

Fire Inside

Pete Brook

In boots, overalls and gloves, they traipse up forested trails. They carry picks, chainsaws, hose-lines and water canisters. Their goggles, pushed back on their helmets, reflect the tree canopy above. They move, below, through the dust, smoke and shafts of golden hour light. The firefighting crew in Brian L. Frank's images are fatigued but focused. In both their visual depiction and in the popular imagination these men are heroic. Make no mistake, in actuality—for the lands they save and the risks they burden—they are heroes. They are also prisoners of the state of California.

In the past couple of years, there has been a noticeable uptick in coverage of prisoner-firefighters—Philip Montgomery for Business Week, Peter Bohler for the New York Times Magazine, Tim Hussin for The Guardian, Gabrielle Lurie for the San Francisco Chronicle. Images, too, by freelancers David Ryder and Noah Berger. The articles for which these photographs were commissioned were good faith efforts to shine a light on California's 3,000+ prisoner-firefighters; they sought to reset the assumptions we commonly hold about the incarcerated by glimpsing this lesser-known strand of modern-day servitude. At first glance, absent of bars, cell and razor wire, it's not obvious that the people in these photographs are prisoners. To a knowledgeable viewer, perhaps, the orange uniforms would indicate the men and women are incarcerated workers (civilian wildfire crews wear yellow)

and, to a particularly inquisitive eye, the acronym CDCR (California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation) emblazoned on some trousers is a clear giveaway of the fire crew's prisoner status.

In one respect, these images can be read as ones of prisoners making sacrifices for the greater good, of men and women in dogged pursuit of self-worth, and of redemption in action. The hero narrative is a tempting one. If these prisoners are heroes, aren't they empowered? If they are represented with dignity, can't only positives come from such images? If they are not under the yoke of constant surveillance, aren't they in some way free? Freer? I worry that these new—and dare I say it, seductive—images might distract us from the reality of the tortured conditions in which hundreds of thousands of other U.S. prisoners live but we don't see. Prisoner-firefighters account for only 2% of the California state prison population and I wonder if the recent prevalence of photographs of this "privileged" minority might skew our perceptions and potentially undermine our ability to understand the gross abuses, wastage and failings of the prison industrial complex.

Over the past forty years, the U.S. prison system has exploded—from approximately 400,000 prisoners to 2.2 million—and now proportionately imprisons more citizens during peacetime than any other nation in the history of humankind. Prisons offer scant and irregular access to rehabilitation and education. Prisons disproportionately warehouse people of colour. The vast majority of U.S. prisons are overcrowded, characterized by very occasional spikes in serious violence but more commonly sites of boredom and trashed potential. Men, women and children are sent down for longer sentences under harsher laws that have come to define America's shameful failed experiment in mass incarceration. For Americans who exist consciously or unconsciously within a racist, economically-violent and traumatic social reality, it doesn't seem too outlandish to suggest that we might seek solace in images of useful, non-violent and pro-social correctional conditions. It stands to reason that we'd welcome images that allow us to bypass examination of the darker corners of a largely invisible system into which we've discarded millions.

Thousands of low-level-security prisoners are mobilized out of thirty CDCR fire camps where they are paid 32 cents per hour (\$2.56 a day) and \$1 per hour when they're out working the fire-lines. The number of workers spike each wildfire season but with climate change, drier weather and increasing population density the season is growing longer and the severity of the blazes is increasing. More and more, prison labour will be relied upon to fight fire. CDCR estimates that the fire camp program saves California taxpayers \$100 million a year. Arizona, Nevada, Georgia and Wyoming use prison labour to fight fire too, but no state relies on prisoners as much as California. Continuously on-call, prisoners are a virtually irreplaceable resource in the Golden State.

Just as some viewers might be schooled enough to place images of prisoner-firefighters within the context of the post-industrial capitalist abuse of disenfranchised people, isn't it just as plausible that some viewers might

point to them readily and often in the belief that prisons work and prisoners benefit? Within a hyper-carceral age, we should be very careful about how we think images function. Within the context of disciplining prison systems that routinely control and suppress images, we can say, at the very least, that the publication (and recent appetite for) such photos is rare and unusual. Might these photos function similarly to propaganda? Is propaganda always propagated from the top-down, cynically and strategically? Or can bottom-up public narratives develop among the popular conscience to forge diffuse and decentralised messaging? I might be stretching the definition of propaganda here, but might these photos be the building blocks of an internalized propaganda adopted by the public to suit itself and to absolve itself?

Frank's work is tethered to what we would identify as documentary: it uses a mixture of candid portraits and work scenes, relying heavily on grain and earthen palette to evoke grime, texture, smell and haze. By comparison Bohler's images are clean; they are shot under clear, blue, ocean skies that make the orange uniforms pop. In both his individual portraits and group shots, Bohler's "magazine-y" approach makes pin-ups of the women. One lounges in the dirt, beside her chainsaw, peering over cocked tinted sunglasses. Another stands against a pink backdrop of flame retardant covered brush. It looks like a constructed set. A group stands on dunes above the Pacific Coast Highway where they survey the land they're working, but they cut figures like those on a continent's edge at the triumphant end of a disaster movie. Bohler's pristine composition of four women meditating, eyes closed, in the lotus position lies in stark contrast to the baggy, slouching, slumbering men during downtime in Frank's subjects. Bohler raises up his subjects by affording them the attention of editorial photography's best treatment, lighting and concern, whereas Frank raises up his subjects by baking in the caked on dirt-sweat to all his images. Both photographers end up creating heroes of their subjects, they just get there by different means.

Be under no illusions, serving time at a fire camp is better than doing time in any of California's 33 state prisons. Comparably "the conservation camps are bastions of civility," wrote Jaime Lowe for the New York Times. "They are less violent and offer more space. They smell of eucalyptus, the ocean, fresh blooms. They provide barbecue areas for families who visit; one camp has a small cabin where relatives can stay with an inmate for up to three days. They have woodworking areas, softball fields and libraries full of donated mysteries and romance novels."

Bohler's image of prisoners practicing yoga, or Frank's images of TV and card games speak to this relative freedom. One can acknowledge the benefits of the fire-camp's relaxed living culture and simultaneously reject the fucked up economics of the work culture. Prison reformers and abolitionists alike frequently characterise the prisoner-fire program as slave labour. They say the same about those who get paid between 8 cents and 95 cents per hour in prison factories making furniture, license plates, uniforms, food and other staples for state

agencies. Interestingly, the photographs discussed here, were used as ammunition by outside advocates during this summer's national prison labour strike (Aug 21st—Sept 9th).

Montgomery's work falls, in some ways, between Frank's and Bohler's. Montgomery captures action among the broken, charred ground and flora but also secures a couple of shots of men lying down gazing toward he, his camera and us. All Montgomery's images are shot at night and his subjects—rendered either by harsh flash or by digital sensor in muddy low-light—stare into the dark beyond. If fire is not the prisoners' backdrop, we know they are on the move, headed toward more flames. Like Bohler, Montgomery channels hints of fashion magazine aesthetic, but his on-the-fly portraits always point toward the work the prisoners have completed and the work they're to return to. Bohler made dusty pictures of women lopping scrub on steep canyon trails, but his immaculate portraits stand out. Not wanting to be too reductive, Frank's work is gritty, Montgomery's stylised and Bohler's sexy. Tim Hussin's photographs (which are the most recent) forego any color theorising and cast the damaged landscape in wider grayscale drama. If Robert Adams were to photograph fire abatement, it might look something like this. Perhaps, Hussin deliberately moved away from the textured chromatic work of those that went before?

Let me be clear, I deeply value the photographs made by Bohler, Frank, Hussin, Montgomery and others. Taken as individual bodies of work, I draw from them far more positives than negatives. The worry I harbour relates to their potential cumulative effect. Shorn from context, and in an aggregated visual experience, we cannot fully know how audiences receive these images. There are a few contradictory ways in which these images function—1) they were made possible (by allowing press photographers access), in the first place, by the state to push a soft-propaganda of a purposeful prison system; 2) they have been adopted by activists for didactic, targeted, anti-state messaging; and 3) they might function to salve to the public consciousness and allow the free citizens to convince themselves that prisons aren't too bad, that prisoners have a fair shot, and we needn't be concerned. Prisons are bad. We should be concerned.

My inquiry here is cautionary. It is also speculative. I welcome prisoner-firefighter imagery but I'd like to see it offset by raw footage of prisons' tedium, manipulations, assaults and stresses. The prisoners in these photos are heroes. They are individuals who by luck, will or coercion are seen, momentarily, as more than their worst mistake. Most prisoners are not afforded the perverse opportunity to work for slave wages in order to rehabilitate their lives ... and their image. Most prisoners don't get seen, let alone the chance to work beyond the panoptic prison space. We must understand what it is we're seeing and note that these prisoners working for pennies on the dollar in the great outdoors are outliers. We must applaud their labour but critique the apparatus it serves. We see them as individuals outside the norms and outside the walls. Going forth, we must demand to see the many, many more individuals inside the walls too.



Firefighters from Crew 13-4 of Camp Malibu on a break at Nicholas Canyon Beach, California, after completing a training exercise on Sept. 30th, 2016. Credit: Peter Bohler/Redux



Dionne Davis of Rainbow Camp, California, summer 2017. Credit: Peter Bohler/Redux

Part of a prisoner-led yoga class at Malibu Camp, California, Sept. 2016. Credit: Peter Bohler/Redux





Although there is a high level of cooperation among different ethnic groups when working as a team on the fire line, some areas at the fire camp, such as the "Latino TV room", remain segregated in order to avoid racial tensions. Credit: Brian L. Frank



Sandra Rojas of Malibu Camp. Credit: Peter Bohler/Redux



A prisoner firefighter shows off his tattoo made with a guitar string. Aftermath of the Carr Fire, Redding, California, July 2018. Credit: Tim Hussin/The Guardian

The Antelope fire crew marches into action in Sonoma County, California. Much of a crew's work is done by cutting lines into burning brush with power tools so that water lines can be brought in to douse the fire. Credit: Brian L. Frank



A prisoner firefighter stands above the smoking remnants of the Carr Fire, Redding, California, July 2018. Credit: Tim Hussin/The Guardian

Inmates at California's fire camps are allowed more recreation time and more freedom to interact without supervision in the downtime between fires than they would have at a traditional prison. Credit: Brian L. Frank



Eduardo Amezcua, exhausted from fighting wildfire in Sonoma County, takes a break on the side of a fire trail. Credit: Brian L. Frank

