

21A.4451

Weekly Memo #4

In America (and as an American-born, American-raised citizen, this is the only national view I have been privy to, through media reports, institutionalized stereotypes, laws and government statements, personal interactions, etc.), the idea of “cheap and docile” and physically capable bodies is overwhelmingly tied to the idea of the “Othered” immigrant. The migrant worker in America is frequently conceptualized as a non-English-speaking, 20-50-year-old, racially “Hispanic” (often Mexican) man – a weathered worker, who submits to the responsibilities of his labor without objection, works jobs that no one else can or will, and, of course, is “illegal.”

As an effort to confirm my perception of the American concept of the migrant worker (and out of curiosity), I attempted to find “proof” of this “image” on the ever-impressive Internet. The results are included below as screenshots. They overwhelmingly support the description I give above, and of course, bring up more questions.

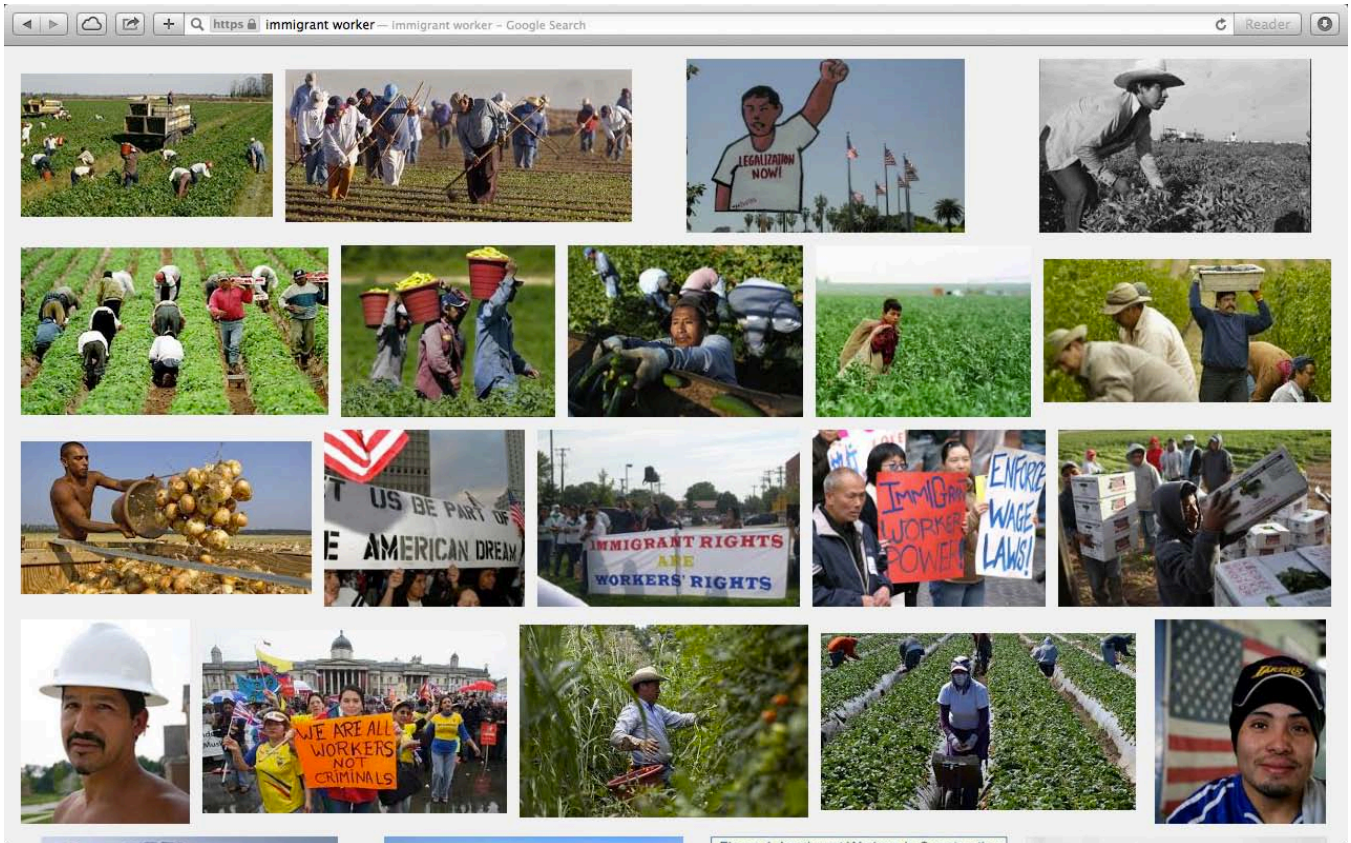
In all of these images, the migrant worker is performing manual labor (farm work, most commonly) – an idea that has associated with “Othering” in Western discourse for centuries. In the United States of America’s colonial history, indigenous peoples and then Africans were enslaved because (this among many other similarly ridiculous justifications, of course) it was considered “natural” for these “kinds” of people to do this “kind” of labor. Pseudoscience supported this by spreading propaganda that “proved” the biological superiority of white Europeans to all others. Given their elevated position in colonial society, it seemed absurd that these Europeans had to perform grueling manual labor, when there were bodies at their disposal that were already doing that awful work – and doing it well. In this way, they were dehumanized and reduced to bodies. We (Of course, there were many other issues at play here besides race – including, for example, an extraordinary language barrier, spiritual/religious differences between various parties, etc. Today, we continue to understand human trafficking, slavery, and other related crimes through the lenses of various identities and their intersections.)

Women, too, work in the fields. Their bodies, like the bodies of male migrant workers, are seen as objects, tools – but unlike their male counterparts, these bodies are often sexualized. Women are therefore particularly “useful” tools to have, as they serve two purposes – manual farm work, and sexual favors (rapes).

The other forms of labor available for migrant women are often gendered as feminine – they are domestic/private forms of labor, like childcare, cooking, and cleaning. Speaking of a specific “form” of childcare, babysitting, José Luis Rocha writes, “Babysitters embody the merchandising of human relations and the cohort of services associated with them.” Here, we once again see the commodification of the worker – reminding me of Karl Marx’s theory of alienation of labor.

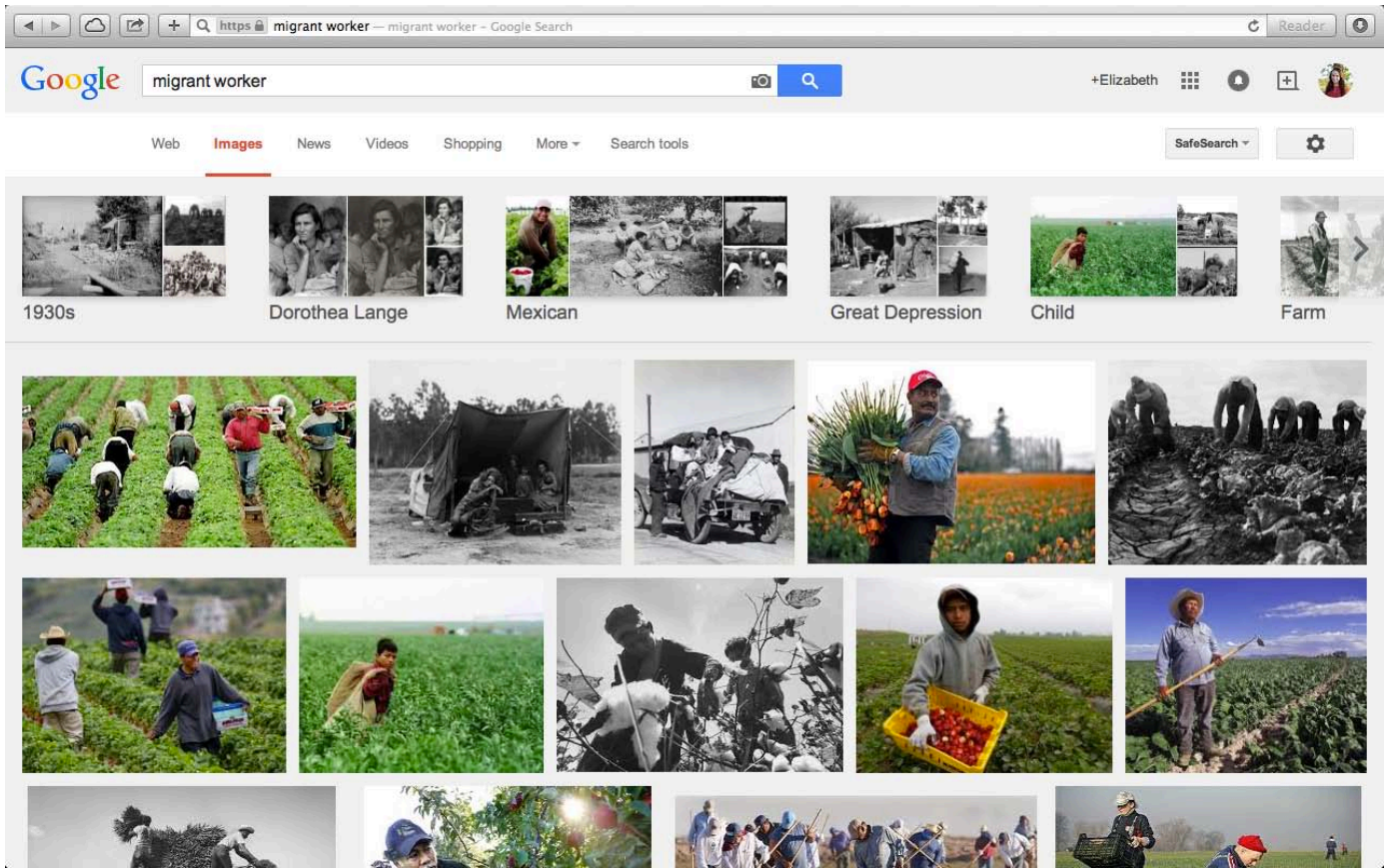
Migration complicates labor for a number of reasons. Many of the migrant workers we have examined are considered “illegal” by many descriptions, “undocumented” or “unauthorized” by others, and even “alien” by some. Would we “un-complicate” the issue of labor (specifically “cheap and docile” manual labor) by legalizing these workers? Summarized perfectly by José Luis Rocha with regards to workers in strawberry fields, the issue is this:

“The argument is that legalization programs only keep workers in agricultural occupations for a while: as soon as they’re happily legalized they’re very likely to leave agriculture for better paying jobs [...] The solution is to stick with the current system: a good supply of workers who are undocumented keeps them captive in the lowest paying activities and those in which they’re less susceptible to being detected.”



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Google Image search: immigrant worker (first four rows of images)



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Google Image search: migrant worker (first images)

I found these particularly interesting, as the additional search terms Google suggests are "1930s," "Dorothea Lange," and "Great Depression" (recalling the opening of Rocha's *Strawberry Fields and Undocumented Workers Forever?* as well as the John Steinbeck works to which Rocha refers), and "Mexican" (which seems to right along with what I discussed above)

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