

Migration and Modernities in the Brazilian Amazon

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Transnational Fashion on the Frontier

by [Elizabeth Kutesko](#) | Nov 19, 2024

When you think of fashion, you might not think of politics. Colonization, slavery and immigration might be the furthest topics from your mind. But if you look at the case study of Brazil, as I have, you'll see how fashion is emphatically political.

For the last ten years, I've focused my research on 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. Fashion acts as a conduit for the researcher to probe at the identity of anonymous individuals in lieu of biographical information, not least to move the lived experience of overlooked subjects into the historical record.

I've discovered the amazing work of New York photographer Dana Bertran Merrill, who, for a year, documented the transnational clothing culture of the frontier society that sprang up around the construction of the Madeira-Mamoré railroad, built deep in the Brazilian Amazon between 1907 and 1912. I explore fashion on this "[commodity frontier](#)" to understand the larger history of North American extractive capitalism in South America in general, and the Amazon in particular.

Through the examination of Merrill's archives, I've seen a vivid illustration of how fashion draws people together, but also sets them apart. Close analysis of fashion illuminates the startling intricacies of global exchange as material goods and visual images flow between individuals, regions and nations—enmeshed within complex networks of power.

Photography and fashion have provided potent tools of surveillance, classification and control within the context of colonial modernity and extractive capitalism, used to categorize individuals in controlled situations according to "type," grouping individuals by race, nationality and social status. Yet the camera, in recording a vast amount of information on unknown individuals, also provides substantive evidence of their material and sensory encounters with dress, capturing modes of fashionable self-presentation and agency that offers a valuable connecting thread to the past.

The photographic sources of the Madeira-Mamoré railroad that my research hinges upon were produced by Merrill in 1910. On the cusp of the rubber boom, Merrill was hired by Yale-trained engineer and entrepreneur Percival Farquhar to capture the speed and progress of the concluding stages of the railroad, which Farquhar was in charge of constructing. It was common practice since the late 19th 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.

In Merrill's photos and beyond, [Brazil](#), I've found, allows us to examine fashion's transnational entanglements that are a direct result of colonization, slavery and immigration. Foreign representations continue to present a one-dimensional image of the country, often centered on Rio de Janeiro's beaches or the Amazon rainforest. But addressing fashion carefully reveals complex patterns of exchange and agency, as well as the persistence of marginalized identities—as seen in Merrill's poignant photos of Caribbean washerwomen in the Amazon jungle.

Since it was first colonized by the Portuguese in 1500, Brazil has absorbed but also reinterpreted diverse influences that stem from its Indigenous populations, as well as from Africa, Asia, Europe and the United States. To understand the nuances of Brazilian fashion in global perspective over the past five centuries, we must reject any simplistic notion of Brazil's dependence on an authoritative Western-dominated fashion industry and culture.

Here's a good place to tell you how I define "fashion." I use the term in its broadest sense to encompass appearance, style and body modifications and/or supplements which, according to anthropologist Joanne B. Eicher, are subject to change and transformation in all cultures, periods and geographies. Every item of clothing, including workwear and occupational dress, incorporates some aspect of fashion. But crucially, each individual fashions themselves to varying degrees through clothing, pose, gesture, gaze or expression, since fashioning the body is a key facet of personal and collective identities throughout the world, as seen in Merrill's photos of the Brazilian railroad project and its accompanying fashions.

The Madeira-Mamoré railroad was an imperial project of U.S. capitalist expansion and exploitation of the Brazilian 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 global markets. 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 Rondônia, 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.

Farquhar spearheaded the construction of the railroad with the political backing of Brazil and under pressure from Bolivia. Such multinational contracts were not uncommon in the early decades of the 20th 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.



Brazilian authorities visiting a completed section of the Madeira-Mamoré railroad, May 31, 1910. They have dressed for the occasion, in European-style suits, ties and hats that gesture towards the gentlemanly pursuits and air of urban “civility” deemed necessary to tame the Amazonian “wilderness.”

© Dana Bertan Merrill. Public Domain / Museu Paulista (USP) Collection

Yet the project became memorialized in the U.S. and Brazilian press as the “Devil’s Railroad.” This was 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 global 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 labor in the wake of the abolition of slavery that legally ended in Brazil in 1888. By the time of the railroad’s August 1, 1912, inauguration, the speculative boom for Amazonian rubber had already crashed in favor of cheaper supplies from the Far East. This rendered the Madeira-Mamoré railroad not just a late arrival, but already obsolete.



View of abandoned locomotive, Abunã, June 2019. © Elizabeth Kutesko

The industrial archaeology of a stationary locomotive that still haunts the contemporary Amazonian landscape is the surest reminder of global capitalism's clear failures, as nature slowly reclaims her territory. Similar examples of “ruin porn”—aestheticized representations of nature as it reclaims former industrial sites in a state of disrepair—are common in contemporary reportage of the Madeira-Mamoré railroad.

Indeed, of the numerous projects of Anglo-European industrialization and modernization that took place in the Amazon during the late-19th and early-20th centuries, the Madeira-Mamoré railroad captures the imagination. Although intended to generate capital by speeding up the transportation of goods, the project was undercut by the reality of going around in circles, of repeated failed attempts at construction that were compounded by the almost immediate economic failure of the project upon completion. It underlines the antagonist forces at play between the imperial and nationalistic ambitions for “progress” that were fueled by North and South American elites. There is a logic to the project that is worthy of Werner Herzog's *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), whose eponymous anti-hero played by Klaus Kinski, wearing a crumpled linen suit and Panama hat, upholds a delusional fantasy of building an opera house in the depths of the Peruvian jungle.

But let us not forget that the frontier, according to its most famous theoretician, Frederick Jackson Turner, is also “the outer edge of the wave—the meeting point between savagery and civilization.” Fluid and borderless, the frontier ebbs and flows, reminding us of the need for its boundaries to be continually delineated. I look not only at how land was demarcated with the expansion of the American frontier in South America, but also how the contours of different ethnic and racialized bodies were delineated and articulated both through fashion and the pseudo-scientific medium of photography.

By the very nature of their construction in an orderly succession of parallel tracks and perpendicular ties, railroads materialize a teleological narrative of progress. Photography parallels the forward momentum of the locomotive, which serves as a metonym for capitalist speed and advance, leading the eye towards a vanishing point on the horizon.

Merrill's camera, however, 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 modernization, 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.



North American contractors A.B. Jekyll, John Randolph, Robert H. May and Henry Dose seated on the veranda of one of the American-built houses in Porto Velho, the frontier town that marked one end of the line. © Dana Bertran Merrill. Public Domain / Biblioteca Nacional, Rio de Janeiro.

In the more than 2,000 photographs that Merrill documented during his time spent in the Amazon between 1910 and 1911, of which only 500 or so remain, we see a vast array of different types and locales. Changing modes of dress are captured in intricate detail in multiple variations on the same subjects.

Although he was not employed to document the transnational clothing culture of the frontier society that sprang up around the construction of the railroad, Merrill's commissioned photographs overflow with visual information on fashion: what people wore, and how they wore it, documented in extraordinary detail. His gaze orientates our attention to the environmental destruction that industry has left in its wake, but he also

documents the fashions sported by his subjects with a care and attention to detail that is completely unexpected in commercial photography of engineering sites during the period. Given that there are no existing material sources of clothing relating to the Madeira-Mamoré railroad for the fashion historian to analyze, the photographs produced by Merrill fill a considerable dearth in the historical record. His photographs yield new insights into fashion's histories as well as those of photography and its intersection with global projects of industrial capitalism.



Caribbean women work in the hot and humid Porto Velho steam laundry, dressed in sturdy floor-length skirts, aprons, and white lace blouses. © Dana Bertan Merrill. Public Domain / Museu Paulista (USP) Collection

In this remote and isolated male-dominated frontier society, fashion was a tool used to sustain hierarchies of race, gender and class deep in the jungle. It distinguished between the U.S. engineers, the Caribbean women who worked in the steam laundry, the Brazilian government officials sent to oversee the works, the skilled and unskilled laborers who were recruited from all over the world, and the Indigenous peoples whose land was being expropriated during the process.

The North American contractors, for example, wore startlingly light suits: easily soiled, difficult to maintain and requiring frequent laundering by the Caribbean women who laboured day after day in the steam laundry on site. It is the repetitive labour of care performed by Caribbean women in the steam laundry that upheld the pristine whiteness of their tropical suits, which served as a symbol of racial superiority and rank. Merrill's camera worked in the service of material whiteness, amplifying its symbolic and racialized qualities in visual form by capturing a momentary state that could be preserved for posterity by the ostensible neutrality of the photographic record.

By putting his photographs together with diaries and memoirs we can gain valuable insights into the sartorial detail and bodily performances that individuals enacted before Merrill's camera, to understand the significance of fashion at this transnational crossroads, but also the uneven hierarchies of power that underpinned the process of extractive capitalism in the Brazilian Amazon. That Merrill later produced work for U.S. fashion magazines *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar* underlines the meticulous attention that he paid to fashion.

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Two unskilled laborers are simultaneously particularized and generalized by the physiognomic gaze of the camera. Photographed in 1910, the unidentified subjects wear a mixture of utilitarian work clothes and dress that looks too good for hard manual labour. The distinctive waistcoat sported by the figure to the right, which is probably Balkan, may have been brought along by the wearer to act as a synecdoche for home. When workers died in camp, their belongings were often sold at reduced prices to other men, making up for the lack of shops in the isolated location. © Dana Bertan Merrill. Public Domain / Museu Paulista (USP) Collection

During the process, my research has brought into sharp focus questions concerning archival evidence and historical practice. Most of Merrill's photographic negatives, and written records that were held in Porto Velho at the railroad headquarters, were destroyed in the 1980s by the Brazilian military dictatorship. Remaining sources are spread in public institutions across four different time zones in the United States and Brazil. It has been a lengthy process accessing these materials, forcing me to confront my expectations of the imagined records the archive was supposed to hold, as well as the methods the historian might use to overcome acts of erasure in the authorized record.

I have come to understand Merrill's archive as more precious for its incompleteness—like a patched-up sweater. It enables us to isolate momentary glimpses from the serendipity of who he documented, and of the moments that have been preserved, somewhat accidentally, by history. Merrill's camera acted both as witness to, and abettor in, this imperial project of U.S. capitalist expansion and exploitation of South America. But turning to fashion enables the researcher to shift the agency and attention to his predominantly male subjects, who used clothing strategically to position themselves in relation to one another in the remote and uninviting location a long way from home. Merrill's photographic gaze provides an unusual case study for the historian to interrogate the very nature of fashion, by critically evaluating the colonial and neocolonial devaluation of labor upon which it is predicated.

Elizabeth Kutesko is Senior Lecturer in Fashion Histories and Theories at Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London. She received her Ph.D. in Art History from the Courtauld Institute of Art in 2016, and is the author of Fashioning Brazil: Globalization and the Representation of Brazilian Dress in National Geographic. Further information on her research projects can be viewed at elizabethkutesko.com.

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Sewing the Past: The Enigma and Dress of an Afro-Brazilian Gentlewoman

Writing this text was a significant and important challenge for me, as a Black Brazilian woman and academic, used to impersonal writing.



Unsubmissive Images

Hemetério José dos Santos (1858-1939), a Black grammarian and teacher at Rio de Janeiro's most important schools suffered racist attacks in the press because of the way he dressed.

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