

Mining Photography: *The Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique 1899*

On 18th July 1990 Mr Smail wrote to Henry Hucks Gibbs. He addressed him by his title:

My dear Lord Aldenham,

I am sending you herewith an album of views of Alianza and Iquique, which I would ask you to accept as a souvenir as our last but I hope not least among nitrate oficinas. The views were taken about the middle of last year¹ (Figure 1).

Mr Smail was a manager of nitrate companies mining in Chile owned by merchant house Antony Gibbs and Sons; he was accustomed to corresponding with their London office, sending financial accounts to the head of the house (Figure 2).² The 'album of views', which has the title *Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique 1899* embossed on its cover, contained around ninety photographs of nitrate industry in the Atacama Desert of Chile, concluding with panoramas of nitrate ports. The desert was intensively mined for nitrate from the late nineteenth to early twentieth century. The industry was driven by British capital and capitalists that colonised an inhospitable place, an almost waterless environment. Machinery was imported from Britain and labouring men, Chilean, Bolivian and Peruvian, were brought and bound through an enganche system to live in the nitrate oficinas.³

¹ *Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique 1899*, Album 12, Fondo Fotográfico Fundación Universidad de Navarra/Museo Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona.

² Harold Blakemore, *British Nitrates and Chilean Politics, 1886-1896: Balmaceda and North* (London: University of London/Althone Press, 1974) 54.

³ Michael Monteón, 'The British in the Atacama Desert: the Cultural Bases of Economic Imperialism', *The Journal of Economic History*, Vol.35 No. 1, March 1975, 117-133; Micheal Monteón, 'The Enganche in the Chilean Nitrate Sector, 1880-1930', *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 6. No.3, Summer 1979, 66-79. Thomas F. O'Brien, 'The Antofagasta Company: A Case Study of Peripheral Capitalism', *The Hispanic American Historical Review*, Vol. 60, No.1, Feb 1980, 1-31. See also: William Edmundson, *The Nitrate King: A Biography of "Colonel" John Thomas North* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). Andre Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America* [1969] (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1971) that capital that developed nitrate mining was Chilean not British and appropriated by the latter, see pp.101-2 and p.111.

The *Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique 1899* album contains one image of contemporary political significance: the photograph numbered 27 presents a row of nitrate miners, shovels in hand, entitled 'A Group of Desripidores'; it has been deployed in commemorations of the Escuela Santa María massacre, the killing of hundreds of striking nitrate miners, railway workers, cart drivers and artisans by government troops in Iquique on 21 December 1907 (Figure 3). A week before, 5 000 nitrate workers had walked from the oficinas along the railway lines that cross the pampa to rally in Iquique; they waited in the large courtyard of a school called Santa Maria while their representatives, including José Briggs and Luis Olea, presented their demands: an end to payments in *fichas*, the nitrate company tokens that were the currency of the overpriced company stores; wage stability with the establishment of an eighteen pence peso; safer working conditions, especially around *cachuchos*, the mechanism for crushing *caliche*, the desert rocks containing nitrate; honest working practices, particularly an end to processing the low grade *caliche* for which workers had been refused payment; more schools and free evening lessons for workers; an amnesty for strikers. The nitrate companies, merchants and bankers refused to negotiate. Regional governor Intendente Carlos Eastman declared a state of siege and ordered nitrate workers back to the pampa. They refused. The military, led by General Silva Renard, used machine guns to fire on the strikers then charged with cavalry and bayonets. This 'site of the greatest labour uprising, remains part of the class consciousness of militant labourer' writes Michael Monteón.⁴ The Santa María massacre is, summarises Lessie Jo Frazier, the central symbol of repression that led to the formation

⁴ Michael Monteón, *Chile in the Nitrate Era: the Evolution of Economic Dependence, 1880-1930* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1982) 80 and see also 103-105; Eduardo Devés, *Los que van a morir te saludan. Historia de una masacre: Escuela Santa María de Iquique, 1907* [1988](Santiago: LOM, 1997); Sergio González Miranda, *Ofrenda a una masacre: Claves e indicios históricos de la emancipación pampina de 1907* (Santiago: LOM, 2007).

of working-class consciousness.⁵ It has commemorated with annual rallies at the school and, importantly, recalled in song. The *Cantana Santa María of Iquique*, was written and popularised during 1970-1973 Popular Unity period. The 1907 killings became a more complex symbol of class struggle in Chile: 'an allegory for the overthrow'⁶ of Salvador Allende's government by General Pinochet with his United States supporters.

The figures of nitrate workers photographed some eight years before the Santa María massacre are an embodiment of the heroism of manual labour, collectively organised. Their forms circulate far beyond their position in the *Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique 1899* album; they have been remodelled in metal, digitally reproduced on left radical blogs as well as used to represent the regional history of Iquique to tourists (Figure 4,5,6). The image (Figure 3) is arresting; it offers the possibility of catching sight of the work of nitrate mining, of the experience of shovelling the desert earth, of the material conditions of labouring in the desert: a flash⁷ of a past reality. It contains, in Walter Benjamin's words, a 'tiny spark of contingency':

No matter how artful the photographer, no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder feels an irresistible urge to search such a picture for a tiny spark of contingency, of the Here and Now, which reality has so to speak seared the subject⁸

Maybe. Hopefully. We shall see. This article examines *Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique 1899* as a fragment of an archive of the British nitrate industry in Chile. I offer a reading of

⁵ Lessie Jo Frazier, *Salt in the Sand: Memory, Violence and the Nation-State in Chile* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) 118. She also comments on the importance of the image of the *derripiador* (note spelling): the foremost image of the pampino' 151.

⁶ Frazier, *Salt in the Sand*, 119.

⁷ A flash like a memory. Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in Hannah Arendt (ed), *Illuminations* (London: Fontana) 247. The image also features in Patricio Guzman (dir) *Nostalgia for the Light* (2011).

⁸ Walter Benjamin, 'A Small History of Photography' in *One Way Street and Other Writings*, (London: Verso, 1979), 243. For an analysis of how photography of nitrate mining provides a simultaenous view of the past and future see Andrea Jösch, 'The Photography of an Inhospitable Territory' In Ribas, X., *Nitrate*, (Barcelona: MACBA [Museu D'Art Contemporani de Barcelona] 2014), 43-46.

its sequence of photographic images. Space permits halting upon only a few of the ninety images to consider photographic practices of recording the mining exploitation of Atacama Desert.

The first image, the number 1 scratched onto its surface, is, I would suggest, is one of the most important of the album (Figure 7). Initially, it might appear rather blank: an empty sky, pale sepia produced by colodion printing process, hangs over a flat desert, which is only a little darker in colour. The rocky surface creates some shadow. The nineteenth century camera has captured details of surface. The land is textured but the emptiness of the sky is foregrounded beneath and below it. The tracks of the railway line establishes lines of perspective along the left of the image; the right hand track, a long straight line with a dark sharp shadow, propels the viewer of this first image to a building then a wall. Also distinguishable because its shape is darker straighter than the surface of the desert, a wall cuts across the horizon where desert fades into the sky, providing another line of sight through a series structures that continue to draw attention across the image towards a distant factory building. Entitled 'General View of Grounds and Works', the image prepares the viewer for the following ninety; it sets the scene, indicates everything that is in store.

Rather than blank, the empty, flat image is full and quite dynamic. The railway tracks generate a geometrical order; the lines square off the desert. The photographic arrangement of the view posits an industrial topography; it shows a worked and controlled landscape. Within a measured boundary, the uneven surface of the desert becomes a nitrate field, one of the 'Grounds' of industry to use a word from the image's written title. Tracks and walls are, furthermore, lines of movement, visual and geographical trajectories. Their destination, on the far right of the horizon is the *oficina*. Its smoking chimney, a sign, or more precisely, an index of industrialisation (Figure 8). The visual path of the viewer simulates that of the train, on which the photographer carrying his camera and other

photographic paraphernalia would have certainly travelled. Train and photographer, with those who have flicked through the album trailing behind them, are heading for the *oficina*. The opening image promises a journey and, indeed, a journey does unfold through the album.

The first forty photographs trace the mining, processing and transport of nitrate; its transformation from desert rock, a mineral deposit, *caliche*, lying just beneath the its surface, to a chemical, bagged and ready for transport (Figure 9,10). As nitrate changes its material state, it crosses the landscape: each photograph shows an industrial stage and is a geographical frame. When the nitrate is loaded onto the train to leave desert (Figure 10), the movement of the camera, and the gaze of the viewer that falls in behind it, rests on the *oficina* itself. A tour of the nitrate works and nitrate town in twenty photographs opens with a view of the general stores and concludes with one of administrator's house (Figure 11, 12). This sequence is an interlude. The image that immediately follows, the selection of which seems to me to use editing techniques that characterised early moving film, shows the arrival of the train pulling sacks of nitrate at the port of Iquique (Figure 13). It is as if the nitrate town tour took place while the bags of nitrate were travelling across the desert to the port of Iquique. Geographical frames are also time frames. When the train enters Iquique, the viewer rejoins nitrate's journey. The next closing sequence, ten or so photographs, tracks the movement of nitrate as it transferred from vehicle to vehicle, stack to stack, from train to warehouse, warehouse to dock, boats to ships (Figure 14,15). Here is evidence of exports, a measurement of the quantity of nitrate. The effect of the images is cumulative: piles upon piles of stuff is a display of plenty, always a representation of wealth.

The album *Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique* presents a photographic sequence that is spatial, material and temporal: from the desert to the sea, from rock to commodity. Furthermore, there is an evocation of historical time within the sequence that makes

industrial process appears as historical progress. It is the second image of the album, that which immediately follows the opening photograph of a worked, controlled desert landscape, an industrial topography, opens the historical sequencing. Entitled 'Virgin Nitrate Grounds', it is almost featureless, a photograph of nothing, no event, no action (Figure 16). It consists of two blocks of colour: a pale earth and paler sky. It displays the desert as vast empty expanse, an uninhabited land, waiting for something to happen. The human figure is scaled small against the desert to demonstrate its emptiness and readiness. Two men on horses are positioned in the centre of the photograph; their forms are indistinct; only an outline is discernible. The horses are held (one by the reins) facing each other, angled to form gateway into the desert vanishing to point between them (Figure 17). Across from each other, the men look into the distance. The profile of their clothed bodies with the shape of their hats not their faces visible indicate figures turned away from camera drawing the viewer's gaze to as far as they eye can see, to the vanishing point. The undisturbed surface of the empty desert spreads out before them. In this geographical time frame, there is no smoking chimney, no signs of industry. In the photographer's time, real time, if you like, he has simply pointed his camera away from the *Oficina Alianza*, the fully operational *oficina*, that he was heading towards as he travelled on the train. He has produced another view of the desert as past of the *oficina*; thus his sequencing of photographs becomes an account of the industrialisation of the desert; it shows the industrial transformation of the Atacama desert as a historical as well as daily operation.

In the album, the desert landscape dominates (expansive ochre fields under a large empty skies), until the arrival of technology. The seventeenth frame of the album is well-organised image of industry (Figure 18). The tracks, girders and planks (the railway carrying carts of *caliche* and regular openings of the crusher's hopper) extend from bottom left to centre providing lines of perspective around which the elements of the image are

drawn into symmetry and balance. Steep sided structures, exposed constructions repeating metal forms, rise on either side of the tracks. Industry lies between, represented by activity and quantity, productivity, to use the economic term. Men occupy purposeful positions within the industrial architecture and oversee the mounds of materials. At the very centre of the image, at the destination of the lines of perspective, is its defining moment, the stage in industrial process announced in its title: 'Top of Caliche Hopper Carts tipping Caliche'. Three men reach and hold the cart as dusty rocks pour from the bottom and spill from the top (Figure 19). The face of foremost figure, whose leaning body is aligned with the cart to become part of the shape and movement of tipping caliche, is turned upwards towards the camera. His glance punctures the image, alerting its viewers, us, that this moment is being presented. But the image's other elements combine to encourage a dismissal of his look and its small incidental challenge to the documentary claims of nineteenth century industrial photography. The cart and its handlers might have halted for the camera but heavy loads stacked up behind them reassure that the sight of a tipping cart of *caliche* is a routine of nitrate processing, in fact, it is repeated in the image: dust cloud pours from a mule drawn cart, positioned above right. The viewer can see enough to assume that this happens all the time.

These moments in the journey of nitrate are not merely a record of where the photographer stood but nor is the narrative of nitrate his invention. I am assuming the photographer is male, but I do not know his name or other sign of identity. Records of him have not been unfortunately lost or overlooked; his anonymity is an historical accuracy of a kind. The photographer of *Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique 1899* cannot be distinguished as an individual practitioner because his work reproduces standard photographic forms of the late nineteenth century. The sequencing of images has been, I have suggested, created through considered editing, their numbering and renumbering is discernible on some plates (Figure 18), but the composition of the views of the desert

landscape and nitrate industry dutifully follows the conventions of late nineteenth century photographic practice. The extraordinary spaces of the Atacama Desert are presented as an industrial scene like other industrial scenes. The desert is framed through practice of industrial photography, which was well established by time the album was compiled in 1899. Historian of the art of the engineer, Francis Pugh, states:

During the latter half of the nineteenth century industrial photography became one of the principal means for recording and publicising the achievements of British industry, so that by 1900 there was hardly an industrial sector which did not make use of photography in one form or another⁹

It was from the mid-nineteenth century, photographers with some professional status were commissioned by engineers or contractors, to produce photographic records of large-scale industrial schemes. Typically, it was ambitious structural interventions upon the landscapes that were documented, such as bridges or tunnels for railways lines. Henry Flather's *Construction of the Metropolitan and District Railway 1856-68* is an important example of this photographic practice. Many of Flather's sixty-four images contributed to establishing the conventions of industrial photography; I would draw attention to just two. One, 'cutting the line at Notting Hill Gate', is a perfectly arranged scene of industry (Figure 20). Flather deploys pictorial practices to provide a frame through which industry can be represented; he organises the view of industry, brings an order to the disorder of an unfinished industrial work. His photograph has the formal arrangement of a landscape painting¹⁰: a left to right, top to bottom axis creates movement across the picture plane. On either side of this axis, the railway cutting and the subject of the photograph, along exposed surfaces of dark dug earth and lighter rocky shelves lie heaps of stuff, pile of wooden planks awaiting use, barrows of blocks to be carried away. An unfinished scene is drawn into a balanced

⁹ Francis Pugh, 'Industrial Image 1843 to 1918', in *Industrial Image: British Industrial Photography 1843 to 1986* (London: Photographers' Gallery, 1986), 9.

¹⁰ See, for example, Helen Langdon, *Claude Lorrain* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1989) for composition arrangement of classical landscape painting.

arrangement. A symmetry between two cranes suggests archway across the cutting. The heaps of temporarily discarded stuff form geometrical patterns: repeating rectangles or the lines of isosceles triangles. Unfinished nature of scene is busy but not chaotic; it is an image of the moment of material transformation. Human figures have a small part in this scene; they stand within its industrial structures, as if emplacements, belittled by amounts of materials and scale of scene.

Another Flather image of the Bayswater Excavations, is captioned 'a gang of workmen around a steam crane which is removing spoil from an excavation at Craven Hill' (Figure 21). It has the human figure, the worker's body, a group of labouring men, as the subject. They are turned to face the photographer, the camera and, once the shapes of light upon photographic plate are fixed in chemicals and reproduced, they face us, the photograph's viewers. They have been positioned ascending and descending the steam crane, another balanced classic painterly arrangement. The figures form sight lines from left and right into the centre of the image, to the cogs and wheels of pulley mechanism, the steam pipe atop all, the pinnacle of the image. The group of labouring men presents the technology of industrial work and present themselves; they hold poses from which their forms industrial labour can be read from their bodies. The chest of foreman, positioned centre right fills out his waistcoat to demonstrate his command. The wide stance, a lunge, of the white jacketed worker, front leg bent, shovel held infringe straight back leg, displays not simply his manual type of work but preparedness to labour. They not as shown with their backs bent in labour (another trope of industrial photography), we see they have stopped for the moment of photograph, but labour is the photographic subject as it is, in the twenty seventh image of the album *Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique* (Figure 3).¹¹

¹¹ Although I have located 'A Group of Desripiodores' within the practice of industrial photography, it can be read as a frontier group portrait. See Margarita Alvarado Perez, 'Pose y montaje en la fotografía *mapuche*: Retrato fotográfico, representación e identidad' in Margarita Alvarado et al

A row of nine nitrate workers confront the viewer. They do so because they have been lined up directly in front of the photographer and have held their positions. The figure on the far left is posed for an individual portrait: his gently angled body weighted on his back foot, his face and glance titled upward and he carries a token of identity, the shovel (Figure 23). But the rest of the row has simply squared up to the camera: a full length front view of their whole body is plainly visible: legs straight, hands by sides, faces to the front. They appear to await a military style inspection; nitrate workers on display. Yet, they do not quite present themselves. Their presentation is arranged within the image, through the composition of the photograph. The row is mediated by a single figure in the foreground (Figure 24). Seated on his shovel, below head height, he does not interrupt the view of the nitrate workers but, to use metaphors of performance, announces them. In the background are ten figures. Their faces less distinct, their bodies partially visible, they fade into the architecture of image. Five figures with the smaller frames of children are evenly spaced ascending wooden stairs and function as a supporting cast to the main players. Five of the row of nine are bare-chested and four stand together in the middle. If the row is the main performance; they are its centerpiece. All other nitrate workers are fully clothed in every other image in the album. Desripiodores', those shovelling waste of nitrate processing from boiling tanks, worked with their shirts off. One female North America observer, Mabel Todd, noted they were half-naked.¹² Perhaps, then, in a moment of rest from work occasioned by the act of photography (the interruption of their routines cause by the entrance of the photographer, the installing and adjustment of his equipment), some cooled and dressed or in a moment of rest felt the heat of the day and undressed. Two

(ed), *Mapuche: Fotografías Siglos XIX y XX: Construcción y Montaje de un Imaginario* (Santiago de Chile: Pehuén, 2001)

¹² Mabel Loomis Todd, 'The Nitrate Wealth of Tarapacá', unpublished manuscript, Mabel Loomis Todd Papers (MS 496C). Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library, 13.

white shirts hang over the wooden structures of the *oficina*'s boiling tanks, a collarless neck of a worker's garment just visible. Unintentional or otherwise, this is a show of strength: physical, manual, masculine. That much can be seen but its meaning is not clear, neither in 1899 nor now. Bare chests are worn in all kinds of imagery from sculpture to comic strips by classical and primitive subjects: ancient warriors and colonial peoples. To try to understand the contradictions of such a show of strength, I would like to consider that moment of interruption, the act of photography. When the photographer was ready to take his shot, did he fear asking the nitrate workers to appear fully dressed? Or, did they reach for their shirts and he told them to stand without? In that moment, to whom did their strength belong? There are two figures who do not stare at the photographer or his camera but look to their left: the seated figure in the foreground and an upright figure parallel to him behind the row. They seem to be looking at the same thing or the same person; they wait for the photograph to be taken, the moment to pass, and perhaps receive the sign from the foreman, *el capitaz*, to get back to work.

Like Flather's Bayswater Excavations photograph, the 'Group of Desripiodores' is an image of work halted but industrial labour is its subject. I am not arguing that the photographer of *Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique* had seen Henry Flather's photographs or admired the work. My case is that by 1899, when he arranged his tripod on the uneven surface of the rocky desert to point his heavy camera towards an empty landscape before turning to focus upon the operations of machinery, a way of picturing industry was already in place. Furthermore, by the 1880s, according to Francis Pugh, photographic documentation of industrial works became part of that industrial work, organised by the engineer, contractor or company carrying it out. At this time, he states 'the engineer-

photographer becomes a more familiar figure' ¹³ The photographer of the album is just another industrial worker¹⁴ and the less we know about him, his relationship to the nitrate companies, the owners of the machinery, the railway, the more photographs appear to record the historical inevitability of industry, that the desert was just there waiting to be industrialised, rather than their own existence which was contingent upon industrial relationships.

Each industrial stage of nitrate mining at the *Alianza oficina* documented in its album was 'entwined'¹⁵, even determined by, competitive relationships of capital accumulation. If it is not a contradiction in terms, nitrate trafficking was a matter of competing monopolies. Following Chile's victory in the War of the Pacific over neighbours Peru and Bolivia, the natural monopoly of sodium nitrate of Atacama Desert became the site of concentrated capitalist exploitation. Competition for concessions to mine nitrate fields and the railway routes from these desert fields to the Pacific ports led to the rapid expansion of nitrate mining, the industrialisation of the Atacama. One nitrate company (for example, Antony Gibbs, John Thomas North, Balfour Williamson, Campbell Outram, Folsch Martin) would work several nitrate fields, own the nitrate *oficina* and warehouse in Iquique or Pisagua where sacks of nitrate stored awaiting export to Liverpool, London and Europe where German farmers, who grew beets for cattle feed liked the quickening effect of nitrate fertilizers, were important customers. The railways that transported nitrate from desert to the sea were the 'key' to profits and profiteering in nitrate.¹⁶ Railway companies charged nitrate companies for transportation. Monopolies reigned. High tariffs per quintal

¹³ Francis Pugh, 'Industrial Image 1843 to 1918', 17. See also Michael Collins, *Record Pictures: Photographs from the Archives of the Institution of Civil Engineers* (Göttingen: Steidl Mack, 2004) for the way photographers are not separately identified as engineering develops as an industry.

¹⁴ Steve Edwards, *The Making of English Photography: Allegories* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 1.

¹⁵ Edwards, *The Making of English Photography*, 2.

¹⁶ Harold Blakemore, *British Nitrates and Chilean Politics, 1886-1896: Balmaceda and North* (London: University of London/Althone Press, 1974) 33-64.

(a hundred weight) of nitrate were charged. In 1887, British engineer turned financial speculator John Thomas North, bought 7,000 shares in the Nitrate Railways Company, owned by Peruvian Montero brothers but registered in London 1882. The following year, he became company director. Herbert Gibbs complained to Foreign Office that 'the monopoly of the Nitrate Railways was weighing unmercifully upon British capital invested in the Nitrate works.'¹⁷ Gibbs' objection to paying North's high tariffs and, more broadly, to his parvenu status in British nitrate trade, meant that the nitrate field of *Alianza* remained unworked as they diplomatically pressed for a concession to build their own railway line and until North's railway monopoly was brought to an end. Monopoly was the character of business in nitrate.

Allan Sekula states that industrial photography was monopoly capitalism's form: 'institutionalised industrial photography characteristic of the epoch of monopoly capitalism.'¹⁸ Are, then, the images that comprise *Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique 1899* bound to Antony Gibbs and Sons interest Chile that they can only display the values of monopoly capital? It does have a dual status; it is both a general and specific form. It is of a type, an example of industrial photography, a generalisable representation of a landscape transformed by feats of engineering: cuts, lines and movement made by massive metal structures and engines. But it is also a quite specific representation of Antony Gibbs and Sons interest. I use interest here to evoke at least three of its meanings: a scene that might attract attention, a matter of concern, their business. *Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique 1899* is an album of interest to Antony Gibbs for all these reasons. In Mr Smail's words, it is 'a souvenir' of 'our last but I hope not least among nitrate oficinas', an object of the place of *Alianza* that brings a part of it to a London office. It is accepted as

¹⁷ Harold Blakemore, *British Nitrates and Chilean Politics, 1886-1896: Balmaceda and North* (London: University of London/Althone Press, 1974) 132.

¹⁸ Allan Sekula, 'Reading an Archive: Photography between Labour and Capital' in Patricia Holland et al ed. *Photography/Politics: Two* (London: Comedia Publishing Group, 1986), 153.

such. Photographic plenty analogous to profitability. 'My dear Smail' replies Henry Hucks

Gibbs:

I am much obliged to you for the excellent photography of the Alianza...handsome volume... If the business itself produces a corresponding handsome result, it will be in great measure be down to your zeal and ability, which are fully appreciated by my friends as well as by me (Figure 1)¹⁹

So where might the Benjaminian 'spark of contingency' be found in Desripidores? It must be there since it is only image of the album that has been widely reproduced. It might be found in the stance of the row of nitrate workers. Even without their shirts, they guard themselves. Their bare chests, a display physical and collective strength for the photographer in Alianza in 1899, may be the spark. Quite out of chronological sequence, it illuminates the gestures of the nitrate workers lined up in front of General Silva Renard's troops in 1907. Micheal Monteón relates that when they surrounded the Escuela Santa María, 'Laborers greeted the soldiers' arrival with hoots; some ripped open their shifts and dared the troops to fire.'²⁰ Or, the reality that has 'seared the subject' is in the hands of a nitrate worker. The sixth figure from the left holds his shovel with an easy familiarity: thumb balanced on the top of the handle, fingers gently curling under it, resting but ready to hold it more tightly (Figure 25). At first glance, there appears a perfect fit between hand and tool. The repeated act of shovelling, of labouring, can be seen in the image of physical familiarity. More details can be detected between the hand and the tool, the nitrate worker and the shovel: there is fabric wrapped around its handle. All visible shovel handles are similarly wrapped. Nitrate workers' dress had a number of fabric bindings, some around their waist and their socks, *poliana*, are bound to protect their skin from the abrasive mined material of the desert: salty, sharp nitrate and dusty, dirty ripio. The gentle grasp of nitrate

¹⁹ *Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique 1899*, Album 12, Fondo Fotográfico Fundación Universidad de Navarra/Museo Universidad de Navarra, Pamplona.

²⁰ Michael Monteón, *Chile in the Nitrate Era: the Evolution of Economic Dependence, 1880-1930* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1982) 105.

worker around the folds of fabric around the handle of his shovel reveals a little of the hard labour in an inhospitable place. Thus, momentarily, the material conditions of mining in the Atacama Desert are captured in the photograph numbered in 27 in *The Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique 1899*.

Conclusion

Importantly, this 'album of views' of the nitrate industry, its orderly sequences of productivity and profit, has not been able to repress the 'urge to search ... for a tiny spark of contingency.' There is a tension between the album of industrial photography and the photographs it contains, or at least one: 'A Group of Desripidores'. They pull in different directions to reveal nothing less than the historical contradictions of industrial capitalism: pictured here is the inevitable opposition between mining monopolists and the labour of miners. In the photographed bodies of the ripio workers, we can see both industrial oppression and organised resistance.

The Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique 1899 is a document of industrial capitalism. Its long photographic sequence, which begins with desert rocks and ends with bagged commodities, highlighting the dynamism of machinery in this material and spatial transformation, is an account of industrial progress. Its articulation is dependent upon the practice of industrial photography, Sekula's 'characteristic' form of monopoly capitalism. *Oficina Alianza and Port of Iquique 1899* reproduced a series of scenes of industry that were already established views: the dramatically altered landscape, the force of machinery, the image of labour obediently halted. Plate 27, 'A Group of Desripidores,' is just another of these 'characteristic' forms of industrial photography wherein the bodily strength of workers is part of the documentation of the stock of capital. Pasted into the album, their image was transported from Iquique to London, following the same path as the bountiful bags of nitrate and their detailed account books to be received as analogy of

profit: a 'handsome volume' that projects a 'handsome result.' In the photograph, capital assumes a visual rather numerical form. Yet, 'A Group of Descripdores' has been retrieved from the hands of monopolist merchant houses in City of London through the same process by which it loaned itself: photography. It is a 'dialectical image.'²¹ The light of the Atacama Desert that filtered back through the lens of the camera to react with the chemical covering of its plate left evidence of the reality of mining in Chile: the abrasive conditions of shovelling nitrate residue overcome by the collective strength those stood to face the camera and forces which had brought them all there.

²¹ Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History,' 247.