.

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Himalayas and researching another on culinary public cultures. She is a member of the editorial collective for *Radical History Review*, is on the editorial board of *Global Food History*, and edits the *Empires in Perspective* book series.

Notes

1. We did a quick survey of the leading journals of labor and photography. Over the past ten years, journals of labor and labor history virtually ignored photography; journals of photography repaid the favor by largely neglecting to examine labor and capitalism. Our survey from 2007–2017 involved searching the following labor journals for feature articles in which photography or photographs were central components: *Studies in Working-Class History*, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, *Labor History*, *Labour / Le Travail*, *Journal of Labor*, and the *Labor Studies Journal*. For the same years, we surveyed the following photography / visual culture journals for feature articles in which labor was a keyword: *History of Photography*, *Aperture*, *October*, *Photography and Culture*, *Critical Inquiry*, and the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. In the labor history journals, we found the following: Peterson, “Producing Visual Traditions” (1992); a special issue of *International Labor and Working-Class History* under the title of “Crumbling Cultures: Deindustrialization, Class, and Memory” contained three articles that took photography and visual culture as categories of analysis: Davies, “Visual Geography of Chernobyl” (2013); High, “Beyond Aesthetics” (2013); and Strangleman, “Smokestack Nostalgia” (2013). It is encouraging that over the past five years or so, journals of labor history have regularly reviewed books that use photography and visual sources to bring new perspectives on labor. These include nonacademic titles from independent publishers as well as academic monographs from university presses. This makes up somewhat for the very small number of research articles that reach these journals that interrogate issues around photography and labor. Turning to the way that journals of photography dealt with labor, most of the coverage comes in the form of review essays, usually of exhibits and photographers: Bowden, “Camera of Dirt” (2000); Cisneros, “Kathya Maria Landeros” (2017); Kouwenhoven, “Worker-Photography Movement” (2011), a review of “A Hard, Merciless Light: The Worker-Photography Movement, 1926–1939,” curated by Jorge Ribalta at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid. Over the past ten years, *Photography and Culture* has published just one article in which labor is a keyword: Garrido Castellano, “Shadowy Presences” (2017).
2. There is an interesting parallel between the way that most historians have received studies using photography as sources and the way that the profession treated those using oral history interviews. The first generation of historians to use oral history treated their interviews as unproblematic sources of information.
3. This was American pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce’s formulation; see *Collected Papers*, 414.
4. Kevin Coleman explores issues of interpretative indeterminacy in photography by reading a photo of two unclothed men covering their genitals with leaves as an allegorical critique of neocolonial, heteronormative racial relations in the banana plantations and towns of Honduras; see Coleman, “An Egalitarian Optic,” in *Camera in the Garden*, 97–123. For other examples of the ways in which the iconic and symbolic registers of photographs have been interpreted, see the early work of feminist scholars Gillian Rose, “Engendering the Slum,” and Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets*.

This debate about indexicality goes back to Louis Daguerre and William Henry Fox Talbot; the foundational contemporary texts are Barthes, “Rhetoric of the Image”; Barthes, *Camera Lucida*. Margaret Olin challenges prevailing interpretations of Barthes’s notion of indexicality and instead suggests that “we endow [photographs] with attributes we need them to have.” She argues that “the most significant indexical power of the photograph may consequently lie . . . in the relation between the photograph and its beholder, or user, in what I would like to call a ‘performative index,’ or an ‘index of identification.’” See Olin, “Touching Photographs,” 85. For an argument that proposes two approaches, one that is more visceral and the other more cultural, through which historians might approach photography, see Thomas, “Evidence of Sight.” The most far-reaching arguments on the irreducibly indexical nature of photography have been put forward by Azoulay, *Civil Contract and Civil Imagination*. And even when the content of the image seems to be what is at stake, as in the Tichborne Affair (1867–1874) examined by historian Jennifer Tucker, the exclusivity of circulation of daguerreotypes may be what induced Victorian Britons into seeing resemblance between men pictured even where there was little; see Tucker, “Moving Pictures: Photographs on Trial in the Sir Roger Tichborne Affair,” in *Documenting*, 23–44.

5. Peter D. Osborne writes, “the categories of Art Photography and Documentary Photography have not so much fallen apart as fallen into each other.” See Osborne, “Afterword,” 8. For a general account, see Batchen, “Vernacular Photographies.”
6. Quoted in James and Lobato, *Berisso obrero*.
7. Carassai, “Busca del futuro olvidado”; Benjamin, “Work of Art.”
8. For a discussion of the work that photographs do in commemoration and mourning in the deindustrialization of Berisso, see James, *Doña María’s Story*, 149. See also Metz, “Photography and Fetish.”
9. On the United Fruit Company Photograph Collection at Harvard University’s Baker Library, see Coleman, *Camera in the Garden*. See Baker Library, Harvard Business School, “Photographs and Prints.” On the George Eastman Museum, see eastman.org/collections-online. Beyond the explicitly instrumental uses of photography as one of various corporate techniques for managing production, distribution, and marketing, companies also collect fine art. JP Morgan Chase, 7–Eleven, Hallmark, the LeSalle National Bank, Microsoft, Seagram: each of these companies has curated art collections to buttress their own corporate identities. For precisely that reason, these art collections offer neglected source material for the historian of capitalism. In what ways does such art exceed and undermine the acquisitive desires of its collectors?
10. Within visual anthropology, there is a well-developed literature on these photographs. See, for example, work by Elizabeth Edwards, Deborah Poole, Christopher Pinney, Zahid R. Chaudhary, and Amos Morris-Reich.
11. Andermann, *Optic of the State*, 203.
12. Mraz, *Photographing the Mexican Revolution*.
13. Gürsel, *Image Brokers*.
14. Bourke-White and Caldwell, *You Have Seen Their Faces*. For entry into the critical literature on the work of Caldwell and Bourke-White, the best place to begin is with James Agee’s unsparing critique of Bourke-White’s travels through “the back roads of the deep south bribing, cajoling, and sometimes browbeating her way in to photograph Negroes, share-croppers and tenant farmers.” Agee and Evans, *Let Us Now Praise*, 399. This set the tone for the contrast that is repeatedly drawn between Bourke-White’s approach to

- documentary photography and that of Walker Evans; see, for example, Shloss, "Privilege of Perception," and Tagg, *Disciplinary Frame*, especially chapter 3. In contrast, Jeff Allred makes the argument that documentary photography in the Depression-era United States worked through an "interruptive aesthetic" in which photographers became self-aware producers of "plausible fictions of the real." See Allred, *American Modernism*, 16.
15. Library of Congress, "About This Collection."
 16. Ribalta quoted in Kouwenhoven, "Worker-Photography Movement."
 17. Lavrentiev, "Soviet Photography."
 18. Ribalta, "A Hard, Merciless Light," 1.
 19. See, for instance, the work of Allan Sekula, among others.
 20. Brecht, *Threepenny Opera*.
 21. In his discussion of what he calls "allegorical materialism," Jacob Emery puts the matter this way: "all work, including the photographic artwork, constitutes a trace of productive activity as well as an image of it." Emery, "Art of the Industrial Trace," 122.
 22. Sekula, "Eternal Esthetics," 25.
 23. *Ibid.*, 26.
 24. *Ibid.*, 23.
 25. Interview with Deborah Risberg, "Imaginary Economies," 243.
 26. Toscano, "Seeing It Whole."
 27. Dilnot, "Chris Killip's Portraits."
 28. Michaels, *Beauty of a Social Problem*, 28. Michaels is working within a larger analytic initially laid out by art historian Michael Fried. See Fried, *Why Photography Matters*. For a critique of Fried's anti-theatricality, see Moten, "Resistance of the Object," 233–54.
 29. Fried, *Manet's Modernism*, 336.
 30. Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem*, see especially chapter 2, "Neoliberal Aesthetics."
 31. In his study of photography under the British Raj in India, Zahid R. Chaudhary shows how the camera changed sense perception. He argues: "If aesthetic form is a means of making sense of the world and a kind of habit and habitation, then in the scene of colonial photography in India, loss has necessarily underwritten aesthetic form." Chaudhary's account of form as akin to entrenched yet mutable habits of looking takes us still further from certain art historical discursive mechanisms for privileging some aesthetic objects over others. See *Afterimage of Empire*, 21.
 32. Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore describe "cheapening" as "a set of strategies to control a wider web of life." See *History of the World*, 3.
 33. Pinney, "Photos of the Gods."
 34. For an elaboration of Jain's notion of "proliferation of multiple cultures of capitalism," see *Gods in the Bazaar*, 37.
 35. Jason W. Moore develops the notion of "not-yet-commodified nature" in *Capitalism in the Web of Life*.
 36. De Leon, "Working the Kodak Zone," in this issue.
 37. Peterson, "Visual Culture," 213. See Peterson's footnotes for similar developments in Europe and the United States. For studies of the visual practices Mexico's labor movement, see Lear, *Picturing the Proletariat*.
 38. Quirke, "Imagining Racial Equality," in this issue.
 39. *Ibid.*
 40. Toffoli, "Capturing Capitalism's Work," in this issue.

41. Corbould, "Race, Photography, Labor, and Entrepreneurship in the Life of Maurice Hunter, Harlem's 'Man of 1,000 Faces,'" in this issue.
42. Bourland, "Handsworth Song," in this issue.
43. National Archives, "Guide to Federal Records."
44. This would extend Jill Casid's discussion of nineteenth-century technologies of image projection, psychoanalysis, and empire; see Casid, *Scenes of Projection*.
45. Coleman, "Practices of Refusal in Images," in this issue.
46. There is a long genealogy of the concept of "constitutive outsides"; for two examples relevant to our argument here, see Hall, "Introduction," and Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar*.

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