THE RAILROAD TRAMP AND THE AMERICAN CULTURAL IMAGINARY

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To my parents
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“The Railroad Tramp and the American Cultural Imaginary” argues that competing representations of the railroad tramp reveal submerged cultural contradictions attendant to valuations of work, mobility, technology, domesticity, and citizenship. The tramp figure traverses multiple forms and genres, emerging as a trope in the wake of the Civil War and persisting to the present day. Thus, I build my argument on an analysis of a wide variety of texts by Jack London, Upton Sinclair, John Dos Passos, and Frank Capra, as well as lesser-known figures such as Edward Anderson, Tom Kromer, Ben Reitman, Charles Ashleigh, and William Wellman, and even anonymous cultural producers. Such texts situate the tramp around the edges of the national *picaro* and *isolato* narrative traditions, implicating the figure in on-going, ideologically diverse projects that seek to define the American character. While R.W.B. Lewis has argued that an Adamic conception of this character—with its insistence on a self-invented hero, free from the weight of European history, imbued with Emersonian optimism and innocence—prevailed in the literary and philosophical discourse of the antebellum period, I present the railroad tramp as a vital figuration through which to interpret America’s postbellum, postlapsarian condition, and I use this figuration to
theorize utopian and pedagogical models that imagine alternative subjectivities. Steadfastly unconvinced, unreconstructed, and undomesticated, the tramp defamiliarizes modernity’s promise of technological and economic progress even while deriving his extralegal agency by repurposing that definitive technology of American capitalist enterprise, the railroad. Whether portrayed positively or negatively, the figure articulates the profound ambivalence that accompanies the ascendency of the free labor ideal, demanding a critical reconsideration of the notion that citizenship should be framed exclusively in terms of productivity. In sum, the tramp functions to “decenter wage labor in our conception of life under capitalism,” to borrow Michael Denning’s phrase. This function remains as relevant to the current moment of economic and political crisis as to those of the Gilded Age or Great Depression.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Freight train rides are parables.

—William T. Vollmann, Riding Toward Everywhere

The title of an article published in Vice magazine in October of 2012 announced the “Death of the American Hobo,” thus eulogizing a figure that many had likely presumed long since interred. The author, Aaron Lake Smith, a young and hip New Yorker who also serves as the publication’s senior editor, begins the piece by rhapsodizing about the mysterious allure of the railroad, asserting that as “the last truly American place, untainted by the regrets of modern progress,” it embodies “several hundred years of America’s daring and rugged spirit” (112). He goes on to imagine that in his isolation at Walden Pond Henry David Thoreau (whom Smith labels a “proto-hobo”) must have taken comfort in “the sound of the train whistle echoing through the woods in the dead of night,” and that the presence of near-by tracks “steeled his will to the task at hand and reminded him that while he was alone, he was still a part of humanity” (113, 112). Of course, this speculation ignores the fact that Walden contains passages explicitly decrying the railroad’s negative impact on the nation and its people—“We do not ride on the railroad; it rides upon us” (60)—but it still makes good rhetorical sense to call upon such a paragon of American romanticism and authenticity in service of a tribute to a technology that Smith now finds so archaic, uncomplicated, and pure. Smith then recounts the details of his own train-hopping journey to the 2012 National Hobo Convention in Britt, Iowa, an event first held in that location in 1900 and recurring there more-or-less annually since 1933.¹ Starting in the late 1880s, a loose association of itinerant workers half-jokingly dubbed Tourist Union No. 63 by its
members had organized a yearly reunion and, in an effort to generate publicity, a group of city boosters from Britt offered to host the event in their tiny young town at the turn of the century. Since its revival during the Depression, the event has drawn at times thousands of vagabonds and onlookers to Britt every year.

As new generations discover the thrill and financial advantage of stealing rides on freight trains, younger riders continue to attend the event, hoping to connect with hobo history and mingle amongst surviving examples of “a dying breed.” On arrival, however, they likely take notice of what Smith, with palpable disappointment, describes as something more akin to “the ambiance of a hippie craft fair than a Depression-era Hooverville” featuring “a conspicuous absence of people who looked like real hoboes who had spent any considerable amount of time on the tracks” (117). Smith came looking for a bona fide manifestation of an iconic—and impoverished—American figure, but found only a simulacrum in the form of “‘hobos at heart’ (a euphemism faux hobos invoke to describe themselves)” who “seemed to have commandeered the convention,” having arrived in their RVs and driven away almost all of “the authentic hobos” (119). The Convention had gone “mainstream,” he complains, using much the same language that a music fan might when a favorite indie band signs to a major label after having been “completely sanitized” (118). Following the arrest of one of the few satisfactorily genuine transient attendees for the crime of urinating on a fence, Smith decides that he has “had enough. Disgusted by the petty paternalism of Britt and with the convention, it was time to leave.” With apparently unintended irony, he follows his dangling modifier by announcing that he and his friends, all of them repulsed by the dearth of authentic train-hopping hoboes, “flew back to New York.” The conclusion of the article finds its
author back at his desk, “crying for all the gone people and gone ways of life, and the
great American hobo, disappearing down the westbound track, never to return again”
(119).

Others have previously lamented the disappearance of the “real” hobo. In 1993,
almost two decades before Smith found only artifice at the Hobo Convention,
photographer Michael Williamson and journalist Dale Maharidge collaborated on a book
titled *The Last Great American Hobo*. They met their titular subject, who goes by the
moniker Blackie, in the late 1980s when he was living in a shanty he had built on the
shore of the river in West Sacramento, during the months before an urban renewal
project led to a series of police sweeps to evict the homeless men and women who had
settled in the area. In his essay, Maharidge speculates that “Blackie may have been the
oldest active hobo left,” although he deliberately refrains from explaining succinctly the
implications of this pronouncement (vi). Indeed, he quite blatantly rejects the possibility
of arriving at precise definitions. It is a matter of epistemology, and “trying to explain” the
hobo’s experience and understanding of reality will prove as fruitless as “trying to tell
you about a planet in which hydrogen instead of oxygen is the element that fuels life
and in which gravity is half that of earth” (32). So, provided only with descriptions
accompanied by minimal and inconclusive gestures toward any sort of explanation, the
reader alone must puzzle out what it means to be a hobo, let alone a “great” hobo, or
even the “last” hobo. We do get a few clues, at least: we learn that a hobo is “one kind
of dreamer,” and on an ontological level they differ from “citizens,” those regular people
who work regular jobs and have regular homes (1, 9). But it is more than that. To be
sure, not all who lack jobs and permanent residences can claim to be hoboes, as then
no one would be declaring their imminent extinction. On this point, Blackie argues that
the morally neutral term “homeless” applied to an entirely different category of person,
that “[h]e was a hobo, not a homeless man” (21). Mobility, rather than mere precarity,
appears to have something to do with it—specifically, the mobility obtained by stealing
rides on trains. But trains still run, and people still ride them illegally, and they will
continue to do so long after Blackie stops. Although he hopped his first train in 1928,
even Blackie acknowledges this continuity when he insists that “[a]s far as hoboin’ goes,
it’s the same as it used to be” in the days of the steam engine. “Still the same old tracks.
Same units [i.e., engines]. Same goddamn road, clickety-clack on down the line. Really
nothin’ has changed over the years.” Simultaneously, however, he notes that “[t]he old
bindle stiffs are gone. A few around like myself” (10). One must account for the
difference between the verb “hoboing”—designating the act of train hopping—and the
noun “hobo,” as hoboing alone does not a hobo make. Maharidge admits, apparently to
his frustration, “[N]o matter how many freight trains I ride or how long I live on the edge
of the homeless world,” there will always remain something about hobo subjectivity that
“I, with my middle-class indoctrination, can never possibly understand” (73).

For the hobo, mobility means “leaving, getting there, until there gets to be a
burden, and you repeat the process,” and being a hobo means something “far beyond
dropping out” (45, 73). It means adopting an alternative perspective from that of
“citizens” who insist their world constitutes the one true reality, a reality so thoroughly
naturalized as to appear free of any ideological ramification. It means confronting or at
least fleeing the hegemonic order and those “basic rules and assumptions that forbid
most of us from understanding or even accepting other realities,” those “prescribed
ways to live, be it working, what we purchase, how we spend our leisure time, who we associate with, what we perceive to be the ‘in’ thing to do” (29). From the hobo’s perspective, the reality in which citizens dwell rests on an essentially irrational premise.

“It’s like my friends,” Blackie explains, “who work forty years at the same fucking job, then they retire and six months later, they’re dead. So he works forty years to pay for the fucking house. … Hasn’t been no further than the fucking county line all his life. You think everything is right, and all of a sudden it’s fucking wrong.” By contrast, he says, “I’m happy. Hey, this is my life. Fuck them people man, I don’t need no nine-to-five shit. … Free. That’s what I mean. That’s all I want” (17). And here, perhaps, is the most crucial point. With a combination of sadness and anger, Maharidge hints that the reproduction of citizen subjectivity has been rendered so effective and total as to preclude the further development of an alternative perspective from which one might challenge the assumed goods of employment, consumerism, and domesticity.

More than thirty years before Williamson and Maharidge documented what they see as Blackie’s valiant but ultimately doomed struggle to remain free in a homogenizing, hegemonic modern world, Jack Kerouac similarly mourned “The Vanishing American Hobo” in the concluding essay of his 1960 nonfiction collection Lonesome Traveler. Like Blackie, Kerouac’s ideal hobo pursues his own version of freedom, stubbornly asserting his individual autonomy even as the disciplinary society continues to extend its reach. This hobo resolutely sets himself apart, wanting “nothing to do with a community but with himself and other hobos” (176). As always, authenticity remains a central concern. Kerouac himself may have once wandered, but he admits quite frankly that he “was not a real hobo” because he always anticipated an end to his
wanderings and a return to the “social protection” afforded by participation in sanctioned—meaning commercially productive—activities (173). Moreover, we must distinguish hoboes from mere bums, who may have once been hoboes who now “no longer held their pride” (177). In his riffing on iterations of the vagabond in different times and places, Kerouac seeks to expose the hypocrisy of contemporary society’s reaction to the hobo, tossing out examples of the ways in which America punishes any excessive display of the traits it claims to value: “In America camping is considered a healthy sport for Boy Scouts but a crime for mature men who have made it their vocation” (174). In vilifying the hobo, America has betrayed its core principles, its historical mission, the heroes and legends that made it great. The essay claims Walt Whitman, Benjamin Franklin, John Muir, Teddy Roosevelt, and many others as prototypical hoboes (much as Smith’s article name-checked Thoreau), in effect pointing toward the argument that the only problem with the hobo is that his heroism and creative genius have not been recognized and legitimated. The American character’s basic impulse toward freedom and independence warrants celebration only if relegated to the past, or so long as it finds expression in small, well-regulated doses at appropriate junctures. Meanwhile, the contemporary hobo falls subject to “the increase in police surveillance of highways, railroad yards, sea shores, river bottoms, embankments and the thousand-and-one hiding holes of industrial night” that make it so “you cant [sic] even be alone any more in the primitive wilderness” (172, 182). With the elimination of the uncharted territory that had only been settled with self-reliance and self-determination, society cannot allow the flourishing of such potentially destabilizing traits, so the media recasts the hobo as a monster of almost mythic proportions, “the
rapist, the strangler, child-eater” (174). Perhaps his greatest crime is his rejection of consumer capitalism’s bounty: “The Jet Age is crucifying the hobo because how he can hop a freight jet,” rather than paying a fare (175).

Even Kerouac’s prediction of the hobo’s disappearance replicated similar observations made forty years earlier. In the introduction to his groundbreaking study *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man* (1923), sociologist Nels Anderson (himself a former train-riding itinerant worker) speaks of his subject in the past tense. According to Anderson, this figure “began to disappear” following the increasing availability of the automobile, with which the mobility once afforded only by the train “took another form, making it possible for more people to become mobile” (xix). In 1903, thirty-four years after the completion of the first transcontinental railroad and three years after the first annual automotive trade show in New York, Dr. Horatio Nelson Jackson’s unprecedented and seemingly eccentric cross-country drive proved that far from being “an unreliable novelty,” the horseless carriage provided a tenable means by which “to bridge the continent” (Hill 7). The potential of the automobile thus confirmed, the fervor with which tracks had been put down in the last half of the nineteenth century would be refocused toward the goal of constructing a national highway system over the course of the twentieth century. *In Autophobia: Love and Hate in the Automotive Age*, Brian Ladd summarizes the essential and unprecedented appeal of the automobile thusly: “The car combines the promise of thrills with sovereign assurance of mobility. Mobility is freedom—freedom is mobility—and before the car, mobility was unavailable, or slow, or (as with trains) dependent on the whim or goodwill of others” (1). Furthermore, this new form of mobility heralded the Fordist turn, the arrival of mass production and the
accompanying reproduction of consumerist consciousness. Mobility was now fully commodified for the individual purchaser. What the hobo had once taken from the railroad, committing theft in order to secure access to the far-flung movement he saw as his birthright, the consumer could now simply and easily buy. Under such circumstances, asks society’s implied question, why would anyone choose to become a hobo? (This question, of course, problematically presumes individual choice as the only factor in the production of the tramp.) Yet, the purchase of an individual automobile, that symbol of individual autonomy, effectively pulls the purchaser into an ever widening network of interdependency and enforces perpetual spending, which in turn requires perpetual income. So, in order to obtain unlimited freedom, the individual must necessarily forfeit a portion of that freedom to the system of waged labor. Here lies the crux of Anderson’s assertion that this new mobility differs from that of the hobo, illuminating his implicit claim that the railroad hobo’s particular, exclusive brand of mobility constitutes a form of privilege.

This last point begins to suggest answers to a pair of questions motivating my project: Why have observers have spent almost a century mournfully yet unsuccessfully attempting to bury what they insist is a moribund national figure who once sparked panic throughout the Gilded Age, and who appears so closely related to those members of the homeless population that many view as a blight on America’s cities and towns? Why does this figure continue to command attention, alternately inspiring over the course of its career harsh condemnation and enthusiastic celebration? The premise that those who live on society’s fringes while traversing the country by way of stolen train rides have something special about them, whether that “something” be good or bad, has
informed representations of the hobo or tramp since the historical appearance of a mass floating population after the end of the Civil War. However often declared dead, banished to a distant national past, the train-riding tramp continues to surface in various modes of cultural production—including film, television, literature, and other media—portrayed alternately as a hero, a villain, both, or neither. A notably consistent set of associations and assumptions has emerged and remains easily cited. For example, the 2008 economic downturn inspired commentators across the political spectrum to evoke anxiously the 1930s and that decade’s multitudes of impoverished wanderers; even if the tramp has played a major role in American discourse since the economic crises of the 1870s and 1890s, any allusion to the Great Depression calls forth collectively shared images of freight trains mobbed with jobless transients. A March 25, 2009 article in the *New York Times*, for example, addresses the “unhappy déjá vu” of “modern-day Hoovervilles” springing up in “a dozen or so cities across the nation” (McKinley). Such readily legible signifiers illustrate that, in refusing to die once and for all, the figure still continues to permeate the American “cultural imaginary,” what Graham Dawson defines as “those vast networks of interlinking discursive themes, images, motifs and narrative forms that are publicly available within a culture at any one time,” that “furnish public forms which both organize knowledge of the social world and give shape to phantasies within the apparently ‘internal’ domain of psychic life” (48).

In order to frame my discussion of the ways in which representations of this figure play an important role in organizing knowledge and shaping ideas, it is important to define two related and key terms. Although the words are often used interchangeably, sufficient variances exist to distinguish the *hobo* from the *tramp*, and consequently the
manner in which those two figures (if not the appellations) have been culturally deployed. Observers both sympathetic and antagonistic have sought to demarcate rigid boundaries between them to better separate the worthy from the unworthy, hero from menace. Such taxonomical gestures comprise a rhetorical inheritance from England in the sixteenth century, when the sharp increase in “masterless men” so threatened the social order. Attitudes toward poverty, a state once understood as virtuous and even holy in the Middle Ages, had started to shift by the fourteenth century, accelerating with the spread of the Renaissance’s humanist ideals, “which celebrated the value of worldly activity and success” (Beier 4). According to A.L. Beier’s landmark Masterless Men: The Vagrancy Problem in England, 1560-1640, English literature of roguery, which claimed to offer accurate accounts of vagabonds based on first-hand observation, contributed to the cultural and “legal concept of vagabondage” by insisting on “the distinction between the able-bodied and the ‘impotent’ poor” (9). The disciplinary laws intended to contain the spread of the former class punished those people who left their masters, refused official wages, or worked as casual laborers while ostensibly allowing for charity toward those unable to help themselves.

Such a moral delineation, contingent on the subject’s perceived attitude toward work, informs the ideology that insists on an ontological gap between the hobo and the tramp, however much that differentiation might have faded since those labels first acquired their particular meaning in the American context. In his study, Anderson quotes the influential formulation often attributed to Ben Reitman, who notes that “[t]here are three types of the genus vagrant: the hobo, the tramp, and the bum. The hobo works and wanders, the tramp dreams and wanders, and the bum drinks and
wanders” (87). Subsequent definitions would assign the bum to a stationary position, so exiling him from the scope of the present discussion, and leaving the particular mode of mobility Anderson cites as the prerogative of tramps and hoboes. As may be readily apparent, the line between these two remaining categories can easily become blurred in practice, such that the observer may find it difficult to file all train-hopping transients into one of these two discrete groupings. A tramp may not be primarily motivated in his travels by a pursuit of work, but he still might be willing to work should the opportunity arise, while a hobo might deliberately (or not) go months between jobs. Moreover, these terms have undergone further transmutation in popular discourse, so that “tramp” is often used pejoratively to signify a woman perceived to deviate from prevailing sexual mores (thus enacting another form of unbounded mobility), while “hobo” applies generically to any homeless person. Over time, even these more recent ideologically loaded uses have acquired a somewhat archaic quality, their use implying a degree of affectation. Given that it still maintains a perceptible connection with that which it once signified, many observers—including Anderson, Kerouac, Maharidge, and Smith—have tended to default to “hobo” when discussing the railroad vagabond, regardless of the designee’s relationship to labor. Yet, in what follows, I will deliberately privilege the term “tramp” in an effort to draw critical attention to the naturalization of the implicit moral hierarchy that situates the hobo in a superior position relative to the tramp because of a purportedly unique—among the transient population, at least—eagerness to work. In other words, I wish to distance my analysis from those that seek to recuperate the figure according to the terms of the dominant ideology by giving priority to its redemptive aspects vis-à-vis the work ethic. The railroad tramp, whatever label one uses, remains
compelling in a manner suggested by the panegyrics quoted previously precisely because of his deviation from socially legitimated modes of behavior, not because of his conformity to them. (Even so, I must acknowledge that I do at times resort to using the two terms with some ambiguity, which only further reflects the instability of the categories.)

The competing narratives of the tramp suggested by the tension between these two categories illuminate the broader cultural endeavor to define the American character, an endeavor that carries both descriptive and disciplinary functions. At least since the revolutionary era, voices internal and external to the body politic have sought to articulate—or impose—those traits that reveal the uniqueness of this country and its people, motivated by the implicit belief that doing so might demonstrate the nation’s singular mission, sanctioned by history and by God. This sport continues unabated into the contemporary era. Campaigning in 2008, Sarah Palin claimed that “the real America” could be located in the rural areas of the United States, and Bill O’Reilly blamed President Obama’s 2012 reelection on what he termed the erosion of “traditional America” (Layton). Paul Krugman, in turn, responded by calling this vision of a “real America” populated by “non-urban white people” an artificial construction, and provided in its place “the real real America” made up of a “racially and ethnically diverse, and increasingly tolerant” population. This particular instance of the on-going definitional debate superficially focuses on demographics, largely leaving unstated what other efforts—which, at least since the Jeffersonian vision of the yeoman farmer, have often simply assumed a white, Christian, provincial male as the default American subject—make overt in seeking to identify fundamental and even exclusive moral and
behavioral national attributes. Portraits painted by those with a view from outside the still-young country might not always flatter the national self-image, as when Alexis de Tocqueville worries about American democracy’s potential to produce a tyranny of the majority or (more personally, perhaps) D.H. Lawrence claims that “[t]he essential American soul is hard, isolate, and a killer,” but among those proffering a self-generated interpretation a generally positive consensus emerged between independence and the Civil War (65). They saw in the American a protean individual, a self-directed citizen determined less by past inheritance and more by future ambitions, one who heeded the Emersonian dictum, “Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist” (“Self-Reliance” 260). Such consensus leads R.W.B. Lewis to argue that an Adamic conception of the American character prevailed in the literary and philosophical discourse of the antebellum period, positing a self-invented hero, free from the weight of European history and personal ancestry, imbued with optimism and potentiality and, above all, a profound sense of innocence.

However much that innocence may have existed more as a discursive construction than a historical condition, the trauma of the Civil War signaled its loss, so that the figure of the American Adam no longer obtains in a postbellum, postlapsarian era. If the quintessential American character has always been understood as coming into being rather than definitively established, at this historical moment it appeared especially unstable, and its values open to modification. With slavery now constitutionally banished, the outcome of the conflict positioned an emergent Northern corporate industrialism politically and rhetorically as a new national ideal to supplant not only Southern feudalism and the system of forced labor on which it depended, but also
the increasingly untenable vision of the yeoman farmer and independent owner-producer. During the Reconstruction era, Radical Republicans in Washington sought to import this model of a free labor economy, which valorized employment-at-will labor relations and fostered a networked infrastructure, to the rest of the country and its Western territories as a matter of policy. An increasingly industrialized economic system depended on laborers who worked for wages, accelerating the adaptation of the work ethic to a new, post-artisanal mode of a production. This process had begun during the first half of the nineteenth century, as court decisions and legislation accumulated to codify as legal doctrine the free labor ideology. Whereas Americans of the Revolutionary era had envisioned a continuum extending from voluntary wage labor to voluntary indentured servitude to slavery, “[o]ver a number of decades, a consensus emerged that traditional practices in the employment relationship violated the basic equality promised by the American Revolution” (Steinfeld 159). According to the resulting binary logic, Eric Foner explains, “the definition of free labor depended on juxtaposition with its ideological opposite, slave labor,” even while this dichotomy “masked the fact that ‘free labor’ itself referred to two distinct economic conditions—the wage laborer seeking employment in the marketplace, and the property-owning small producer enjoying a modicum of economic independence” (x-xi). In other words, the freedom afforded by American citizenship increasingly entailed contractual autonomy, not necessarily economic autonomy (xvi). This contractual freedom provided workers with a formal independence that allowed them to seek out more beneficial waged positions, while employers no longer carried the burden of a paternal model that previously obligated them to maintain their employees.
Instead of relying on physical compulsion to ensure the industriousness of the nation’s work force, free labor’s proponents promulgated and adapted as necessary the morality of the work ethic, what Kathi Weeks describes as “that complex of shifting claims, ideals, and values” that continues to legitimate the “structure of the work society” (38). As Daniel T. Rodgers explains, the work ethic may not have been indigenous to the United States, but here, “as nowhere else in the Western European orbit, the middle classes set the tone and standards for society as a whole. They did so through their hold over the strategic institutions of economics and culture” (15-16). Through its presence and influence in the realms of business, religion, education, and publishing, the bourgeoisie established a culturally pervasive ideological agenda that inextricably yoked labor to the individual’s moral worth. Neither the idleness of the Southern aristocracy nor the irregular habits of a rambunctious working class had a place in the post-War society. As industrialism’s rise remade and rationalized the material processes of work, the discourse of the work ethic extolled labor’s extra-economic impact—the way it “cleared away doubts and vanquished despair; it curbed the animal instincts to violence; it distracted the laborer from the siren call of radicalism; it redeemed the convict prisoner. It did all this in part by character-building, by ingraining habits of fortitude, self-control, and perseverance, and in part by systematic exhaustion” (Rodgers 11-12).

Mobility plays a central role in the coalescence of the free labor economy. A traditional (yet not uncontested) means of establishing American identity, mobility in the United States has long inspired contradictory attitudes both culturally and legally. National discourse celebrates it as a fundamental freedom that allows for the
expression of the nation’s pioneer spirit, purposefully drawing attention to the fact that America exists in its present form only because settlers dared to cross vast expanses of ocean and then thousands of miles of land in fulfillment of their manifest destiny. In turn, the experience of mobility reinforces this particularly American exceptionalism. Frederick Jackson Turner influentially describes this self-perpetuating process in his Frontier Thesis:

To the frontier the American intellect owes its striking characteristics. That coarseness and strength combined with acuteness and inquisitiveness; that practical, inventive turn of mind, quick to find expedients; that masterful grasp of material things, lacking in artistic but powerful to effect great ends; that restless, nervous energy; that dominant individualism, working for good and for evil; and withal that buoyancy and exuberance which comes with freedom—these are traits of the frontier, or traits called out elsewhere because of the existence of the frontier. (37)

In practice, however, many found (and continue to find) their individual mobility discouraged or restricted. Indeed, the right to travel receives no explicit mention in the Constitution, and today it exists according to a historical rather than a doctrinal basis, and still required the reaffirmation of the Supreme Court almost two hundred years following independence. On behalf of the Court in the 1966 case of United States v. Guest Justice Potter Stewart acknowledged this ambiguity, admitting that “[a]lthough there have been recurring differences in emphasis within the Court as to the source of the constitutional right to travel, … [a]ll have agreed that the right exists” (Karst 2275). In terms of the national narratives that demarcate the limits of acceptable action, it often seems that celebration applies only when a certain segments of the population uproots and throws off those forces that would fix them in place. While nominally the subject of unqualified affirmation, mobility receives endorsement primarily when practiced for the benefit of the nation-building project by those recognized for their embodiment of
American ideals. This sort of sanctioned movement might entail pressing into the wilderness on a civilizing mission that accelerates the exploitation of resources and the expansion of markets, or relocating to an urban center in service of increased industrial production. The tramp’s ambiguous role in these sorts of projects helps explain the conflicted nature of his legal position. This ambiguity manifests in the impossibility of reconciling the need for a large casual labor force with the municipal and state vagrancy laws, which criminalized a person’s status rather than any particular act. These laws persisted until 1972, when the Supreme Court finally struck them down in its ruling in *Papachristou v. City of Jacksonville* (Asperger 2774).

In particular, employers have had an ambivalent reaction to the mobility of the labor pool. A certain degree of mobility proves beneficial to the factory owner who, in a tight labor market, seeks to pilfer away a rival’s employees. As well, the Western farmer whose intensive production requires large numbers of extra hands for brief periods during the harvest welcomes the itinerant worker. Yet, these interests conflicted with the factory owner’s desire for the latitude to take persuasive measures to retain their own employees. Similarly, a farming community’s disenchantment with transient workers after the completion of the harvest typically produced calls to punish the very mobility from which it had only recently benefitted. Such conflicting interests parallel the larger ambivalence regarding expressions of mobility that alternately received social endorsement and condemnation. Robert J. Steinfeld argues that, in the end, the advantages of worker mobility to the employing class outweighed it demerits, and an “emerging consensus that the collective good was better served by not allowing individuals to lock up economic resources in the traditional way” (170). Still, the tension
remained, and the tramp, in his radical interpretation and exploitation of mobility, poses a threat to the uneasy balance that supports the cost-benefit analysis Steinfeld describes.

The rapid expansion of the railroad broadened the scope of this mobility in ways previously impossible to imagine. The construction of a continent-spanning infrastructure had a crucial nationalizing effect, demarcating physical and discursive boundaries while integrating far-flung population centers and rural areas into a domestic marketplace, an effect anticipated and deliberately invoked by advocates of construction. Asa Whitney, a tireless early supporter of *A Project for a Railroad to the Pacific* (1849), envisioned both the economic benefit to the nation and the civilizing effect on the individual of a transcontinental transportation network twenty years before a line linked the coasts. He observes that the western “settler who now pays for his land to the government gets no benefit from the sum paid beyond his title to, and possession of the land.” Unconnected to the market, he has no opportunity to sell either his labor or his crops. “Thus,” Whitney continues, “you see him in the wilderness, remote from civilization, destitute of comforts, and nearly a demi-savage; his labor, it is true, produces food from the earth; but he cannot exchange with the different branches of industry, and is not a source of wealth or power to the nation” (12). In other words, the spread of the railroad would perform a disciplinary function, bringing the individual into the economic and political fold, thereby co-creating the American character.

Not only would railroad technology have a profound impact on how the American people experienced, understood, and interacted with their world, the railroad industry essentially transformed the constitutional definition of personhood, further complicating
any theoretical attempts to isolate those traits that define a national character. Prefiguring the *Citizens Untied* decision by well over a century, *Santa Clara County v. Southern Pacific Railroad* (1886) affirmed the legal personhood of corporations, bringing them under the purview of the Fourteenth Amendment, which was adopted in 1868 in part to extend citizenship and equal protection to African Americans. According to the headnote for the case, “[t]he court does not want to hear argument on the question whether the provision in the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which forbids a state to deny any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws, applies to these corporations. We are all of the opinion that it does” (qtd. in Beatty 110).³ In a further loss of the innocence previously essential to the American character, a provision for the protection of civil rights became primarily a legal means by which to safeguard property. America, characterized as a pristine, Edenic new world of infinite possibility by everyone from the earliest European explorers to Emerson, had become sullied by the strife, violence, and the juggernaut of corporate capitalism, transforming into a society in which the individual, everyday citizen—no matter how rhetorically venerated—seemed no longer to play a central role. The mobility and work ethic celebrated in the national narrative seems to benefit an ever narrower portion of the population. The representation of the American character’s self-determination and optimism seems less and less connected to the experience of actual Americans.

It is precisely because of this disconnect that literary and cultural representations of the railroad tramp provide a vital framework through which to comprehend and elaborate the submerged tensions—if not the outright contradictions—embedded in the practices and discourses attending mobility and work, and, by extension, domesticity.
and citizenship. Analyzing these representations synchronically and diachronically facilitates an understanding of the superstructure underpinning hegemony’s operations. Stepping into a volatile economic and ideological context, a period when the United States was in the throes of intensive and complicated instability that accompanied the processes of self-definition, the railroad tramp embodies the potential both to reinforce and to challenge existing narratives of national identity. A multivalent figure, he (for he is, as we will see, most frequently constructed as male) has been variously characterized as either quintessentially American or fundamentally un-American, an embodiment of this nation’s spirit of independence and adventure or an existential threat to all of our most cherished institutions.

Although European rogues and vagabonds may serve as his antecedent, the railroad tramp’s appearance necessarily coincides with the maturation of American industrial modernity. The suffusion of the free labor economy, the relentless westward geographic expansion of both infrastructure and population, and the recurrent cycles of economic (and moral) crisis that accompanied this maturation led to and relied on the untethering of a once stationary work force for the benefit of an increasingly rationalized system of waged labor relations. The tramp, who first appeared in recognizable form during the last decades of the nineteenth century seemingly without native precedent, may even be considered the quintessential figure of the era, in that the development of such conditions contributed directly to the production of the railroad tramp as a material and as a cultural figure—even as these figures both perpetuate and react against those conditions. Henry George identified and articulated this interdependent relationship during the Gilded Age, noting that “The ‘tramp’ comes with the locomotive, and
almshouses and prisons are as surely the mark of ‘material progress’ as are costly
dwellings, rich warehouses, and magnificent churches” (7). Jack London expanded on
this idea in his essay “The Tramp” (London used tramp and hobo interchangeably),
arguing “that the tramp is only personally undesirable; that he is negatively desirable;
that the function he performs in society is a negative function; and that he is the by-
product of economic necessity” (475-476). The tramp emerges from the ranks of surplus
labor, which accommodates “fluctuation in production,” “irregular and periodic demands
for labor” (477), and “acts as a check upon all employed labor” (478). The tramp has
discovered that he can periodically leave and reenter this system, and so takes to the
road, “one of the safety-valves through which the waste of the social organism is given
off. And being given off constitutes the negative function of the tramp” (486).

The socioeconomic functions of the actually existing tramp point to, even if they
do not precisely parallel, the rhetorical functions of tramp’s cultural representations. My
goal is to draw attention to the cultural work performed—the social meaning produced—
by these representations. While the figure’s details differ little between various textual
constructions, the tramp has been deployed in the service of a remarkable range of
ideological goals. Indeed, beginning with his earliest narratives in the 1870s, there has
been something of a battle for discursive control of the figure, a battle tied to the larger
struggle to determine national narratives surrounding work and mobility. An analysis of
the differing characterizations of the tramp has the potential to illuminate the contours
and contradictions of the ideologies motivating these characterizations. Alternately
disciplinary and oppositional, competing characterizations of the tramp reveal national
ambivalence about the triumph of free labor, about the intensive market integration
enabled by the railroad, and so finally about capitalism itself. Perhaps it is not surprising, for example, that the tramp’s restless mobility prompted observers—and many tramps themselves—to equate the figure with the frontier settler posited by Turner. And perhaps it is equally unsurprising that such an equation between the semi-legendary pioneer character and the tramp still proves controversial, even virtually sacrilegious. As a self-directed wanderer, the tramp lurks around the edges of American narrative traditions of the picaro and the isolato, the latter term coined by Melville to describe that “self-reliant … character who has the willingness and the capacity to persist in a private vision, no matter what the effect his pursuit will have on others” (Cahir 36). Indeed, the tramp’s story participates in a fundamental narrative tradition, necessarily comprising a subspecies of what Bakhtin identifies as “[t]he chronotope of the road” that has played an “important role … in the history of the novel” (243, 244). Yet, because of the tramp’s indeterminate moral and ontological status, he and his story resist full absorption into the pantheon of literary character types and narrative genres.

This equivocal status does not imply textual scarcity. Although the actual, material figure has all but disappeared in his most recognizable form (replaced in part by homeless veterans, punks, activists, and—perhaps most pertinently—undocumented workers from south of the border), the railroad tramp maintains an iconographic presence across the culture imaginary. Even if we do not know the specifics of either his material or his cultural history, we are able to conjure a general image of the railroad tramp. Perhaps we visualize someone akin to Emmett Kelly’s weary clown, dressed in tattered clothes, a bindle on a stick over his shoulder, a corncob pipe in the corner of his mouth, his legs dangling from the open door of a boxcar. Once in town, he might knock
on a back door to ask for food, or he might swipe a pie cooling on a window sill. In either case, he manages to remain independent and on the move. Roger Bruns summarizes the predominant iconography in his informal history of the tramp, *Knights of the Road*:

> In cartoons, articles, plays and motion pictures the image emerged—the forlorn wayfarer in a losing war against life’s vicissitudes, the shaggy demeanor, the slapstick bouts with railroad dicks and fierce dogs, the determination to plunge ahead against all manner of slings and arrows lying in wait. The figure was usually unshaven and crimson-nosed. He sometimes carried from his shoulder a red-bandana bundle tied to a stick. (102)

He still surfaces in forums as disparate as fiction, memoir, cinema, and prime time television. He even appears in restaurant chain logos (families can choose between The Hungry Hobo and Hobo Joe's) and internet memes (mocking updates of hobo names and “signs”) with remarkably stable, yet simultaneously contradictory, semiotic implications. But he persists most vigorously through his linear narrative—written or cinematic, self-generated or externally prescribed—a mixture of fact and fiction comprising the “love-hate, respect-disgust attitudes” of the American populace regarding the figure (Bruns, *Knights* 123). This conflicted attitude motivates what Kenneth Allsop characterizes as “the respectable citizen’s muddle of guilt and envy,” a complicated response that allows the onlooker to see in the tramp “both a folk and a culture hero” and “a betrayer of the open economy.” The tramp has rejected the opportunity to advance his position, yet “the true-blue citizen” also “suspect[s], with covetous resentment, that the hobo had by unfair thaumaturgical means retained an independence which had somehow drained out of his own successful career. So in his more sentimental moods he indulge[s] himself with wistful yearning for the vagabond contentment he erratically” projects onto the tramp figure (49).
In fact, the tramp does not rely on thaumaturgy to effect this freedom that so
many have come to find so elusive, but rather a means symbolizing the very
mechanizing, industrializing, rationalizing processes that have in many ways
circumscribed and disciplined the citizen-worker’s activities. However conflicted the
responses the tramp’s image inspires, in the popular imagination the tramp remains
inextricably linked to the railroad, that great emblem of capitalist expansion and,
paradoxically, the vehicle by which the tramp achieves his intermittent freedom from the
demands of modernity. Even if it also brought “horror and pain, the railroad” serves as
the tramp’s “life force,” provide the source of “his identity and style of life” (Bruns 47;
Allsop 49). If anything, the link between the tramp and the train has only grown more
profound with time. In writing about the subculture in the late twentieth century, author
and journalist Lucius Shepard observed that for the tramp the freight train “is the sole
object worthy of deification,” a quasi-mythological, sentient god-beast “embodying a
romantic menace deserving of respect” (xi). When speaking of their experiences
railroading, tramps in fiction and memoir frequently lapse into a kind of reverie:

Riding the rails more or less gets in your blood. … I think hoboing to a
great extent is excitement. A lot of young guys get on it more or less for
kicks. You ride enough and by God you get hooked! And the same thing
applies to the older heads. It’s just like taking marijuana, it’s habit-forming,
it’s a disease. Put it this way: you piss out of a boxcar once, you’re
hooked. (qtd. in Mathers 126)

It is also the train that enables tramp’s placelessness and thus transforms him into a
national figure, depleted of regional associations. While observers (such as Anderson)
have noted that Chicago came to serve as the unofficial headquarters of the nation’s
floating population, the tramp as both a historical figure and a representation ceases to
exist if he ceases to wander. When Leland Stanford ceremoniously drove the final,
golden spike to connect the Central Pacific and Union Pacific lines and thus the east coast of the United States with the west in 1869, the tramp achieved the freedom to travel clear across the country in order to evade the dictates of rationalized wage labor.

By using the railroad in this way, the tramp further demonstrates the almost schizophrenic inconsistencies that render him as a distinct and compelling figure of modernity. In popular culture, the figure has come to signify a generalized resistance to things as they are, even if the specific details of what he resists at times remain amorphous. As one of free labor’s discontents, he pushes back against the disciplinary regime imposed by clock-time rationality, bureaucracy, Fordism, Taylorism—against the disenchantment of the world, what Max Weber calls “the Spirit of Capitalism.” His acts of resistance manifest the sort of “reaction against the way of life in capitalist societies” that characterizes a romantic worldview (Löwy and Sayre 17). Yet, the tramp embodies a contradictory romanticism, eschewing nostalgia for technology of a pre-modern age, embracing the industrial technology of mobility even while refusing ever to commit fully to a participation in the mode of rationalized labor that produces and promulgates that technology. Rather than escaping modernity in nature, like Wordsworth’s vagabonds, the tramp practices a paradoxically modern pastoralism. To this end, representations of the tramp tend to repurpose the railroad as “a space for preindustrial adventure and physical testing” (Photinos, “Tracking” 180). Like any modern subject, he experiences the alienation accompanying the conditions and instruments of modernity, yet in a naively utopian gesture he exploits and manipulates those instruments in order to oppose their ramifications. Consequently, in textual representation, tramps are typically depicted as what Evan Watkins calls “relics, throwaways, isolated groups of the
population who haven’t moved with the times, and who now litter the social landscape and require the moral attention of cleanup crews, the containing apparatus of police and prison, the financial drain of ‘safety nets,’ the immense maintenance bureaucracies of the state” (3). Depending on the ideological positions of the particular text, the tramp-as-throwaway may warrant indignation, nostalgia, pity, or celebration, producing in aggregate a dialectic of containment and subversion.

After decades of relative neglect, the tramp has been the object of several recent compelling studies, including Tim Creswell’s *The Tramp in America* (2001), Todd DePastino’s *Citizen Hobo* (2003), Frank Tobias Higbie’s *Indispensable Outcasts* (2003), and Mark Wyman’s *Hoboes* (2010), all of which bring a scholarly rigor to the subject of the previously cited popular histories by Allsop (1967) and Bruns (1980). Creswell explores the ways in which “sociology, American Vaudeville, eugenics, documentary photography and silent film” are linked by “the figure of the tramp” (10). DePastino argues that the hobo “signaled a crisis of home that is always also one of nationhood and citizenship, race and gender” (xix). Higbie seeks to reorient the discussion of “Progressive Era history around the conflicts [hoboes] symbolized and experiences they embodied” (3). Despite its title, Wyman’s book discusses the railroad tramp as just one factor in the development of the Western system of intensive agricultural production. While these authors concern themselves primarily with the historical tramp (and I draw on their insights), I seek to focus narrowly on the cultural work performed by representations of the figure by investigating a series of exemplary texts. Although many these texts have been cataloged, substantial work remains to be done in order to analyze the figure’s persistent significance. As will become apparent, a study of the
railroad tramp in popular culture prompts a focus on moments of economic and political crisis or transition, meaning that I concentrate primarily on texts produced during the Gilded Age, the Progressive Era, and the Great Depression, with several forays into the more recent era of globalization.

Some previous studies have, in fact, addressed the cultural construction of the tramp figure. Frederick Feied’s No Pie in the Sky: The Hobo as American Cultural Hero in the Works of Jack London, John Dos Passos, and Jack Kerouac (1964) situates the tramp in a rebellious narrative tradition, as his title implies, but often leaves its political and theoretical implications underexplored. John Seelye, analyzing the figure in his seminal essay “The American Tramp: A Version of the Picaresque” (1963), goes further, arguing that representations fall on one or the other end of a heroic-versus-comic binary, according to the historical context of textual production. This approach, however, sharply delimits possible ideological readings of the character. Only in recent years has a handful of literary scholars begun to revisit the representations of the figure. In an effort to counter the general scholarly neglect of works by tramp memoirists, John Allen devotes a chapter of his Homelessness in American Literature (2004) to the deluge of tramp autobiographies that appeared between 1890 and 1940. Citing the disparity between the experiences of the textually constructed tramp and those of actual homeless transients, he broadly concludes that these texts end up “sanitizing and romanticizing the tramp experience,” and thus offer no real criticism of the “dominant order” while performing “detrimental” “cultural work” (95). Although his assessment rings true to some degree, Allen fails to acknowledge that this very romanticism can in fact serve as the basis for criticism if one sees the work of these texts as being a critique of
social relations under capitalism, rather than a narrowly defined contribution to the “cultural and ideological discourse of homelessness in America” (4). My own approach has more affinity with work by Christine Photinos and John Lennon, who have each published articles that offer ideological readings of Jack London’s tramp writings.

I begin my discussion with a description and analysis of what I call the Savage Tramp representational tradition, which has its origins in a broad cultural anxiety regarding the acceleration of change in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Tramps exploited the radical mobility afforded by the railroad while refusing the discipline of rationalized labor, so becoming a social and political threat. In response, the dominant rhetoric tended to pathologize the tramp, locating the (negative) causes of tramping within the individual tramp, to the exclusion of other external factors. To emphasize the tramp’s depravity, commentators often employed the kind of logic and language found in stereotypical portrayals of Native Americans and recently emancipated African Americans. While debate about the tramp often appeared in political discourse, iterations of the Savage Tramp found their way into fiction as well. Lee O. Harris’s 1878 novel The Man Who Tramps responds to the uprising of the Paris Communards abroad and the spread of labor agitation at home by blaming social disorder on the anarchist tramp. Published the same year, Frank Bellew’s The Tramp: His Tricks, Tallies, and Tell-Tales, with all His Signs, Countersigns, Grips, Pass-words and Villainies Exposed similarly offers descriptions of a vast conspiracy of revolutionary transients. While Harris proposes brutal eradication and Bellew endorses liberal reform, both demonstrate their debt to the English rogue literature of the early modern era, replicating that genre’s preoccupation with distinguishing the unworthy from the worthy poor. Although the
rhetoric had dampened by the Great Depression, in the 1990s anxiety about the railroad tramp reemerged in sensationalist coverage of serial killers Robert Joseph “Sidetrack” Silveria, Jr. and Ángel Maturino Reséndiz. Once again, the unbounded and invisible mobility of the unassimilated tramp comes to represent internal and external threats to the American way of life, a boogeyman that appears in crime dramas, tabloid programs, and true-crime books.

Representations of the Americana Hobo, by contrast, offer a figure that reinforces rather than challenges the bourgeois liberal subject position. First appearing along with the earliest Savage Tramp portraits, this tradition would achieve primacy as attitudes regarding the railroad vagabond shifted. These shifts reflected a growing awareness that the rapid growth of the western agricultural industry, enabled by the construction of a transportation infrastructure, required an unfixed labor force capable of following seasonal demands. The dominant discourse rehabilitates the parasitic tramp as the self-reliant hobo in an effort to absorb and assimilate into the national narrative what it cannot purge. His nonconformity safely circumscribed, his veneration helps to normalize precarity by ennobling it. Representations of the Americana Hobo find a parallel in imagery of the indigenous Noble Savage, in that both figures serve as exemplars of natural independence, wisdom, and authenticity untainted by the effects of excessive civilization. As a successor to the pioneer, the hobo becomes an emblematic of a particular brand of freedom-loving rugged individualism. Once again, Harris’s novel The Man Who Tramps presents an early rendering of this archetype, well before the term “hobo” had achieved common usage. Amongst all the evil, radical tramps, a single vagabond rejects political involvement entirely, refuses to beg or steal, and attributes his
peregrinations to some innate compulsion rather than larger forces. A similar character plays a central role in Frank Capra’s 1941 film *Meet John Doe*, seeing through the false populism of the media and politicians while recoiling from every offer of aid with suspicion. Edward Anderson’s Depression-era novel *Hungry Men* (1935) has as its protagonist a more nuanced version of the Americana Hobo who nonetheless ultimately rejects collectivist politics in favor of an individualist approach, for which he is rewarded. Each of these narratives seeks to contain the hobo’s oppositional potential through a repeatable formula: the figure represents American individualism, but his life ultimately lacks the attractive stability of a middle class life. By the end of the narrative, either the hobo himself reforms, or he functions as a negative example, so that the characters who interact with him are able to embrace the domesticity they had temporarily rejecting in taking to the road.

Representations of the Critical Tramp, by contrast, present an undiluted critique of the dominant order. This version of the railroad vagabond shares several traits and behavior patterns with the Savage Tramp: exploiting radical mobility, frequently eschewing waged labor, rejecting bourgeois morality, and disrupting heteronormative domesticity. Yet, like the Americana Hobo, the figure receives a sympathetic portrayal. In other words, the tramp is critical if his power to disrupt is seen as a positive element within (or outside of) the narrative. The tramp is savage if his power to disrupt is threatening to a social order or institution that the narrative portrays as legitimate. Three works of autobiographical fiction serve as exemplary texts. The protagonist of Tom Kromer’s *Waiting for Nothing* (1935) does not actively protest, but his degradation facilitates an implicit critique of a society that demands that its members work but fails to
provide the means to do so. Charles Ashleigh’s *The Rambling Kid* (1930) takes much more aggressive approach in its sympathetic portrayal of a young man’s journey from disaffected worker to revolutionary agitator. Ben Reitman’s *Sister of the Road: The Autobiography of Boxcar Bertha* (1937) deploys the rarely seen female tramp in order to subvert not only the gender conventions of the dominant culture, but of the tramp’s subculture, as well.

In my next chapter, I elaborate on the tramp utopics implied by narratives of the Critical Tramp. The first wave of railroad tramp texts coincided with a period of intensive production of utopian narratives, exemplified by Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888). While the formal narrative utopia typically relies on an unfamiliar setting—an undiscovered land or a future world—to mount its critique of the current order, utopian tramp texts offer models of alternative life practices in the present. Such a utopian gesture appears in most tramp narratives, which characterize the radical mobility of the railroad as an enclave into which the tramp may venture. This enclave becomes a site of evasion, a place free from the enforcement of the capitalist ethos *within* capitalist society. Jack London’s short story “The Apostate” (1906) presents a tramp origin story, portraying life and labor under laissez-faire principles as a nightmarish dystopia, which the young protagonist exits when he quits his job and climbs aboard a freight train. Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* (1906) builds on this idea, situating the tramp’s enclave as a means by which one might eventually arrive at a socialist consciousness. John Dos Passos’s *U.S.A. Trilogy* (1930-1936) also sees the revolutionary potential of the tramp enclave, but acknowledges that this potential is historically contingent. Finally, Nelson
Algren’s *Somebody in Boots* (1935) offers a critique of the tramp enclave’s allure, demonstrating the road’s enduring mythological power while recognizing its limits.

By way of a coda, I propose a model of tramp pedagogy that builds on insight gleaned from the tramp in his various guises. Through the pedagogical strategies typically embedded within its narrative, the figure of the tramp negatively defines the dominant discourse in America, thereby acting as a figure of resistance. The tramp acts as a pedagogue, seeking to reproduce himself by fostering in an apprentice a subject position that runs counter to the subjectivity prescribed by what Louis Althusser has termed ideological state apparatuses: most particularly, the school. This function becomes especially apparent in an analysis of hobo memoirs by Jack London and Leon Ray Livingston (writing as “A-No. 1”) and subsequent tramp how-to manuals. In their descriptions of their own tramp training, both writers provide an alternative to the bourgeois, liberal-humanist model of education. Because didacticism is central to tramp discourse, a tramp text remains free to make explicit pedantic moves without violating the formal aesthetic contract between author and reader; these two positions, after all, have already been constructed as analogues for teacher and student. Consequently, London and Livingston, intentionally (in the case of the former) or not (in the case of the latter), necessarily instruct readers in an alternative mode of social and economic organization.

I want to conclude this introduction with a caveat in the form of a brief personal note. In the interest of full disclosure I must acknowledge that I do not come to this project as a disinterested observer. Rather, it has been inspired by my own limited tramping experiences—as has my entire graduate career, in a way. For the bulk of a
four-year period beginning in 1998, I crisscrossed the continent on freight trains, slept outdoors and in squatted buildings, and ate food salvaged from dumpsters. I had made the decision to take to the road after more than five years of working in a warehouse for little more than minimum wage and intermittently taking classes at a local university that primarily served a commuter student body. To be sure, rationalized wage labor had lost what little appeal it might have once held for me well before I actually hopped my first train. Unlike many of the people I met on the road, I had the privilege of romanticizing my experiences as they unfolded, for I was transient by choice, a part of a critical dropout culture that sought to disengage from the prevailing order. (Of course, this means I also had the luxury of coming off the road after growing tired of the precariousness inherent to a criminalized mode of living.) Along the way, I’d kept a record of what I viewed as adventures worth recounting, and this record eventually formed the basis of the few issues of a zine I published. In other words, as it does for so many people, tramping provided me with an impetus to write, and I continued to write even after my adventures assumed a more mundane form. Bits of that writing got me into an MFA program, and from there I decided to pursue a PhD. Writing this dissertation has allowed me the opportunity to return to many of the concerns that prompted the first of many train rides. I cannot say whether the present work benefits or suffers as a result of my intimate connection to the topic, but I can say that it very likely would not exist at all in the absence of that connection.

1 According to a documentary history of the town assembled by the Britt Centennial Committee, “the second National Hobo Convention” took place in August 1933, and “[w]ith the exception of a period during World War II, the Hobo Day Convention has since been an annual event” (201). Smith erroneously claims Britt had hosted the convention for 112 years; the Wikipedia entry titled “National Hobo Convention” makes the same mistake.
Of course, Jim Crow's laws in the South, as well as de facto segregation in the North, undermined the full implementation of the free labor ideal in practice.

Beatty explains that the first headnote to the case—in this instance written by court reporter Chandler Bancroft Davis—reads, "The defendant Corporations are persons within the intent of the clause in section I of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, which forbids a state to deny any person equal protection of the laws" (qtd. 171). In fact, only the dictum, neither the arguments before the Court nor the unanimous opinion on the case addressed the issue of corporate personhood. Beatty argues (citing Justice William O. Douglass) that it is the reporter's headnote, not the actual opinion, that enshrined personhood status for corporations (173).

Even on the most basic level of political geography, the country underwent radical changes during the tramp's heyday—lasting roughly from 1870s through the 1930s—with eleven Western states joining the Union between 1876 and 1912.

See DePastino's discussion of the hobo and the frontier myth in Citizen Hobo, 118-121.

Structurally, the "illegal immigrant" is the truest inheritor of the hobo's tradition, insofar as they are both migratory laborers who frequently travel by freight train. Documentarian Rebecca Cammisa explains the process of traveling from Central America to the United States: "Let's say you get to a southern city like Tapachula, there's a network of smugglers that may help you or help transport you north, maybe through buses or cars or vans. Let's say you don't have the money to pay them to take you—you basically wait for freight trains. You cross the border at Tapachula, you walk eight to ten days to get to Arriaga and there you wait for the train. Now, once you get on a freight train, there's any number of things that could happen to you; you could have a relatively safe journey or you can fall under the train wheels and be decapitated, cut in half or have legs or arms cut off; you could be robbed from gangs or from corrupt police officials. There's any number of pretty horrible experiences that one can have along the train route" ("HBO Documents").

Even here, the city represents an infrastructure set up to accommodate transience: flop houses, unemployment agencies, etc.
CHAPTER 2
THE SAVAGE TRAMP

I’m a tramp, a bum, a hobo. I’m a boxcar and a jug of wine. And a straight razor if you get close to me.

—Charles Manson

In “Catching Out,” an episode from the 2008-2009 season of the CBS crime procedural *Criminal Minds*, the FBI’s Behavioral Analysis Unit, headquartered at Quantico, investigates a series of connected burglary-homicides committed throughout California’s central valley. Speaking in clipped, expositional fragments, Agent Spencer Reid explains during a briefing this killer-of-the-week’s *modus operandi*: “Blunt-force trauma with objects found at the home, multiple bashes to the head.” This “unsub” (i.e., unknown subject) employs a crude and certainly savage method, made all the more horrific given that he uses the victims’ own possessions as his weapons, those objects accumulated over the course of a lifetime, rewards for hard work, signifiers of comfort and stability. The agents’ dialogue emphasizes the essential invasive nature of the crimes as much as their violence. Agent Aaron Hotchner notes that “what’s unique about this unsub is that after he kills them, apparently he sits down to dinner in their homes.” Agent Jennifer Jareau continues, explaining, “He stays there for hours. He eats their food, tries on their clothes, he showers, he even sleeps in their beds.” To illustrate the point, the agents share projections of multiple crime-scene photos of not only the victims, but also the bloodied trappings of domesticity: an unmade bed, a fully set dinner table. In violating the physical structure of a single-family dwelling—the doors and windows that delineate a family’s sanctuary from the rest of the world—and inhabiting it so intimately, as if he too belonged there, the criminal assaults not only these particular victims, but the very concept of the home.
In addition to his unusual behavior during the actual crime, the issue of the suspect’s movement between crime scenes presents the agents with a conundrum. Although he seems to have no car of his own—none of the neighbors has spotted an unfamiliar vehicle at any of the crimes scenes—and he does not steal those belonging to the people he kills, he has left victims scattered across an atypically wide geographical range, over 400 miles, impelling one agent to muse, “Big area. Are we sure it’s the same unsub?” (Indeed, because regional authorities sometimes fail to share DNA information from crime scenes through national networks and the killer has traversed several jurisdictions, only gradually do investigators begin to connect the all the murders to a single suspect—the panopticon can only function at its full potential if the currency of the evidentiary database is diligently maintained.) Before the agents solve this mystery of exceptional mobility, Agent Hotchner chastises an overly ambitious local investigator who has dubbed the suspect “The Highway 99 Killer” in the media: “By calling him this, you are detrimentally influencing the investigation.” The key to the puzzle arrives when, investigating the site of the latest murder, Agents David Rossi and Derek Morgan discover the “unsub” (unknown subject) habitually drapes his soiled clothing over the male victim’s body and begin constructing a speculative psychological profile from a distinctly classed foundation.

AGENT ROSSI: This might be some form of transference. … By symbolically dressing Mr. Sullivan in his clothes, [the killer is] equalizing their status.

AGENT MORGAN: Mr. Sullivan has all these things, and he doesn’t. This guy’s got a problem with his station in life.

AGENT ROSSI: He can’t bring himself up on his own, so he makes himself feel better by destroying others and living their lives. … He pretends this is all his.
Following that last line—delivered incredulously—the camera pans the spacious room, which is filled with possessions that reveal the victims’ individuality, possessions properly earned by the victims’ hard, legitimate work. The killer is a usurper, one who seeks to circumvent the path of self-discipline and labor in order to achieve what the victims (and, presumably, the viewers) gained only through an embrace of individual responsibility. After one murder, he even takes the female victim’s wedding band, the ultimate symbol of domesticity, and puts it on his pinky. The filthiness of the killer’s discarded clothing leads the agents to conclude that he must be homeless, to which a clueless local cop responds, “So, how does a homeless man move about the state like this?” At this point, Agent Rossi arrives at an inspired answer to the lingering question of mobility: the killer is hopping freight trains.

The viewer, of course, already knows this: from the episode’s opening shot, we have watched the shadowy figure occupying mobile spaces of boxcars, transported into generically familiar suburban neighborhoods, very definitely arriving from the wrong side of the tracks—or rather, from the tracks themselves. The railroad technology that dominates much of the episode visually and aurally, often backlit and enshrouded in fog to underscore the cars’ cold, dark spaces and filmed throughout from defamiliarizing angles, almost takes on some kind of mechanical agency, suggesting that it operates in collusion with the killer. The rhythmic knocking of the wheels elides with the music score’s propulsive bass line, while the shriek of metal on metal complements jarring synthesized strings. Whenever the killer leaves the scenes of his savage crimes, a train conveniently rolls into view as if to meet him by prearrangement; he appears unintimidated as he runs alongside this overwhelmingly huge and powerful industrial
machine, throwing his pack into a boxcar, and then swinging aboard. Cuts obscure some of this action, rendering portions of it merely implied, so that it seems to happen in one smooth feat of athletic motion, with none of the awkward, ungraceful movements actually involved in boarding a moving freight train, lending the killer a sense of almost superhuman prowess. Once he is aboard, the train rolls out of the frame and he disappears without a trace. Agent Reid, the unit’s resident nerd, recites from memory a fact that maps the scope of the threat facilitated by this mode of travel: “There’s over 140,000 miles of track in this country. He could be anywhere.”

As the investigators pursue their case, the episode reveals some of the habits and customs of the rail-riding subculture. Once they discover their unsub travels by freight train, Agents Rossi and Morgan visit a yard, where a member of the railroad company’s private police force explains that “Bulls and ‘boes don’t usually cross paths,” then defines this vocabulary for his apparently baffled audience: “They call rail cops bulls, we call them ‘boes,” adding helpfully after a beat, “as in hoboess.” The killer, we come to understand, may be counted as a member of a distinct social group of outcasts with its own alien customs, vocabulary, and iconography. After shaming the transients they encounter at a hobo jungle for not taking their questions seriously enough, the agents submit the tramps to an examination process, extracting the meaning of the symbols rail riders leave carved or painted on various surfaces in order communicate with each other—all in exchange for a couple of candy bars, a rather low price for a group that the episode also portrays as secretive and aloof—which they then share with both other investigators and the audience, rendering this unfamiliar world less opaque. One of these symbols, the code for “friendly old lady,” left at a rail yard mere blocks
from where the first victim lived, allowed the killer to identify a home at which he would likely encounter little resistance; the victim, it turns out, was known to provide food to transients in exchange for work, thus to some degree bringing about her grisly fate.

The tramps at the jungle constitute a fairly repellent lot, but in the wake of his crimes the killer degrades himself much more severely, orgiastically huffing cleaning supplies he finds under the bathroom sink after he has dispatched his victims. The camera focuses in close-up on his tongue lolling in his mouth and the red sores that circle his lips, careful not to reveal his full face until midway through the episode. During a briefing with an assembled team of various law enforcement agencies, despite the fact that both the audience and the agents know the killer bathes and changes clothes at the scene of the crime—we even see him using a toothbrush, presumably belonging to a victim—Agent Emily Prentiss assures her audience that “If you get close to him, you won’t miss him: he will smell like a combination of human filth and paint thinner.” As if essential to his being, the stink cannot be scrubbed away. Once the FBI, largely through the use of networked information, identifies the unsub as Armando Luis Salinas, a thirty-eight year-old Mexican national, and subsequently tracks down his much older half-brother, Ruben Garcia, in a camp of migrant agricultural laborers, the agents confirm their earlier theories, exposing the killer’s true ontological center, of which the stink turns out to be only an accidental characteristic. Ruben explains that his sibling had been in trouble before, serving time back in Mexico, so he took Armando with him on the agricultural circuit, implicitly understanding that the antisocial behavior stemmed from a lack of labor discipline. However, at Armando’s core, “He’s not a good worker,” and for this failure of character he found himself rejected by his brother and his
community—and then the killings began. Ruben, in a hushed, quavering voice, explains obsequiously, "I'm grateful to work, but Armando hated work. Hated the camps. Always complained he never had a nice bed to sleep on. When he was a kid, he slept on the floor. In jail, he slept on the floor. All he ever talked about was having a house of his own. A bed to sleep on."

The lesson is clear: threat arises and disorder results when an occupant of the lowest social strata aspires to the goods above his station while rejecting the dogma of work and crossing the boundaries of acceptable mobility. After Armando has been gunned down by Agent Hotchner at the conclusion of a dramatic chase along the top of a moving train, Ruben returns to work in lush green fields under bright blue skies, content with his lot, and the social order is restored. This pastoral image functions as an inversion of Adam and Eve’s condemnation to a life of toil for their transgressions: here, exile from Eden, punishment for hubris, manifests as the exclusion from work. Whereas Ruben and his fellow conscientious workers, united in a sort of modest ersatz family, continued to enact a responsible transience that plays out along prescribed routes in the service of sanctioned economic activity, Armando illegitimately exploited the radical, invisible mobility afforded him by the railroad.

As mobility’s range expands and velocity accelerates, the tension regarding its appropriate use and potential abuse grows proportionately. Ever-increasing opportunities for travel in the United States over the course of the nineteenth century held great promise for the American populace. Because it theoretically allowed laborers to negotiate the conditions of their employment—they had the liberty, after all, to leave any job that provided insufficient compensation—and perhaps then with their savings
relocate in order to initiate a small capitalist venture that would provide a product or service to a community that lacked it, freedom of movement came to occupy a central position in the narrative of the American Dream. Thus, people received active encouragement from the press, the government, and business interests to take advantage of this new freedom of movement, most succinctly encapsulated in the form of the dictum to “Go West, young man” (typically attributed to newspaper editor Horace Greeley). This was generally considered excellent advice—so long as it was followed by the right person: a single white man looking to join the effort to tame the Western wilderness, or a family seeking to homestead on the Plains. For other strata of society, however, this mobility, like other expressions of freedom, was actively (and, quite often, legally) discouraged: Black Codes and then Jim Crow laws kept African Americans literally and figuratively in their place in the South, quotas limited immigration from anywhere other than Western Europe, and vagrancy laws targeted the homeless and transient.

The technology of the railroad played an absolutely central role in enabling this new-found mobility. Emerging in the 1820s, tripling in scope during the 1850s to reach 30,000 track miles by end of the decade, connecting the Atlantic and Pacific with the completion of the first transcontinental line in 1869, adding thousands of miles of tracks through the 1870s, and coalescing as a truly national system by the end of the century, the railroad, the ultimate symbol of the triumph of industrial and monopoly capitalism in the United States, was one of the most important factors in shaping the social, cultural, environmental, legal, economic, and geographic character of the country during this era, not only allowing for territorial and expansion market integration at an exponential rate,
but also playing a crucial role in the dissolution and repair of the Union during the Civil War. Trains allowed for unprecedented movement of goods, money, and (most pertinently for this discussion) people as lines rapidly “moved ahead of the frontier line and pulled millions of Americans into the western territory,” often “clearly preceding both extensive settlement and admission” of new states to the Union (Stover 64, 65). Demographic data lends substance to this interpretation: in 1800, two-thirds of all Americans lived within fifty miles of the Eastern seaboard, whereas by the end of the century, the Western frontier had been closed (Gordon 14). The railroad quickly proved to be far more efficient and reliable than had water routes and other traditional forms of travel in the U.S. Significantly, patterns of movement and settlement were no longer restricted by the dictates of nature. Whereas previous modes of transit suffered from the impact of weather, geography, and topography, railroad technology adapted to varying conditions with relative ease. The railroad radically expanded what had previously been considered the boundaries of possible movement, as tracks could be put down virtually anywhere, so towns no longer needed to rely on rivers, lakes, or canals to remain accessible. Along with new communications technology such as the telegraph, it radically compressed time and space. Now, raw materials could be obtained from anywhere, finished goods could be shipped to anywhere, and people could travel and settle anywhere. The Federalist vision of national unity appeared to have been achieved, and the fulfillment of Manifest Destiny was eminently plausible.

And yet, this new technology, which so rapidly altered every aspect of American society, frequently inspired an ambivalent reaction not acknowledged by the pronouncements of railroad boosters. For all the potentiality embedded in this new form
of transportation, it also served to disrupt and often destroy traditional social relations and modes of living, engendering a discomfiting sense that something has been lost for what has been gained, and the exchange may not be worth it—a sense that by midcentury induces Thoreau to exclaim in *Walden* that for all its “so called internal improvement,” the nation now “lives too fast.” He specifies the object of his critique, at first posing a series of ironic questions designed to highlight the cyclical logic behind the drive for perpetual economic expansion: “If we do not get out sleepers, and forge rails, and devote days and nights to the work, but go to tinkering upon our *lives* to improve *them*, who will build the railroads? And if the railroads are not built, how shall we get to heaven in season? But if we stay home and mind our business, who will want the railroads?” If answered honestly, Thoreau famously concludes, we have no choice but to acknowledge that

> We do not ride on the railroad; it rides on us. Did you ever think what those sleepers are that underlie the railroad? Each one is a man, an Irishman, or a Yankee man. The rails are laid on them, and they are covered with sand, and the cars run smoothly over them. They are sound sleepers, I assure you. And every few years a new lot is laid down and run over; so that, if some have the pleasure of riding on a rail, others have the misfortune to be ridden upon. (60)

While Thoreau (along with Hawthorne and Cooper) offered this assessment of the new technology’s wider implications from a pastoral and romantic perspective, the loss of the pastoral experience initiated by ever increasing exposure to railroad travel rapidly facilitated the construction of a new, industrialized subjectivity. According to Wolfgang Schivelbusch, this exposure entailed “a complex process of denaturalization,” such that mechanization “regularized the previously natural and erratic” sources of power, which in turn literally and figuratively altered human consciousness (2, 3). Because of the accelerated velocity and strict regularization of train travel in contrast to traditional
modes of transport, passengers find themselves alienated from the environment through which they pass, as “landscape” (which is contiguously relational) transmogrifies into “geographic space” (which is closed and systematized), affecting the traveler’s sensory perceptions—sight, in particular—producing a literally new way of seeing: panoramic perception, or “the tendency to see the discrete indiscriminately” (53, 60). Moreover, because the mode of transport by definition materially determines “the traveler’s space-time perception,” any change in this technology disrupts the traveler’s understanding of time (36). Of course, an individual’s valuation of these changes was contingent on one’s “economic and ideological position,” so that “representatives of industry and free enterprise saw transportation’s release from nature’s fetters as a gain,” whereas others who benefited less directly saw “the loss of a communicative relationship between man and nature” (11).

Not all skepticism centered around such arguably more esoteric concerns such as the loss through mechanization of a perception intimately bound up with movement through the natural world on its own terms. Necessarily, the technology of the train enabled a more concrete and entirely new constellation of fears that previously would have had no material basis: prior to the Industrial Revolution, nature provided the myriad sources of accident and catastrophe—in the form of floods, storms, etc.—which originated from outside of the mode of transport itself, whereas “[a]fter the Industrial Revolution, destruction by technological accident came from the inside. The technological apparatuses destroyed themselves by means of their own power” (Schivelbusch 131). As Paul Virilio explains, every innovation in transport technology multiplies the possibilities for new traumatic experiences, ensuring that “no technical
object can be developed without in turn generating ‘its’ specific accident: ship = ship
wreck, train = train wreck, plane = plane crash, etc. The accident is thus the hidden face
of technical and scientific progress” (92). Indeed, the first railway accident in the United
States in 1831 took the dramatic form of an explosion when a worker blocked an
engine’s steam valve, causing pressure to build to the bursting point. The subsequent
rapid increase in mileage initiated in the 1850s brought with it a commensurate increase
in often spectacular accidents, a situation facilitated by the tendency of railroad directors
to de-prioritize safety and maintenance while emphasizing expansion above all other
structural concerns, an attitude dispassionately summarized by Charles Francis Adams,
Jr., a regulator with the Massachusetts Railroad Commission and later president of
Union Pacific Railroad, who observed that “A practically irresistible force crashing
through the busy hive of modern civilization at a wild rate of speed, going hither and
thither, across highways and by-ways … cannot be expected to work incessantly and
yet never come in contact with the human frame” (qtd. in Stover 168). He knew of what
he spoke: in the state of Massachusetts alone, an average of eighty-seven people were
killed annually in rail accidents during the 1860s, with yearly averages reaching 143 for
the 1870s and 208 for the 1880s (Stover 168). Sometimes dozens of passengers died
in a single derailing, head-on collision, bridge failure, or explosion, such as in 1876,
when the trestle at Ashtabula, OH, collapsed and the resultant fire burned ninety-two
people to death (Burt 184).

Such numbers were high, but not exceptional, and these sorts of accidents often
motivated the composition of popular ballads and illustrated broadsheets that circulated
widely and served both to instill and express the sort of general anxiety Harper’s Weekly
captured in an 1858 column (under the subheading "Nobody’s Murders"), which claims that “every man who leaves a city by a train must cast a lingering look behind, in sober sadness, doubting whether the chances of safe arrival are not entirely against him.”

Written in the wake of yet another disaster, this one on the Erie Railroad line (recounted in a formal journalistic mode in another section of the same issue, accompanied by two illustrations of the accident), the anonymously authored column frames the scope of the problem in epidemic terms, observing that “Boilers are bursting all over the country—railroad bridges breaking and rails snapping—human life is sadly and foolishly squandered—but nobody is to blame. Boilers burst themselves. Rails break themselves.” Although adopting an ironic tone with the intention of emphasizing that neither the industry nor its individual representatives ever admit responsibility or suffer penalty for this loss of life, the column also draws forth the sense that these machines have in fact achieved a kind of dangerous self-reflexive agency (“The Lounger”). To accommodate the new technology in light of such readily available evidence required the passenger to engage in a “repression of fear” of its potential for harm (Schivelbusch 160). This sort of anxiety and repression might bloom into full-fledged neurosis brought on by shock for those who actually survived an accident without severe physical trauma; the increased prevalence of such neuroses galvanized the rise in the second half of the Nineteenth Century of the medical investigation into the psychopathological impact of such mental trauma, which produced injuries—as contemporary observers were forced to admit—that differed in quality, not only frequency or severity, from more obvious physical injuries.²
So, if the radical new mobility offered freedom of movement on a previously unimaginable scale, it simultaneously destabilized subjectivity while posing a constant threat of injury or death. Across the culture more broadly, it functioned to destabilize the familiar institutions of the family, the church, and the community, so that towns found they were no longer self-sufficient, but instead thrust into a national economy in an interdependent relationship, willingly or not (Gordon 5). For the first time, the crowd became a significant social force across the country, and the technology of mobility ensured that these crowds were increasingly heterogeneous in character. The legal system lagged behind these material developments, inciting Thomas Cooley, head of the Interstate Commerce Commission, to warn that “the police regulations of our trains are of the crudest sort, and but for that general common sense and native chivalry of the American man, our passenger trains moving rapidly from one criminal jurisdiction to another, would be safer places for malefactors than even the shady woods” (qtd. in Gordon 262). Mobility expedites criminality. A generalized anxiety mounted, even for non-passengers who found their surroundings and the structure and rhythm of their daily lives increasing affected by the railroad; there was no opting out. George Beard, in his 1883 book *American Nervousness: Its Causes and Consequences*, coined the term “neurasthenia” to describe the previously unknown anxious disorder now experienced by individuals living in modern times—and all the conditions of these modern times could all be traced back to the development of the railroad and the mobility it afforded (Beatty 5).

This process of modernization advanced along multiple planes. While the passenger experienced the decrease in time required to travel an increased distance as
a mutation of what had hitherto been the limits of temporal and spatial subjectivity, the railroad wrought equally insidious and more extensive changes in the entire populace’s relationship with chronology. In *Keeping Time: A History of American Time*, Michael O’Malley traces the interwoven trajectories of the industrialization of travel and the industrialization of time, culminating on November 18, 1883, when, “[w]ithout the benefit of federal law or public demand” the railroad industry “managed to rearrange the nation’s system of public timekeeping at a stroke,” abruptly bringing dozens of widely varying local times into conformity with one of four meridian time zones, basically the same as those that exist today (100). Of course, time had already begun its process of rationalization during the antebellum period, with publicly displayed and privately owned clocks becoming less expensive and more common, a process facilitated by the emerging factory system of mass production, which itself benefited from the imposition of greater worker discipline afforded by this new clock time, in an interdependent, self-perpetuating, and ever accelerating cyclical relationship. This unsettling transition entailed a general re-conception of the definition of time, which previously had always been understood as a phenomenon essentially equivalent to the rhythms of the natural world—the world as God made it—whereas now it was progressively determined by the authority of the human-made clock, a device that imposed a rigidity on the day, dividing it into neat, uniform segments. Now, rather than the sun, bosses and their clocks determined the hours of the working day. Yet, even as clocks played an ever greater role in the management of people’s time, those clocks were still set according to the solar conditions of particular localities. Although railroads had developed a workable (if exceedingly complicated) system of timetables to accommodate these various local
times, when it became apparent that the world scientific community’s advocacy for a standardized global time might result in legislation on the matter to which the industry would have to adhere, the railroad corporations acted to preempt any such inconvenience and thus standardize time on their own terms. Although a vocal minority would continue to protest this seemingly arbitrary dictate of corporate—rather than community—interests well into the next century, business interests ensured that the establishment of Standard Time occurred with relative smoothness. As William F. Allen, the principal architect of the new scheme, remarked, “railroad trains are the great educators and monitors of the people in teaching and maintaining exact time” (qtd. 115). In other words, the railroad itself became a technology of discipline.

Another modern social condition—along with the redefinition of space and time—contributed to the ambivalence, if not outright antagonism, people had regarding this new networked transportation technology: the appearance on a scale previously unseen in America of the wandering tramp. The tramp phenomenon emerged after the Civil War, and there is some legitimacy to the claim that it was in fact directly produced by that conflict. Observers argued that the War had given many young men their first experiences outside the disciplined structures of home and work, thrusting them out on the road, where they traveled by train, camped outdoors, and pilfered supplies—habits that they then carried into their careers as tramps (Kusmer 37). Once again, the railroad played a crucial role in the appearance of this phenomenon. Indeed, many felt that the train actually created the tramp. One commentator describes a slippery slope, whereby the railroad corrupts even those illegal riders genuinely in search of employment: “out-of-works who beat their way on freight-trains very easily degenerate into professional
vagabonds” once they learn “how easy it is to manage without working,” so that, before long, they “travel merely for travel’s sake.” Worse, it presented a temptation for the “romantic and adventuresome boy,” who after only a ride or two would risk becoming a confirmed tramp (Flynt 310, 313). During the War, it had allowed for the mass deployment of soldiers and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people, and after the War it imported the tramp problem from urban centers into towns and rural areas. Tramps, in fact, misappropriate this most potent symbol of industry for their own ends, which appear in many ways at odds with the goals of the industry that produced the technology.

Response came quickly and harshly, soon coalescing in its construction of the figure of the Savage Tramp. In 1875, a New York Times editorial announced that he was “becoming too frequent, too troublesome, and even too dangerous to be ignored,” so “the process of elimination must be direct and specific, and should be begun speedily” (“The Tramp”). Yale Law School Dean Francis Wayland, addressing the Conference of the Boards of Public Charities in 1877, offers a typical perspective when he describes the tramp as “a lazy, shiftless, sauntering or swaggering, ill-conditioned, irreclaimable, incorrigible, cowardly, utterly depraved savage” (qtd. in Kusmer 44). In general, the discourse took as a given that the tramp’s condition stemmed from an individual pathology, irrespective of prevailing socioeconomic conditions. These characterizations were well within the mainstream tendency to dehumanize completely the mass of homeless transients, so it comes as no surprise that the tramp was soon conflated in national imaginary with the recently freed African-American and the displaced Indian in terms of the threat each of these figures was perceived to pose. This
threat stemmed alternately from radical mobility, brute physicality, or lack of civilizing influence, but in any case the potential result was the same: members of all three groups carried the hint of potential sexual violence against pure white women, would remain idle if left to their own devices, carried themselves with an air of unearned arrogance, and had no scruples about engaging in criminal activity, if only they had the necessary intelligence to do so effectively (Kusmer 44). Headlines appearing in the *New York Times* from the 1870s to the 1890s served to confirm these fears: “Stabbed by a Tramp”; “A Woman Beaten by a Tramp”; “Child Attacked by a Tramp”; “Burned by a Tramp”; “A Tramp Killed the Sheriff”; “Assaulted by a Tramp”; “Shot by a Tramp”; “A Long Island Tramp’s Crime”; “Brutally Beaten by a Tramp.” As this phenomenon appeared wholly unprecedented to most observers, it necessitated new terminology to capture its deviance. Historian Todd DePastino, in *Citizen Hobo*, explains that the word “tramp” acquired its particular meaning in the American lexicon as a description of those who made up “the legion of men traveling the nation ‘with no visible means of support,’” breaking from the previous meaning of the word—i.e., a long walk—and supplanting terms like “vagrant” and “vagabond” in 1873, following the financial crash that rendered so many transient (5).

According to DePastino, commentators saw the tramp’s homelessness and resultant immersion in a predominantly masculine social space in terms of a disassociation from the controlling feminine influence of the domestic sphere, which necessarily leads to a loss of “sexual self-government,” so that the tramp became identified with the threat of rape (*Citizen* 27). In this way, anxiety surrounding the tramp dovetails with the fear embedded in the stereotype Donald Bogle identifies as the brutal
black buck (notoriously codified in film by D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation*), who is “oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh” (14). Regarding the conflation of the tramp and the Indian, historian Richard Slotkin argues that after the crash of 1873, journalists and other observers often “drew on the traditional American symbolism of class as an aspect of race,” with the “spectrum of class relations on a scale determined by the degree of likeness to the Indian at the lower end of the spectrum, and the Anglo-Saxon natural aristocrat at the other” (301). In the 1870s and 1880s, books such as *The Dangerous Classes of New York* by Charles Loring Brace and *Certain Dangerous Tendencies in American Life* by Jonathan B. Harrison posted that, like the Indian, the tramp (as well as African Americans, immigrants, and the urban poor) was constitutionally different, weaker in character and therefore “predisposed to degradation” when insufficiently disciplined by labor, rendering them dependent in the moment and potentially violent in the future (308). Similarly, E.L. Godkin, editor of the *Nation*, argues in an 1876 editorial that both Indians and tramps must be regarded as savages, musing on the policy option of extermination for the former (following calls for such in the wake of Custer’s Last Stand), as well as the degrading effects of philanthropy:

But if they are to be exterminated, why any longer pauperize them, and then arm them? What would be said if the city of New York, after lodging its thousand tramps in comfortable idleness during the winter, were to arm them on leaving the almshouse in the spring with a good revolver and knife … to deliver them alive the animals they were to eat, and were to allow them to kill them themselves in mock chase with lances? But why should it be worse to do this thing to savage whites than to savage Indians? … Fancy our tramps starting on the spring journey not only armed, but mounted, with saddle-bags for their provisions and flowers in their buttonholes. (Qtd. in Slotkin 493)
It is worth noting that even after this sort of heightened rhetoric and accompanying vindictive calls for punishment and eradication of the tramp had been largely abandoned before the outbreak of World War I, ostensibly neutral observers still tended to replicate the pathologizing assumptions that served as the foundation for such commentary. Writing in 1923, Robert E. Park, a founding figure of the Chicago School of sociology, speaks of the sort of “man whose restless disposition made him a pioneer on the frontier tends to become a 'homeless man'—a hobo and a vagrant—in the modern city,” thus offering a confirmation of Turner’s Frontier Thesis by implying that a homeless person’s condition may be located in his failure to keep up with changing American geography and social conditions (xxiii). While Park seeks to reverse the tone of distaste that permeates statements by Wayland and his ilk by placing that transient figure in a tradition extending back to the national heroes who mapped and settled the West, he still insists that members of this category find themselves in their condition and mode of living to the extent that they are subject to “biological drives” (even if Park simultaneously acknowledges that “human nature … is very largely a product of the environment”) (xxv).

Perhaps most offensively to the American imagination, regardless of the relative liberal or conservative nature of the individual American’s position on the solution to what everyone could agree was a problem, the tramp came to represent a rejection of “the virtues of work, productivity, and self-denial” (Kusmer 47)—the Protestant work ethic. If the Civil War had served to inculcate the habits of future tramps, many of the ideals behind the bloody saga also made their appearance all the more offensive; after all, the Union had nearly disintegrated, hundreds of thousands lives had been lost, and
billions of dollars of damage endured over the course of a conflict that confirmed the propagation of the Republican Party’s ideology of free labor. According to the analysis of historian Eric Foner, the Pre-Civil War Party had been “united by a commitment to a ‘free labor ideology,’ grounded in the precepts that free labor was economically and socially superior to slave labor and that the distinctive quality of Northern society was the opportunity it offered wage earners to rise to property-owning independence” (ix). In a discourse predicated on binary oppositions, free labor’s essence derived from its status as the opposite of slave labor, which in effect “masked the fact that ‘free labor’ itself referred to two distinct economic conditions—the wage laborer seeking employment in the marketplace, and the property-owning small producer enjoying a modicum of economic independence” (x-xi).

Although the colonial ideal entailed a shift from the inherent dependency of wage labor in youth to eventual property ownership and independent production over the course of a lifetime, so that representative government necessarily remained contingent on such ownership, the expansion of wage labor from the immediate pre-Revolutionary period, the increasing integration of domestic and international markets as a result of improvements in transportation technology, and the rise of industrial manufacturing in the urban centers (especially in the northeastern region of the United States) all rendered that ideal less and less attainable. By 1860, immediately before the outbreak of the Civil War, the number of wage earners had surpassed that of the self-employed, having already surpassed the number of slaves a decade prior (xv-xvi). In response to these changing conditions, “changes in the law and its enforcement helped to institutionalize the wage relationship and legitimize it as an authentic expression of
freedom. During the first half of nineteenth century, American law adopted the definition of wage labor as the product of a voluntary agreement between autonomous individuals”—i.e., “the legal doctrine of 'employment at will'”—meaning that the concept of “freedom” now derived less from economic autonomy and more from contractual autonomy (xvi). (Or, American law now acknowledged circumstances were such that workers had nothing to sell to capitalist-employers but their labor power, in exchange for wages.) Even as these material circumstances became subject to critique by those who made use of the metaphor of “wage slavery,” employers and owners insisted that wages produced by hard work in fact provided a pathway to proprietorship, rhetorically placing labor on a continuum with ownership, rather than in opposition to it—thus elevating the status of labor from its previous degraded position—created an ideological link between the freedom of citizenship and waged work. This link manifested in concrete ways; as David Montgomery explains, “Most of the states that had neither property nor poll tax qualification prohibited paupers from voting” (21). In other words, work—particularly with the expansion of white male suffrage in the Jacksonian era—now constituted the threshold for full access to the rights of citizenship.

Abraham Lincoln, in an address delivered in 1859, speaks out against a version of the wage slavery conceit—in this case, the mudsill theory that holds that “whoever is once a hired laborer, is fatally fixed in that condition for life; and thence again, that his condition is as bad as, or worse than, that of a slave”—and upholds the vision of socioeconomic mobility that grants waged labor a kind of nobility due to its function as the first step toward the achievement of the Jeffersonian dream of independent production, albeit it in an altered form, according to which labor and capital operate in
unison, the first leading inevitably to the second, with cycle renewing again for each subsequent generation (249). “The prudent, penniless beginner in the world labors for wages awhile,” Lincoln explains, distilling the essence of free labor ideology, “saves a surplus with which to buy tools or land for himself, then labors on his own account another while, and at length hires another new beginner to help him. This, say its advocates, is free labor—the just, and generous, and prosperous system, which opens the way for all, gives hope to all, and energy, and progress, and improvement of condition to all” (250-251). Furthermore, this systemic justice cannot be in doubt: “If any continue through life in the condition of the hired laborer, it is not the fault of the system, but because of either a dependent nature which prefers it, or improvidence, folly, or singular misfortune” (251).

While the free soil, free labor, free men slogan of the Republican Party as it emerged in the 1850s and achieved dominance with the conclusion of the Civil War incorporated—and fostered—abolitionist sentiments, yet it also spoke to the Northern, white, Protestant, pro-business position of the party. Even in opposing the institution of slavery as a threat to the ideology encapsulated in this slogan, party members still might variously oppose other perceived threats to business in America: Catholics, Mexicans, immigrants, indigenous people, and even white male landless labors. Yet, in many ways, the tramp represents an even greater threat to this ideal/ideology, in being native-born, white, and male—so they looked much like those who occupied the highest ranks of the social hierarchy—and still failing to embrace “free labor,” potentially “exposing the fundamental rift between employers and employees” and so giving lie to the touted partnership between labor and capital (i.e., the “producing classes”) that the War was
supposed to have enabled (DePastino, *Citizen* 19). This failure becomes even more complicated if it is interpreted not merely as passive neglect but rather as an active perversion of what it means to be “free”: tramps push beyond the demand for free labor and instead, by their very existence, demand to be free from labor. The tramp, in deliberately choosing idleness over work, was an affront to the memory of every life lost, every casualty suffered during the War. Of course, this view ignores the material reality of the Gilded Age and the cycles of unemployment caused by the economic recessions and depressions of the 1870s, ‘80s and ‘90s; Lincoln's insistence on the flawlessness of the free labor system meant that those who failed to prosper could blame only themselves, and this notion had been thoroughly absorbed in laissez-faire rhetoric. (The labor press was generally exceptional in noting that the issue might have something to do with prevailing economic conditions rather than personal character and initiative alone.) Tramps must be demonized because otherwise they might serve to remind others that downward economic mobility remains a real possibility, no matter how hard a person works; to locate fault in the systemic socioeconomic conditions rather than in the pathology of the individual would necessitate an admission that those conditions contain some flaw. In assuming such a defensive perspective, one has no choice but to conclude that the tramp was not only failing to contribute to the economy, but he was distinctly un-American. Consequently, to his list of presumptive crimes was added that of political subversion. No wonder anti-tramp laws, sometimes quite vicious in their effects, first appeared in 1876 and quickly spread from state to state (Kusmer 53).

The tramp refused to adhere to any generally agreed upon balance between liberty and restraint. In *Indispensable Outcasts*, a history of hobo labor, Frank Tobias
Higbie observes that “[m]iddle- and upper-class observers believed that vagrants were a threat to the community because they undermined workers’ commitment to wage labor and along with it ‘normal sex,’ that is, monogamous heterosexuality” (12). In essence, the rejection of work operates like a virus, infecting other parallel social institutions, such as the nuclear family, its attendant traditional sexual mores, and, ultimately, the very concept of the home itself—all of which, again, offer their comfort and security only in exchange for reciprocal restrictions. In Civilization and Its Discontents, Freud speaks directly to value and nature of this exchange (even if he relegates it to a footnote): “No other technique for the conduct of life attaches the individual so firmly to reality as laying emphasis on work; for his work at least gives him a secure place in a portion of reality, in the human community.” And yet, he acknowledges, “as a path to happiness, work is not highly prized by men. They do not strive after it as they do after other possibilities of satisfaction. The great majority of people only work under the stress of necessity and this natural human aversion to work raises most difficult social problems” (49n5).

Citizens who found themselves in increasing numbers beginning and ending their days according to the uniform clock time imposed across the country by railroad companies, the tramp remained unbounded by it—for such temporal rigidity provides little apparent utility outside the realm of rationalized industrial work—even while he makes use of the technology that played a crucial role in the enforcement of the disciplinary precision chronology for the rest of the country’s populace. Not only does the tramp appear to expect to the rights of citizenship while eschewing the responsibility of labor that competes the equation, but he manages to evade all related temporal and spatial restrictions. In his practice, he presents a mode of living that entails absolute mobility—
in other words, absolute freedom. Any such interpretation of the figure entails a confrontation with one’s own corresponding lack of freedom. How appropriate, then, that those who now labor under the authority of clock time would come to foster toward the tramp the nagging sense of Nietzschean ressentiment. No wonder, by the end of the nineteenth century, all but four of the forty-four states had adopted anti-tramping acts that “shifted the emphasis in the definition of the crime from begging to wandering without work” (Montgomery 87). The tramp was no longer punished for what he did, but criminalized for what he was: a transient non-worker.

Societies have long understood, at least implicitly, that circumscribing mobility is crucial to the smooth functioning of social, political, and economic institutions. In his genealogy of the modern disciplinary society that arises partially in response to “an increase in the floating population,” Foucault demonstrates that “one of the objects of discipline is to fix; it is an anti-nomadic technique” (218). Through his embodiment of movement in its most extreme, unbounded form, the Savage Tramp functions as a metonymy for all the upheavals wrought by the railroad’s arrival. The tension between the tramp’s freedom and society’s discipline reveals one of capitalism’s central contradictions: in order to participate in the ideal relations prescribed by the doctrine of free labor, the individual must be rendered transient in so much as he or she is “freed” from subsistence living afforded by the land as well as traditional social relations, but absolutely must not interpret these new circumstances as the freedom to refuse waged labor through vagabondage. Put another way, the freedom the individual now possesses is the freedom to be disciplined by a contractual agreement with the employing class. Similarly, railroads offered a new kind of freedom, but like all
freedoms, it must be made available only to those who would use it appropriately, without taking the opportunities it offers to their logical ends.

All of these arguments and attitudes surface in the rather stunning and ahistorical novel *The Man Who Tramps: A Story of To-Day*, written by Lee O. Harris and published in 1878 in the wake of the massive Pennsylvania Railroad strike of the previous year, an event which the story takes as its climax. The book functions as an *urtext*, establishing an enduring taxonomy in its identification and articulation of the absolute dichotomy between two ontologically distinct categories of transients, which I identify as the Savage Tramp and the Americana Hobo (the latter of which is discussed in detail in the next chapter). The novel's hero, the teenaged Harry Lawson, an orphan with a surname that summarizes all the reader need know about his incorruptibility and affinity for justice and the social order and who is destined to play out a drama worthy of any Horatio Alger protagonist, ends up on the road as a result of an elaborate convergence of various circumstances and misunderstandings—but, importantly, through no failure of character. Indeed, throughout the novel, “Harris sharply distinguishes between” a character like Harry “and the mobility of the tramp” (Photinos 1007). Once homeless, he encounters various tramps of various moral constitutions, but he consistently refuses their overtures to join them (“I shall never be a tramp”), insistently expressing his desire for a home, an education, and employment (88). The development of the plot hinges on further misunderstandings and coincidences—a long-lost rich uncle eventually enters the drama—as Harry becomes a prized object of interest for a Savage Tramp, an Americana Hobo, and a kindly doctor who recognizes the boy’s inherent goodness and even shepherds him toward education, career, heteronormativity, and domesticity. More
important for the present discussion than the details of its storyline is the novel’s rhetoric concerning the tramp’s essentially alien nature which, when combined with his mobility and collectivist behaviors, apparently establishes the potential to upend American society.

Harris demonstrates no reluctance to abandon the narrative in order to offer intrusive chapter-length authorial editorials regarding social, economic, and political relations. In the novel’s second chapter, he presents his version of the genealogy of the tramp. Like other commentators, he traces the emergence of the figure to the Civil War, but claims that those who would become post-war vagabonds joined the military already corrupted: many who enlisted were “from a lower grade of society, from the slums of the cities and towns, and even from the jails and penitentiaries, who, tempted by the large bounties then offered and the chances of plunder, became soldiers in name, thought few of them were ever really soldiers in fact” (17). The army, in turn, fostered their worst inborn tendencies, especially their attitudes toward work, so that they emerged from military service in their final, parasitic form. Harris explains that “The reckless, free life of the army had given them a taste for wandering and a distaste for every species of labor, and following their natural instincts, directed by their acquired habits, they became professional tramps” (18). Clearly, the issue stems from flaws of individual character, not the chaotic social and economic conditions following demobilization. As Christine Photonios observes, the tramp’s function in this and similar texts of the era “is to convert economic uncertainty and social disorder into the more manageable form of individual villainy” (995). Echoing the conversation on the subject as it played out in the national press, Harris goes on to assure the reader directly, using the second person, that any
sympathy for people less fortunate is wasted on these meandering vagrants, who not
only choose to be both jobless and homeless, but who also are adept at taking
advantage of such “indiscriminate charity,” which is repeatedly coded throughout the
novel as feminine and irrational, as is even the inclination to extend to tramps the
benefits of judicial process (19). Although certain individuals who have suffered
misfortune do improve as recipients of sympathy, Harris urges his readers to consider
whether it is “justice to suffering virtue to waste such sweetness on insensate clods,
who, if they possess souls at all, have their immortality from the fiends?” and invites
them to approve after a mob drags a tramp from his jail cell and “improvise[s] a gallows,
by throwing a rope over the limb of a tree, and, amid his howls and shrieks for mercy,”
hangs him “up by the neck” (163, 286). Once you dispense any charity, “Your house is
advertised—marked upon the fence, the gate or in some other place,” so that your
home becomes a target of professional transient beggars, and your “wives and
daughters [must] live in constant terror of assault by these unprincipled and desperate
vagabonds” (24, 269).

The existence of such unworthy wretches alone would be sufficient cause for
alarm, Harris asserts, but the problem does not end there. The author sketches a
rudimentary schema of the various subcategories of the Savage Tramp, distinguishing
the “easy-going, indolent vagrant, beating his way through the world with no ambition
but to live without labor” who is merely a “great nuisance” from “another grade,
composed of criminals” who eschew begging in favor of robbing and killing, while worst
of all are “the political tramps” who teach “their inflammable doctrines … and threatened
the very life of the nation.” Despite their differences, these divergent types are
“combined in one great organization,” with the last group striving to influence the former
two, so that this “fraternity of tramps” will serve as front for dissemination of foreign,
anti-capitalist ideals (21). Explicitly influenced by the teachings of Voltaire, Jussieu, and
Rousseau, political radicals of the failed Paris Commune of 1871 have made their way
to American shores bent on fomenting a socialist uprising.

Vicious agitators, who had tasted of the intoxication of anarchy and
bloodshed, when driven from France found refuge here. With all the
natural instincts of the American tramp, combined with the treachery of the
serpent and the ferocity of the tiger, they carried with them a prestige and
a power which soon made itself felt. Then the tramp ceased to be merely
a nuisance; he became a terror. (19-20)

This tramp organization, “regularly organized and officered” along strict military
lines, has a seditious agenda largely unknown to the public at large, or even all of its
own members (112). Contrary to the notion that a tramp lives a free life, Harris makes it
clear that within this fraternity individual dissent remains absolutely forbidden and
personal autonomy nonexistent. At the top of the chain of command (at least in the
“district” in which this story takes place, which consists primarily of Indiana, Ohio, and
Pennsylvania) stands Black Flynn, who is simultaneously lazy and ambitious, and
whose physiognomy reveals his true nature: “a man about forty years old, a little above
the medium height, with a very dark complexion, dark enough for a mulatto, but with
long, straight black hair, and small, restless black eyes, sparkling beneath his projecting
brows” (25). (Not coincidentally, the lynched tramp discussed above is described as
being a “black-faced and ghastly apparition” [286].) As if these racialized characteristics
weren’t enough to earn him our contempt, the reader soon learns that he is in fact the
worst class of vagrant: the political tramp, who spouts radical ideology and plots to “stir
up this strife between capital and labor” (28). On his first meeting with Harry Lawson,
Black Flynn attempts to recruit the boy to this tramp conspiracy, while the boy, for his part, consistently endorses and upholds the values of domesticity, family, education, and honor.

One of the most nefarious aspects of Flynn’s endeavors, however, is the fact that the tramp’s recitation of communist propaganda is not even genuine. (At the same time, labor organizers who advocate for class-conscious collective action appear to be little more than dishonest hypocrites who work harder in the efforts to instigate discontent than they do at their jobs; real laborers presumably have neither time for nor interest in politics.) Tramps, at heart, remain nothing more than thieves and murderers who, the “fraternity” notwithstanding, will not hesitate to betray one another. Harris forgives the honest laborer who might fall under the sway of political radicalism, acknowledging that such a character is most likely sincere (if wrong-headed) in his desire to bring about positive change, but the tramp only adopts such a posture for the chaos and as a way of avoiding honest work and, more execrably, of inverting the natural order, so that “they will no longer be vagrants, but rulers in this land” (43). How social chaos would benefit the tramp is not ever made entirely clear; Black Flynn repeatedly alludes to some master plan, some future “new order of things,” when tramps will become “rulers in this land” (43), but neither he nor Harris ever articulates any specific details. Still, in the most didactic passage in the novel, structured as a Socratic dialogue between the implied author and a supporter of communism, Harris directly addresses radicals both cynically manipulative and sincere—and, most importantly, those readers who might hear radical doctrine with some sympathy for its veneer of egalitarianism—thoroughly debunking both the premise and goals of socialism in a mere eight pages, which he promises “is
laughed at and treated lightly by the majority of the intelligent people of our country,” because only the rewards promised by a capitalist economy will motivate labor beyond that required for mere subsistence, so that “only the hope of accumulating property … drives the wheels of progress” (53, 57). Moreover, the tramp who would endorse radical politics does so not because he is committed to the cause on an ideological level, but because the cause offers another scheme by which to avoid honest labor. Mere “envy of the more fortunate” motivates his beliefs and actions, when in fact neither any particular successful individual nor any structural condition deserves blame for “those who have been so unfortunate as to be too late for the train” of “progress” (51).

To caution the reader, Harris uses the metaphor of the epidemic, facilitated by the new mobility, explaining that “tramping spread like a disease” (18). Appropriately, a kindly farmer warns Harry that to leave home is to put himself at risk, as transience—the separation from domesticity—in itself lowers one’s immunity; boys “leave comfortable homes … and, nine times out of ten, they become worthless tramps” (34). So, the farmer continues, Harry must inoculate himself against tramps, and “Have nothing to do with them, or they will make you a vagabond like themselves,” contaminating him with their habits and ideology; so insidious is the process that “Many an unemployed man becomes a tramp before he is aware” (35). According to the novel’s rhetoric, tramping infects the individual, who cannot help but stay on the road, rejecting work and futurity. Harry temporarily suffers from the early stages of infection associated with mobility, with “the exercise of traveling” becoming “a relief to him,” reducing him to such a state that “He had no plans for the future” (153). This is how it happens: once mobile, a young man risks contact with established tramps, who have spread throughout the country,
uncontained and contagious, infecting the entire social/political body. The metaphor then becomes a bit complicated: while tramping itself is a disease, tramps themselves also serve as carriers of political radicalism, which is likewise a “pestilence which permeated society” (21). Harris, in an effort to contain the spread of infection, to quarantine the social/political body, explicitly calls for the formal disenfranchisement of the tramp—of the entirety of the homeless and mobile population—essentially demanding the repeal of the citizenship of every member of this class.\(^3\)

Part of the problem, Harris makes clear, lies in America’s permissive approach to the freedoms of speech and movement, along with the political ideals of plurality and representative democracy. He explains that “In a society so mixed; a population made up of all nationalities; of refugees from all the despotisms of the world; men who understood nothing and less about our government and our institutions; whose ideas of liberty and license were synonymous—in such a society the specious doctrines of the commune soon took root, and began at once to bear fruit” (22). As with the freedom of mobility, the freedom to entertain a multiplicity of views should be granted only to those who would exercise it within a narrowly defined set of parameters. Even Black Flynn explains that America, “where the laws are weak and slow to act,” offers him the opportunity to move about the country at will, gathering recruits all the while (44).

As a result of this permissiveness, the tramp, Harris writes, has become “a power in the land. His influence [is] felt in politics and in nearly all the social relations” (20). The tramp, in other words, a member of one of the most disenfranchised segments of society, is fictionally afforded immense political power. Harris ascribes to tramps an agency they are, in reality, already largely prohibited from exercising. The problem is
that the tramp is “placed on an equality, politically, with the best citizens of the country,”
despite his remove from the two interrelated pillars of civilization: employment and
domesticity (268). From this folly originates all threats to American society:

   It is the irresponsible floating populace, who have no home ties to bind
   them to society; the vicious, who seek to plunder and destroy; the outcasts
   of all nations who drift upon our shores and fasten upon the industries of
   our country like barnacles to the bottom of a ship; in short, that great
   American institution “The Man who Tramps,” who, watching for every
   opportunity to profit by the contest between labor and capital, commits
   deeds of violence in the name of workingmen only that he may plunder
   from the rich and poor alike. … [A]ll must confess that it throws into our
   political economy an element of danger, when it places on as equality the
   real citizen, whose interests are indissolubly connected with the prosperity
   of the country, and those who have no part or concern in its welfare. (267-
   268, emphasis added)

With all the corruption of the Gilded Age, Harris makes the tramp the focus of what read
like paranoid fantasies. Tramps, comprising one of the more disenfranchised segments
of society, are given immense political power rhetorically, in order to sway those who
actually operate within the polity. Tramps are ascribed in fiction an agency they are
prohibited from exercising in reality, and so in the climactic chapter of the novel,
contrary to historical fact, they instigate the riots the erupted in Pittsburgh during the
strikes of 1877.

Harris demonstrates interwoven narratological and ideological imperatives to
portray the tramp problem as foreign, necessarily originating externally to American
polity and culture. As a closed system, in other words, America capitalism—and
American exceptionalism—remains sound. The author was far from alone in his visions
of an essentially good but perhaps easily swayed native-born working class coming
under the destructive influence of foreign—and particularly French—radicals. The
spectacle of the Paris Commune had dominated national conversation only seven years
previously, when from March 18 to May 25, 1871—following a winter siege by the
Prussian army, a humiliating unconditional surrender by France, and the election of a
republican government imbued with monarchist sympathies—socialist and anarchist
radicals and workers took control of the city and established a municipal council,
President Theirs having fled to Versailles. According to historian Philip M. Katz, just as
expanding railroad and telegraph technology had seemingly eliminated space within the
United States, it had also reduced the space between the U.S. and the rest of the world,
meaning that “Americans had access to an unprecedented flow of news about the
Franco-Prussian] war and the Commune,” which was reported in periodicals with “a
total yearly circulation of more than 1.5 billion” (61, 62). On a typical day, the New York
Times might run “six headlines under the general rubric ‘The Civil War in France,’” while
representations of the Commune would run the gamut of popular media, including short
stories, novels, poetry, public lectures, plays, and cycloramas (67, 69). Because
telegraphic reporting necessarily sacrificed analysis, news items tended to be
fragmentary and even contradictory, obscuring (or aggressively dismissing) ideological
nuances and generally framing the situation as a struggle between order, represented
by the republican government, and disorder, embodied by the Commune. While by no
means monolithic in character, coverage and editorial commentary skewed heavily
toward condemnation of the Communards, speaking of them in terms we have already
seen deployed toward tramps in America. While lionizing the peasantry of the
countryside, in whom “the hopes of France of the future must rest,” an editorial from the
June 1 edition of the Nation lambasts the Parisian proletariat as “crazy and unclean
charlatans, loafers, and apes”—25,000 of whom had just been killed in the final days of
the civil war ("The Assembly" 379). Commentators often yoke the degenerate and savage nature of the Communards to their primitive politics and supposed refusal to work; for example, a dispatch on "The 'Red' Rising in Paris" explains that their "envy and dislike of the bourgeoisie … become rapidly developed into a brutal communism, resting in the main on dislike of labor and a fondness for sensual indulgence" (193). The Burlington Free Press goes further, insisting that "[t]hey are simply idle vagabonds who foresee working for their living as soon as France settles down, and to avert that catastrophe are murdering the men who tried to protect France during the war, and plundering the Paris shops" (qtd. in Dusenbury 12).

This terminological coincidence in discussions of the domestic tramp and the foreign radical finds an analogue in commentary on the other side of the Atlantic. In her book on Rimbaud and the Commune, Kristin Ross details the anxiety incited by the sharp increase in vagabondage in France during the nineteenth century. Much of this anxiety stems from vagabonds' "ambiguous status," as "their ‘way of life’ places them in a state that supposes the eventual violation of laws: vagabonds are always virtual, anticipatory" (57). This anticipatory dread only becomes more acute following the insurgency of 1871, with the transient now embodying a political—not only social and economic—threat. As illustration of this point of view, Ross quotes Théodore Homberg, who writes in 1880, "Vagabonds are the most dangerous enemies of society … they live among us as savage animals would"; echoing Harris’s claims about the tramp’s role during the railroad strikes, he concludes, "for the vagabond, having nothing to lose in moments of social upheaval, desires such moments and helps out in the hopes of gaining something" (58). The insistence that radicalized tramps in the U.S. must be, or
be under the direct influence of, Parisian socialists and anarchists demonstrates the “predictive” aspect of the process Katz describes as the Americanization of the Commune, by which “‘what happened in France’ became a convenient reflection of what some people feared *might* happen in America (instead of what actually occurred in Paris)” (123).

This displaced anxiety reached its apogee during the summer of 1877, when an unprecedented wave of spontaneous and only loosely affiliated strikes washed over the railroad industry. Speculative private and public investment (the latter in the form of land grants and subsides from the federal government) in railway construction during the years immediately following the Civil War facilitated overexpansion, with track going down well in advance of demand. Such practices precipitated the collapse of Jay Cooke and Company, which in turn contributed to the financial panic of 1873 and ensuring depression of several years (Beatty 233). Dozens of railroad companies went bankrupt and those that remained began cutting laborers’ wages while demanding high productivity and longer hours in dangerous working conditions. Finally, in July of 1877, when the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad imposed a 10 percent pay reduction on its employees—while still paying out dividends to its investors—workers refused to allow freight and passenger trains to move through the yards in Martinsburg, West Virginia. From there, the strike spread to a dozen cities (and other industries) and eventually involved 100,000 workers. Elected officials, at the behest of railroad magnates, deployed local militias, but the troops proved unwilling to fire on strikers who came from the same communities. In many cases, President Hayes sent federal troops to quell the uprisings, while the Philadelphia militia arrived in Pittsburgh to confront strikers and their
sympathizers at the Pennsylvania Railroad. Met with resistance, the troops fired on the crowd, killing ten workers, although Harris’s novel reverses the direction of the violence. In response, the crowd surrounded the troops, forcing their retreat into a roundhouse, and set fire to railroad cars, with the flames then spreading to the roundhouse, the Union Depot, a grain elevator, and several dozen other buildings; in the end, twenty workers and four soldiers were killed (Zinn 242-243).

Certainly, an invasion by foreign agents of chaos leading a vast subterranean organization of tramps—despite the fact that “tramps were noticeably absent from virtually all the sites of conflict during July 1877”—would be easier to accept than the prospect of native-born workers benefiting from the free labor system yet somehow remaining unsatisfied (DePastino, Citizen 24). Just as observers insisted that habits acquired during the War combined with individual character flaws, and not the prevailing economic conditions, produced the tramp phenomenon, those commenting on the increasing labor unrest that culminated in the strikes of 1877 blamed refugees from the Commune and other foreign-born agitators rather than the collapse of 1873 and its aftermath. Too much criticism of legitimate working people could suggest that flaws existed in the established economic relations through which they were employed, while testimony like that of the sheriff of Allegheny delivered to a Congressional investigative committee stressed that the strikers were not company employees, but “the bad elements of society from all parts of the city, and from some parts of the county, in connection with thieves and blackguards from other parts of the country,” thus confirming the danger posed by fraternities of those lying outside societies established boundaries (Report 176-177). Not coincidentally, an organized antitramp movement
coalesced formally in July 1877 at a meeting at Bryn Mawr, where speakers expressed their “anger not only against the tramps but also against those they saw as enabling the tramps to continue their parasitical way of life: generous liberals” (Bellesiles 123).

Even if the reader questions Harris’s claims about the national origins and political positions of the transient population of the late-nineteenth-century United States in general—which one finds oneself compelled to do when taking into account the available empirical data that suggests that French men and women immigrated at a yearly rate of about 6,000 during the 1870s, versus tens of thousands from Ireland and over one-hundred thousand from Germany, and “at best a few hundred émigrés could really be called Communards”—and the causes and facts of the violence in Pittsburgh in particular, one may still see the tramp in his Savage form as an essentially destabilizing and even seditious force (Katz 162). Even were the tramp never to attend a meeting of socialists or anarchists, let alone participate in labor riots, he poses a threat to society and the nation by virtue of his implicit violation of the social contract. If a person’s status as a worker forms the basis of that person’s status as a citizen, and citizenship entails the recognition that the state derives its power to govern through the collective consent of the people, the rejection of work may be read as a political act, as a rejection of the legitimacy of the state. In this sense, all tramps are indeed anarchists. Rather than consenting to governance by the state, the tramp opts out. More than that, the tramp’s behavior—his voluntary and even hostile withdrawal from the labor force and thus citizenship, in effect choosing to reduce himself symbolically to the actual political status of women and the indigenous population—functions as an implicit critique of a principle that justifies the validity of social contract theory. In other words,
his actions elicit the question, at what point did the people consent to grant the state its authority? In serving as an embodiment of this question, the tramp challenges the quasi-anthropological narrative that at some point the people collectively decided in “foresight of their own preservation” that the protection provided by a commonwealth was preferable to the state of nature in which life was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes 106, 76). Passed from Hobbes to Rousseau to Locke and apparently reaching full maturity and culminating in the ideas of Jefferson, Madison, et al, as codified in The Declaration and Constitution, this narrative serves as a critical philosophical underpinning to American political principles.

Published in 1878, like The Man Who Tramps, Frank Bellew’s thirty-two page illustrated pamphlet The Tramp: His Tricks, Tallies, and Tell-Tales, with all His Signs, Countersigns, Grips, Pass-words and Villainies Exposed (ostensibly written by an “ex-tramp” and merely edited by Bellew) extends the audacious hyperbole on display in Harris’s novel even further, even if it eventually reveals itself to have a more complex (or, at least, more confused) ideological agenda behind it. Divided into five chapters and narrated in the first person, it tells the story of Martin, a journeyman printer and former school teacher. At the outset of his tale, he explains that a series of economic downturns resulted in loss of employment, which initiated a cycle of loafing, drinking, and looking for work. Only occasionally could he secure a job, which he inevitably lost again, until he gave up the search entirely, leaving only “more and more loafing, until finally [he had] become a Tramp” (5). He begins the narration proper with his decision to venture into the countryside in a renewed search for employment. On the road, however, he must compete with the hordes of other tramps he encounters, and
manages only to find casual labor. After becoming despondent, Martin meets Loo West, a farmer’s daughter who helps him clean himself up (after which he notes, “I felt more like a white man than I had done for months”), and who petitions her father for a job on Martin’s behalf (9). Unfortunately, although Martin proves a competent and industrious worker, the farmer exiles him after catching him wooing Loo, and so he returns to the road, this time falling in with a highly organized criminal gang of tramps. After learning their secrets and participating in their crimes for a period, he breaks from the gang and returns to the farm and, wearing stolen clothing in order to overcome the world’s prejudices, presents himself again to Loo’s father, this time convincing the old man of his worth. The subsequent courtship and marriage take place over the course of a few sentences, just before the story’s conclusion, which finds Martin “once more a respectable member of society,” having reentered the fold of domesticity and legitimate labor (32).

Chapter IV, the longest in the pamphlet, largely dispenses with the narrative mode thus far sustained, so that Martin as a character participating in the action gradually recedes to such an extent that he comes to serve primarily as a conduit through which to offer an abundance of alarmist details about the organization and agenda of tramps in America. Like Harris, Bellew constructs a fantastical portrait of a nationwide, strictly hierarchical structure to which the transient homeless population belongs. After a brief scene in which Martin encounters Chivvy (the fellow’s “nom de Tramp”), an amiable Cockney he knew from his days living on the streets of New York City, the two encounter and undergo initiation into The Red Ragged Rovers, one gang that comprises only a single faction of what Martin subsequently discovers is a
tremendous subterranean quasi-Masonic organization of regional tramp gangs totaling altogether “half a million” members (13, 23). Bellew takes the reader deep into this unknown underworld of the tramp, describing scenarios that in many respects closely resemble those detailed by Harris, with one significant difference: aside from Chivvy the friendly Cockney, all of Bellew’s tramps appear to be native born; French radicals receive no mention. Still, these tramps have a distinctly unfamiliar quality with their exotic, broadly pagan rituals of initiation and punishment for transgression. The verbal descriptions and illustrations paint a portrait of a distinctly un-Christian world, filled with bizarre images and rites. In joining the group, Chivvy (and subsequently Martin, off the page) must submit to ceremony that involves the triple recitation of an oath, each time uttered while elaborately costumed “Executioners”—“their faces … striped with black, red and white paint”—surround him poised alternately with clubs, knives, and nooses, to make it plain what fate awaits any who should betray the vow:

I solemnly swear, by my bones, my blood and vitals, in the presence of these brothers now around me assembled, that I will never betray the brotherhood; that I will never tell anything that may occur in this or any other camp of the brotherhood; that I will never betray a brother; that I will never lie to a brother; that I will never rob a brother, but that I will always aid, council and cheer a brother; that I will share with him when he is in need; I will comfort him when he is sick; I will aid him when he is in trouble, and will fight for him when he is in danger. If I fail in this my solemn oath, I hope the blood may dry in my veins, and my bones rot in my flesh; that I may tramp bare-footed through New Jersey till I am a hundred years old; that every man’s promise made to me may be broken; that everything I love may learn to hate me; that my food and drink may turn to muck in my mouth; that all children may curse me, and that I may die alone.

I also swear that if any brother turns traitor, I will aid, to the utmost of my ability, in bringing him to punishment, and carry out, without shirking, all orders of the duly elected officers of the brotherhood, to that end, whether by fire or water, club, knife or halter. (16)
In taking this oath, the speaker necessarily supplants the tenets of the nuclear family and capitalist enterprise: in joining the brotherhood, a tramp devotes himself to the organization before all else, making a commitment that sounds not unlike a wedding vow (“I will comfort him when he is sick”), while also binding himself to a proto-communist mode of living (“I will always aid, council and cheer a brother”).

Unlike Harris’s novel, *The Tramp* makes no specific reference to the 1877 railroad strikes and riots, but it does invoke the image of general labor unrest, explaining (like *The Man Who Tramps*) how tramps have planned to instigate and capitalize on the chaos created by such conflict, anticipating the moment “when there would be a glorious scramble for the prizes” (23). Much like Black Flynn and his cohorts the Rovers and their fellow tramp gangs do not support a socialist program, which at least venerates labor. By contrast, “the Tramp’s object is, when any trouble takes place, to aid the revolutionary party, strikers or what not, and reap a large harvest of plunder” with the expense of as little effort as possible (20). Although perhaps neither as nihilistic nor as inclined to betrayal as Harris’s vagrants, these tramps still operate according to principles of deceit and opportunism. While waiting for the great upheaval, this group supports itself via theft and beggary, moving about its assigned region with calculated efficiency to extract whatever resources might be available. Ominously, the leaders of this factor have maps of the area marking the location of “every house for miles around,” with annotations generated from the extensive reconnaissance conducted by members of the brotherhood. Each house is identified by a system of numbers and letters, which denote the individual characteristics of the inhabitants of each residence. This code in turn informs elaborate instructions for successful begging: “Ugly bull-dog.
Family pious. Ask for reading matter; say your father was a minister. Don’t ask, and you might get something” (19). To facilitate the mendicant endeavors, the tramps don disguises, perhaps simulating “a man recovering from the small pox or yellow fever” or a disabled veteran to prey on the sympathies of strangers; they “could counterfeit the most venomous-looking boil” and “imitate scars and wounds of sham soldiers” (20).

Bellew provides the reader with a verbal description and pictorial illustration of the various subcategories of tramps, each representing a different ruse intended to fool a gullible public into freely dispensing charity:

- The meek Tramp, with children,
- The bully Tramp,
- The ragged Tramp,
- The respectable Tramp,
- The Tramp who asks for work,
- The unwholesome Tramp,
- The lubberly Tramp,
- The abject Tramp,
- The jolly Tramp,
- Mrs. Tramp,
- And many others (20).

When begging fails, the tramps readily resort to theft, having fashioned extendable hooks and other “various implements useful in picking and stealing” (20).

Neither Bellew nor Harris offer explicit illustrations of tramps taking illegal rides on trains (although characters do buy tickets for passenger cars in The Man Who Tramps), almost as if they simply cannot bear to grant these non-workers access to the consummate technology of industry, yet they both create timelines that imply such rides must have been taken. In The Tramp, at first without mentioning trains explicitly, the “Perfessor” assures Martin that the entirety of the brotherhood’s membership can be summoned and “concentrated at various points [throughout the country] in less than a week,” which in 1878 would have been a superhuman feat, except via rail. He then
reveals explicitly the tactical value of this transportation technology, explaining that once workers call a general strike, “the first step” for the tramps “will be to seize the railroads,” as mobility will prove the decisive factor in the success of their campaign to spread disorder (23). The Perfessor sounds something like an American Fagin, commanding a band of Artful Dodgers with a far more extensive reach facilitated by railroad technology.

Ultimately, despite The Tramp's rather preposterous insistence that a nationwide conspiracy of 500,000 seditious tramps to topple the United States government actually exists, Bellew appears to have a generally liberal agenda. The text allows ample space for the “Perfessor,” whose monologues provide most of the text’s insight into the tramps’ social views, to expound at length about the conditions of economic injustice produced by laissez faire economic policies and the consequences the nation faces in letting those conditions fester unmitigated. Fantasizing about the imminent moment of great upheaval, he cynically remarks that the underclass should “let those twaddlers who prate about things regulating themselves, and about the holy capitalists, as though they were another race of being—let them see whether it would not have been better to regulate things a little, rather than to left them to regulate themselves with lamp-posts and lead pills” (23). The Perfessor here makes a point that the narrator later echoes, both of them in turn providing voice for the implied author’s position on the government’s role in the nation’s economic activity and the value of welfare. Like Harris, Bellew appears to think that tramps, in aggregate, could function as a revolutionary force. Unlike Harris, however, his analysis retreats from broad generalizations and rigorous prosecution. Instead, he proposes amelioration, anticipating in some ways the
programs and (arguably) the impact of the New Deal, as the result of failing to provide support for those who have most severely endured the impact of the cycles of panics and depressions could well be bloody unrest on a mass scale.

While the Perfessor eagerly anticipates a dismal future wrought by an unregulated economy in the absence of a social safety net, Martin offers an earnest plea to the reader in the narrative’s final chapter, decrying humanity’s tendency to heap abuse on the most vulnerable members of society, those who lack power. Of course, the conventions of the narrative require that the narrator undergo a redemption, so that he sees the error of his former tramping ways and embraces a life recognizable to the reader, and so he does indeed marry Miss Loo and take over the management of her ailing father’s farm, settling into the happily ever after of a clear, stable, honorable domestic scenario. Even this reassuring conventional ending—a strikingly compressed conclusion, in that only a sentence or two from the end of the text does the narrator confirm that he has in fact become “once more a respectable member of society”—is preceded by a knotty analysis of the problems facing the country. To accomplish this goal, however, he is forced. In the end, Bellew’s condemnation of the tramp remains tempered and complicated in a way Harris’s does not, betraying a tension between an endorsement of the ideology of individualism and the work ethic and an acknowledgment that social conditions just might at times circumscribe an individual’s options. According to this position, the tramp poses a threat to social and economic stability and has the potential descend into anarchic savagery if neglected, but to some degree society bears a responsibility for his existence in the first place. Bellew allows the narrator to voice overt class-based resentment in his description of the violent
fantasies he entertained during his time as a tramp, when he would take pleasure in imaging New York City burning, “the rich rushing from their homes poor and helpless as myself” (31). Even the narrator, who now seeks to expose the tramp’s evils for the good of society—and apparently placing himself at great risk in doing so—and who has earned the reader’s sympathy and trust, once entertained such antisocial thoughts. Ill treatment at the hands of the privileged does as much to produce such thoughts as any socialist pamphlet or anarchist soapbox speaker.

Yet, in the end, capitalism and its supporting work ethic remain intact as unchallenged goods. The problem of the tramp has its roots not in the structure of the current mode of production, but in the lack of stopgap charity. “I had tried honestly and frequently to obtain work, and failed,” Martin maintains. “I had been treated with scorn because I was in need.” He is now guided by his resolution “to make a great effort to earn what I consumed in the future” and his commitment to charity for those “who were floundering about in the mire of beggary and tramping” (31). In other words, the narrator offers his readers a chance to appreciate what he himself has come to know only through direct experience: if society does not enact modest reforms to address the problem of the tramp, the tramp is poised to stage a revolution that will topple that society.

In terms of both form and rhetoric, narratives of the Savage Tramp—whether overtly fictional or ostensibly factual—that explicitly promise to reveal a mysterious and potentially dangerous underworld find a strikingly clear historical antecedent in a genre that emerged in early modern England in response to similar motivating anxieties: the rogue pamphlet. The parallel between the reaction to and depiction of so-called
masterless men in sixteenth-century England and tramps in nineteenth-century America reflects the analogous material conditions of the two historical moments, in that both were periods of social, economic, and demographic upheaval during which governmental policy generally supported efforts by a bourgeois class to modernize and formalize the economy and to stop the unrestricted use of land-based resources (enclosure in the former case, the closure of the frontier in the latter). In both scenarios, aggregations of vagrants form a threat to the emergent economic orders, in reality and in terms of perception. Typically relying on sensational, exaggerated, or even wholly invented details, the respective literatures exploiting these anxieties emphasize the habits, schemes, and secret language of a complexly organized subterranean class with a subversively criminal agenda. Both the rogue pamphlet and the Savage tramp narrative reflected wider ongoing efforts to define this new class legally and culturally, claiming that the phenomenon of an unfixed and undisciplined population has emerged for the first time and thus poses a threat to the very foundations of civilization if allowed to remain unaddressed—and both at least implicitly propose a rigorous and unsentimental campaign of eradication.

A.L. Beier, author of *Masterless Men: The Vagrancy Problem in England, 1560-1640*, locates the attempts during the Tudor and Early Stuart periods to define the vagabond as not only a social but also a legal category within the more general development of a sharp distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor (9). The latter consisted of the able-bodied: those who could work but did not, presumably by their own choice, rather than as a symptom of the dislocations wrought by land dispossession, urbanization, industrialization, irregular employment opportunities, a
rapidly increasing population, and the declining purchasing power of wages. Those designated as able-bodied and thus vagabonds were criminalized by virtue not of action, but by social position or status—not by doing, but by being. Legislation specifically targeted not only the idle but those indigent and homeless persons in transit without express royal sanction, revealing the understanding of unemployment and mobility as interrelated ills. During a period of radical transition, this group found itself a part of neither the existing feudal order nor the emergent bourgeois and working classes, and in occupying such a liminal position it appeared manifestly as a threat to acceptable modes of family and economic life. Perceptions regarding not only the causes of vagabondage but its nature and scope often conflicted with the actual state of affairs; in reality, “the majority of vagabonds had worked, or were still in employment,” while “a minority … were suspected of underworld involvement” of the sort described by the literature of roguery (86, 124). Still, official punitive measures were harsh, mandating corporeal punishment and loss of freedom—typically some combination of whipping, burning through the gristle of the ear, and hard labor—and, eventually, impressments and transportation. In any event, the response underscored the need for the enforcement of wage labor discipline, as the Act of 1576 demonstrates in its provision that “the youth” be remanded to a house of correction where they “may be accustomed and brought up in labour and work, and then not like[ly] to grow to be idle rogues” (qtd. 165).

Appearing in sixteenth-century England and capitalizing on the anxieties that accompanied the appearance of vagabonds, rogue pamphlets—which sold well and generated significant profit for their authors, who often freely plagiarized each other—
gave expression to the general notion that these vagabonds and other underworld figures posed a viable threat to the social order. Typically in this literature, treatment of vagabondage elides into broader discussion of general roguery, such that the two become virtually synonymous: to be a vagabond is to be a rogue, and vice versa. The earliest versions comprise little more than catalogues of stock characters and schemes, while later examples employ more explicitly literary devices, incorporating plot, so that the authors emerged as narrators who prefigured the authorial voice of the early English-language novel (Kinney 55). First published in 1561, *The Fraternity of Vagabonds* by John Awdeley serves as an example of employing the strategy of catalogue and classification as a defense against rogues, offering only occasional accompanying narrative, instead providing primarily a simple descriptive listing of various unscrupulous types united in their determination to avoid all forms of legitimate labor by way of mendicancy cons or outright robbery. In a brief opening poem, the author declares his objective “To shew that there be such indeed” a “brotherhood of Vagabonds,” insisting that the descriptions that follow derive from an interrogation of one such vagabond, “Who promised … He would as strange a thing declare, / As ever [his interrogators] knew since they were men” in exchange for amnesty and anonymity (91). These few lines demonstrate a rhetorical strategy common to much of the genre: the author insists he possesses access to secret, shocking knowledge obtained from primary sources (either interviews or firsthand experience), and that he is sharing this knowledge as a service to the public, so that it may protect itself. The first section consists of a delineation of the various types of vagabonds, along with brief descriptions: An Abraham Man, for example, “feigneth himself mad” in order to generate
alms, while a Whipjack’s “chiefest trade is to rob Booths in a Fair,” although he will also
deign to beg using a counterfeit license (91, 92). The second section repeats the
process, this time for “Cozeners and Shifters,” whose relatively complex confidence
games require greater elaboration, so that a lengthy, almost narrative, paragraph
follows the name of each type. In each case, Awdeley highlights the deception involved,
whether it be the vagabond who affects illness to engender sympathy or the cozener
who appears as “some handsome young man cleanly apparelled” so that he may
 ingratiates himself to other gentlemen, thus revealing the anxiety produced by illegibility
(94). In each case, the reader finds another disruption of traditionally prescribed social
status or class, in aggregate confirming a generalized categorical slippage: Is this
beggar able-bodied or not? Does this gentleman belong to his apparent social status?
In failing to answer these questions accurately, one risks offering assistance to the
undeserving and thus undermining the foundations of social and moral order.

In A Caveat for Common Cursitors Commonly Called Vagabonds (1566),
Thomas Harman builds on the model found in Awdeley’s pamphlet, greatly widening the
scope and deepening the sophistication, making use of a rather remarkable proto-
sociological approach, inserting himself into the text as an individuated authority in his
assertions that he bases his writings on personally conducted interviews and assembled
case studies, while also deliberately employing literary devices, most obviously
alliteration (note the title) and repetition, as well as figurative language. Consequently,
his lone published work had a wide impact on later authors, introducing (with Awdeley)
the word “rogue” into print and inspiring decades of imitative pamphlets as well as direct
plagiarism—even Shakespeare incorporated some of its stock characters into King
Lear—while the concerns he raised influenced public attitudes toward poverty generally and legislative action specifically (Woodbridge 42-43). Like Awdeley, but with significantly higher ambitions, Harman makes it clear from the outset that he pursues a didactic goal of revealing and exposing “the abominable, wicked, and detestable behavior of all these rowsey, ragged rabblement of rakehells,” in turn producing a total social transformation (the benefits of which he enumerates in a lengthy paragraph, all amounting to the establishment of absolute security for property owners), as the book will motivate the passage of appropriate “wholesome laws,” so that through “the due execution thereof, all [rogues] be dispersed, vanished, and the memory of them clean extinguished” (109, 112). Yet, even in advance of such legislation the number of vagabonds will necessarily dwindle, as exposure in and of itself accomplishes the elimination of rogues—a fact that rogues themselves recognize—because a public knowledgeable of their various modes of deception will stifle one of the primary means by which they reproduce themselves: charity, ill gotten “under the pretense of great misery, diseases, and other innumerable calamities which they feign,” when in fact the typical vagabond “doth choose him this idle life” (109, 115). Harris, of course, would reproduce this formula largely unaltered more than three centuries later.

In order to establish his authority on the subject and offer backhanded praise for Awdeley’s “small brief,”—later dismissing two of its categories as based in fiction rather than genuine research, a gesture which further lends credibility to his own account—Harman carefully recounts his methodology, which anticipates the interview-based approach of modern sociologists. His ability to explicate the hierarchical structure of this subculture, describe its various schemes, and provide an exhaustive glossary of its
secret canting language rests on his “examination of a number” of rogues, whose trust he nurtured “with fair flattering words, money, and good cheer” and “by whom [he has] gathered and understand their deep dissimulation and detestable dealing, being”—while, of course, he has violated that trust by publishing the book (111, 110). For much of the remainder of the text, Harman shifts between specific personal testimony and general descriptions, resurfacing as a self-conscious voice periodically, incorporating his intelligence gathering into the narrative itself, even inserted himself at times into the action as a vigilante character who outwits and facilitates the punishment of the occasional “Whipjack” or “Dummerer.” Harman’s primary concern, however, is (as it was for Awdeley) to provide a detailed typology of the various iterations of the vagabond, with each description doubling as a narrative anecdote. Some of these figures will resurface with few changes in Bellew’s taxonomy; the “Angler,” for instance, steals linens hanging out to dry by means of “a staff of five or six feet long” and affixed with “an iron hook” (120). As do some of Bellew’s tramps, many of Harman’s beggars will tell a story of personal tragedy, such as shipwreck, fire or abandonment, to gain the sympathy and charity of the audience, while others present themselves as afflicted in some way, like the “Counterfeit Crank,” who feigns epilepsy, going so far as to use soap to simulate foaming at the mouth.

With the eradication of the rogue (necessarily achieved if Harman’s readership takes his book seriously and follow his prescriptions), the moral dilemma accompanying charity will disappear as well; no longer will the giver of alms be haunted by possible implication in the perpetuation of roguery through the distribution of aid to the undeserving, and “then greater relief may be shewed to the poverty of each parish”
The book concludes with a long list of names of supposedly actual upright men, rogues, and “palliards”; a glossary of canting language; and a sample canting dialogue. In short, the total of its content provides everything the reader needs to know to understand the vagabond—the interpretation has already been performed. Although scholars once regularly treated Harman’s text as a reliable source of historical information—going so far to conceive of him as “an early but most successful sociologist”—more often they now regard it as at least “exaggerated,” if not a “crucial” and ideological “intervention in society” (Kinney 105, Beier 123, Woodbridge 41).

The idea of the text as an ideological intervention serves the current discussion. With A Caveat—whatever its empirical merits—the proto-novelistic form provides for the authoritative assertion of a proto-sociological typology and evaluation, the genre and the mode of knowing combining to operate in service of a nascent bourgeois subject position. In this way, the rogue literature such as that produced by Harman performs a disciplinary function, providing a critical template for the tramp narratives produced by Harris, Bellew, and others in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Harman’s text enacts what Foucault identifies as the “simple instruments” that underlie the “success of disciplinary power” that facilitates social and economic order: “hierarchical observation, normalizing judgment and … the examination” (170). The rogue’s tricks only work as long as they remained unobservable, if the vagabond is able to remain invisible as a vagabond; in Foucault’s formulation, “Visibility is a trap” (200). To the similar ends as Awdeley and Harman, Harris and Bellew make use of the combined self-conscious strategies of exposure and classification which the producers of rogue literature before them had developed and refined, rendering the tramp visible and thus subject to
discipline in the same way as his antecedent, the vagabond. Early tramp texts, in other words, play a crucial role in the extension of the project of “disciplinary partitioning” that the rogue pamphlets initiated (199).

The ideological assumptions that spurred that first disciplinary partition between the deserving and undeserving poor in early modern England, which informed and was perpetuated by the literature of roguery, circulated in America well before Harris made use of them. Delivered in Boston in 1752, Charles Chauncey’s sermon “The Idle Poor Secluded from the Bread of Charity by the Christian Law” advocates for this distinction, taking as its text a verse from the third chapter of Paul’s Second Epistle to the Thessalonians, which implores “This we commanded you, that is any would not work, neither should he eat” (5). (Verses six through fifteen serve as a general admonishment to shun those who would be idle and disruptive.) Chauncey cautions that the while the Christian doctrine of love may seem to suggest that believers should practice charity, the Disciples soon found that, in giving alms without judgment to the “poor and needy,” it came to pass “that among those who took upon them the Name of Christians, there were some who indulged in Idleness, either not working at all, or not with a becoming Diligence,” as the promise of charity “betray[ed]” the recipients “into an indolent inactive way of life” (5). (This dictate, Chauncey assures his audience, only applies to the idle poor, not the idle rich.) Attitudes that inform the partitioning of the Gilded Age tramp, then, fit into a disciplinary project extending to the pre-Revolutionary era. The elaboration of partitions may also be seen as part of the broader nineteenth-century enterprise of creating a hierarchy of physiological types through the application of
phrenology and other pseudo-sciences, as in the widespread embrace of Herbert Spencer’s misappropriation and misapplication of Darwin’s theories.

Reformers critical of laissez-faire capitalism similarly labored to sort out the truly deserving unemployed and destitute from the inherently flawed tramp. Edmund Kelly, an international lawyer and intellectual who sought to link his burgeoning socialism to his lifelong investment in evolutionary theory in writings published during the 1890s and 1900s, argued that an incapable class (i.e., tramps) comprised “a hereditary social type who posed a degenerative threat to the species” (Pittenger 93). This view informed his proposal for *The Elimination of the Tramp*, published in 1907 as part of G.P. Putnam’s Sons’ “Questions of the Day” series, which calls for a system of forced labor and free labor colonies—such that the State will become the sole source of material support for the destitute, eliminating piecemeal charity that only perpetuates the problem—the former for those “in need of discipline” and the latter for “blameless victim[s] of industrial conditions,” modeled on those found in Switzerland (xv). Thus, “the first task before us is that of classification,” a task not easily accomplished, because all vagrants look alike despite variances in character and motive, yet necessary (9). Society cannot effectively address the problem so long as all transients are “indiscriminately confounded … under the one word tramp,” as members of different subcategories respond to different disciplinary techniques, thus it is crucial that magistrates have some basis for distinguishing between those who “diligently seek employment, innocently stealing a ride on a freight car” from those tramps “deliberately praying on the community, infesting our roads, damaging our property, assaulting our women, corrupting our youth, and breeding disease, moral and physical, through every city and hamlet in the land”
(5). A representative of the former category “may be only a victim—and a victim out of whom there is practically always some and generally much useful work to be got,” while “the tramp habit” imbued in those belonging to the latter category “must be exercised before they can be safely returned to the competitive mill” (14, 56). The logic informing any categorical structure, then, must derive from the subject’s relative productive value—his or her willingness to engage in industrial work, as any “normal,” “perfectly healthy” person would (89). While attributing unemployment to industrial causes, Kelly describes how the railroad, along with indiscriminate charity, facilitates the reproduction of tramps, especially pernicious in the case of young boys, who are “seduced into” tramping by the ease “with which they can get free rides on trains and food and lodging”: once person has traveled to a new town overnight at no cost, then obtained a free meal (whether by begging or stealing) the next morning, “he has developed the embryo of the tramp” (51, 52).

Kelly devotes an appendix to his book to classification, beginning with a quote supplied to him by Dr. Ben Reitman (which he reproduces in full “not only because it comes from a man who is himself a tramp but because of a certain picturesqueness which characterizes it as the work of a tramp”): “The words ‘tramp,’ ‘hobo,’ ‘bum,’ ‘vagrant,’ etc., are terms which are generally used synonymously, but there are unquestionably three distinct types of itinerant vagrant tramping about the country. These I shall call ‘tramp,’ ‘hobo,’ ‘bum.’ They are three species of the genus vagrant” (103). Reitman goes on to delineate among the species, explaining that the hobo “works and wanders,” the tramp “dreams and wanders,” and the bum “drinks and wanders” (104). This pithy observation is consistent with Reitman’s cultivated public persona as a
raconteur, former hobo, anarchist, lover and tour manager to Emma Goldman, and physician to prostitutes and the homeless. His seemingly flippant codification in fact speaks to the battle over the ontological status of the transient rail rider in the discourses of American popular culture, politics, and law. Entering into that battle, Kelly offers several additional foundations for and examples of classification systems more elaborate than Reitman’s almost whimsical delineations, beginning with that of The Departmental Report on Vagrancy, which has four categories: (1) legitimate worker, in search of employment; (2) unemployed, willing to engage only in casual labor; (3) able-bodied, completely unwilling to work; (4) non-able-bodied or unemployable (105). Kelly, however, finds even this scheme insufficient, so he supplies one of his own, which classifies the subject according to three different characteristics: physical strength, blamelessness, and cause of unemployment.

Human geographer Tim Cresswell, in The Tramp in America, makes the observation that the formalization of sociology as an academic discipline occurred during roughly the same period as the formalization of the tramp as an indefinable social category; just as the category of tramp functioned to bring that figure into being, the tramp as a subject of observation “was central to the delineation of … new forms of knowledge” (11). Josiah Flynt’s Tramping with Tramps (1899) and other writings, although originally published in popular venues, found an audience in academic circles in the 1890s and 1900s (Kelly cites him as an expert), although he was hardly a disinterested observer; he makes it clear that the study of his object is the “human parasite” who “had given up all intentions of working” (ix, 302). Like Harman, Flynt establishes his authority by emphasizing his (no doubt real and extensive) firsthand
immersion into tramp life, which allows to him provide extensive descriptions of tramps’
particular habits and customs, as well as a lengthy glossary of the “dialects of their own
choosing and making” that allows them to indentify outsiders and maintain their secrecy,
even if studies like Flynt’s ensure that “the secrets of Hoboland are becoming common
property, and the hobo is being deprived of a picturesque isolation which formerly few
disturbed” (381, 391). For both Harman and Flynt, this deprivation motivates the project
of cataloging and classifying. Regardless of the moralizing tone of his conclusions,
Flynt’s research “informed the work of the Chicago School” of sociology—particularly his
methodology, an early form of participant-observer ethnography that allowed him to “be
part and parcel of” the tramp life’s “various manifestations” (Cresswell 60, Flynt 3).

Nels Anderson, himself a former hobo who would eventually pursue graduate
studies in sociology as one of the early students of the Chicago School, would apply a
strictly disciplinary methodology to sociological research into the figure and help solidify
the category and its various subcategories. Others had published proto-sociological
studies based on the participant-observer model, such as Flynt’s, but Anderson’s The
Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man, initially published in 1923, was among the
first to carry the explicit authority of academic expertise. For Anderson, the meaning of
the tramp’s mobility fit into the Chicago School’s understanding of mobility, which
designated “a change of routine movement in response to new stimuli and situations”
that has profound “implications for progress or regression, opportunity or threat.” Most
relevant to the understanding (or construction) of the tramp, this view held that “when
the mobility of individuals becomes detached from and unorganized by the whole (city,
society) it becomes dangerous and pathological” (Cresswell 67). The project begun with
the rogue pamphlets and updated with the tramp novelists underwent further refinement, achieving the sheen of objectivity. In producing this study, Anderson makes manifest use of the tool of the examination, so building on the potential of Harman’s work, achieving “the constitution of a comparative system that made possible the measurement of overall phenomena, the description of groups, the characterization of collective facts, the calculation of the gaps between individuals, [and] their distribution in a given ‘population’” (Foucault 190).

With an eye toward establishing a rigorous categorical schema, in a chapter titled “The Hobo and the Tramp,” Anderson begins by replicating the Reitman quote that Kelly had previously used, then proceeds to report the ways in which the tripartite division was subsequently revised, so that the delineations acknowledged not only the subjects’ differing relationships to labor, but also to mobility (rather than alcohol), with the underlying moral attitudes variously buried or made overt. For example, Irwin St. John Tucker—a journalist, editor, socialist agitator, Episcopalian minister, and president of the Hobo College of Chicago, whom Anderson also quotes in the process of establishing his hierarchical categories and definitions—proposes that “A hobo is a migratory worker. A tramp is a migratory non-worker. A bum is a stationary non-worker” (87). Like Kelly, Anderson himself arrives at a more complex system, separating his homeless man into five categories: the seasonal laborer; the transient occasional laborer; the tramp who “dreams and wanders,” working only when it is personally convenient; the bum who seldom wanders or works; and the home guard who lives on skid row and does not leave town (89). Elaborating on the figure most related to the Savage Tramp as it has been constructed over the past five decades, in the embrace of
mobility and the rejection of work, he explains that the tramp is “an able-bodied individual who has the romantic passion to see the country and to gain new experiences without work. He is a specialist at ‘getting by.’” Yet, “he is typically neither a drunkard nor a bum, but an easy-going individual who lives from hand to mouth for the mere joy of living” (94). As an academic, Anderson avoids much of the language of overt moral condemnation found in the pronouncements of previous observers, even as he replicates use of the subject’s relationship to work as a basis of taxonomy, ranking his types in descending order of productivity.

The categorical divisions between the hobo, tramp, and bum have always mattered less to the general public than to either the academic or the transient (as demonstrated by the current popular application of the label “hobo” to any homeless person, regardless of the designee’s range of mobility, when perhaps the term “bum” from Reitman’s or Tucker’s schemas would be more applicable), yet the ideology behind the original distinctions remains—the ideology that ties adherence to the work ethic to citizenship. The moral differentiation built into a taxonomy predicated on the division of people according to their relationship to labor and mobility, illustrated in the texts of Harris and Bellew, still pervades. And so, even if it is not invoked explicitly, the category of the Savage Tramp retains its rhetorical utility, as do those of the Americana Hobo and the Critical Tramp, which I will develop in the two following chapters. These categories do frequently collapse in the realm of representation, much as they are unsustainable and artificial in many respects in actually lived experience, but the act of establishing a social category—even if it does not correspond to significant group
practice in the real world—constructs the frame through which any individual with even
only some various characteristics will be seen.

Cultural representation of the Savage Tramp largely recedes as hostility toward
the transient declines, so that “[b]y 1915 sympathetic statements about the homeless
were the norm, not the exception” (Kusmer 62-63). Still, even if the railroad tramp has
largely disappeared from public view (while the non-traveling homeless population
remains generally visible in metropolitan areas) and exists mostly as a nostalgic object
in the cultural imaginary in the twenty-first century, he remains easily evoked and
utilized. To put it another way, we see now in contemporary political rhetoric a
replication of the various ideological positions that have always been embedded in the
discourses surrounding tramps. Unrestricted mobility continues to provide the basis of
the threat, as it necessarily entails a lack of the self-regulation enforced by the
interdependent disciplinary mechanisms of work and domesticity necessary to social
order and economic growth. So, while perhaps atrophied from infrequent explicit usage,
the typological category of the Savage Tramp did not fade into total obsolesce. In fact,
the late twentieth century witnessed a resurgence of the anxiety associated with this
type—despite its general repression in cultural texts by the time of the Great
Depression, increasingly replaced by the Americana Hobo—which accompanied a
wider resurgence of interest in train-hopping transients and their lifestyles in the popular
media, prompted by the growing trend of weekend thrill riding among employed
members of the middle class, as well as the unsanctioned use of railroad technology by
members of the overlapping environmentalist, anarchist, and punk communities. In the
mid-1990s, articles started appearing in appearing in newspapers and magazines like
the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the *Austin American-Statesman*, and even the *London Sunday Times* and the inaugural issue of Maxim. They tend to follow a similar pattern, starting *in medias res* with the journalist describing a moment that captures either the excitement, the physical discomfort, or the subterranean nature of train hopping (or, most often, some combination thereof), then backing up to explain that, yes, although the reader probably thought it had disappeared by the end of the 1930s, “train-hopping is still very much alive” (Howe). From there, the writer goes on to describe such a journey, undertaken with the guidance of a veteran hobo who has a quaint moniker, while dutifully reminding the reader that the activity is both dangerous and illegal.

As interest in this subculture grew, television programs began featuring segments that introduced the viewer to this modern day tramp—or, at least, a particular version of it. In 2000, MTV aired *The Travelers*, a documentary about a small group of deliberately apolitical train-hopping punks (“I don’t give a shit about anything but riding freight trains, drinking, and my friends”) who consciously situate themselves within the lineage of “real Americana,” while living on dumpstered food and the handouts they receive while begging on the streets. They spend that spare change on alcohol, of course, and explicitly reject the ideal of domesticity during the interview portions of the film: “I don’t have a house. I have a backpack. I have a sleeping bag. I have freedom.” As for motivation, one explains, “I got a bug that says I got to go,” reproducing the language of individual pathology that commentators have used at least since the 1870s. “No one’s stuck on the streets at all. It’s by choice that we do this,” another rider explains. While previously in the film he has self-identified as a “[bleep]ing hobo,” Nels Anderson or even Ben Reitman would categorize him as a tramp. Indeed, according to
the discourse surrounding the homeless in general and rail riders in particular, he performs a version of the Savage Tramp, validating the suspicions of those viewers who would hold that impoverished transience has always been a matter of individual responsibility rather than social conditions: he has chosen this lifestyle, freely and independently, he does refuse to work, and he expects society to subsidize of this choice.

The violence and chaos implied in portraits of this kind would receive dramatic confirmation when sensational headlines reported on first one, then a few years later another, train-hopping serial murderer who often selected victims at random and subsequently disappeared from crime scenes without a trace, mystifying authorities. The “Boxcar Killer,” Robert “Sidetrack” Silveria, a tramp and purported member of the Freight Train Riders of America (FTRA) who eventually confessed (and later recanted) to murdering twenty-eight people over a period lasting more than a decade, achieved national notoriety as “the first known rail riding serial killer in more than a hundred years of railroad history” after his arrest in 1996 (Palmini 11). *Murder on the Rails*, a true-crime paperback about Silveria co-authored by William Palmini, Jr., a detective who played a significant role in breaking the case, repackages for a contemporary audience the rhetoric and themes developed in texts like Bellew’s and Harris’s over 125 years before: it promises to expose for the reader a mysterious, violent, quasi-occult and surprisingly organized tramp underworld of which the vast majority of the public, as well as most law enforcement agencies, remains completely ignorant. Members of this underworld have their own signs, codes, and language—as certainly as they did in the 1870s—incomprehensible to the average citizen, so this book offers not mere
entertainment, but a crucial didactic guide to interpretation of a subaltern subculture that threatens the comfort and even the life of the average citizen. Palmini develops his authorial presence through a construction of an investigative persona that invokes various tropes from detective fiction and film, rendering him a trustworthy intermediary between the reader and the Savage Tramp: although a representative of law and order, he finds himself standing somewhat aloof from his colleagues, not merely because of his charming eccentricities (such as his sideline as an Elvis impersonator), but also his inclination to buck authority (“anything I wore at the station never seemed to be conservative enough for the chief and the guys on my staff” [31]), his willingness to dispense with Standard Operating Procedure and employ unorthodox methods when necessary (“Following the usual police procedures didn’t shed any light on the case” [32]), his muted hostility toward impersonal corporate interests (“I suppose a dead body here and a dead body there is the price the rail companies pay to exist” [37]), and his considered sympathy for the homeless population in general and the murderous object of his pursuit in particular. These factors combine to give the narrator the unique ability to reveal “the real story” about Silveria and his cohorts, a story “different from the one presented to the world by the cops, the courts and the media” (65).

The threat of the Savage Tramp, as in the late Nineteenth Century, remains crucially linked to his radical mobility, which is in turn facilitated by the industrial technology of the railroad. Palmini claims that railroad companies even adopt a “policy of tacit permission to allow illegal riding on their trains,” suggesting an actual collusion (129). Yet, the issue goes deeper: freight trains bring with them not just individual transients who may have violent tendencies to our communities, but an amorphous
existential threat to everyday life. Following his immersion in a world previously unknown to him through his involvement in the Silveria case, Palmini comes to realize retroactively the awesome, almost supernatural power of the railroad as a technology of systemic circulation, admitting that bulldozing the odd encampment of homeless transients adjacent to rail property “couldn’t bury the evil and the madness moving in all directions along the tracks,” unbounded by those institutions that civilizations has developed to ensure security in exchange for the sacrifice of absolute liberty, because even in the post-9/11 era, “seasoned rail riders … still have the know-how to circumvent the authorities and move around freely” (38, 65). In providing a quasi-mythical origin story for this exemplary Savage Tramp, Palmini begins at the beginning, further establishing the link between the technology and the killer as he recounts the history of Redwood City, California, Silveria’s hometown, explaining that the municipality “got its early push in 1863 when the railroad line pierced through its jurisdiction, prompting an explosion in land values and population. Ninety-six years later, Silveria popped up, making his own headlines in railroad history” (66). According to this narrative, the railroad becomes inextricably linked on a syntactical level with, and even causally related to, the murderer’s genesis, while the diction reserves the violent imagery of violation and disruption for the introduction of the former, adopting an almost whimsical tone for the emergence of latter, going so far as to eschew the language of birth in favor of something like spontaneous generation. Trains do not merely facilitate the movement of serial killers, they actually produce the killers in the first place.

Through the particular form of movement enabled by use of the railroad, Silveria imposes his own spatial subjectivity on those pursuing him, forcing them to
accommodate an experiential perspective inextricably linked to this mode of rapid, wide-ranging, yet invisible circulation. He appears to have nothing one could reasonably consider resources, lacking any income and carrying all his possessions on his back, yet he manages to evade all the disciplinary mechanisms available to the dominant order. By definition, living the majority of his life on trains and in jungles hidden from the public eye (lest he be evicted), his very existence thereby rendered one of perpetual illegal trespass, the railroad tramp occupies a dispersed, transitory, unseen space, so that his moral illegibility—it is unthinkable that a person would reject the unquestionable goods of home and productive work—derives from this habitual uniqueness. Attempting to unravel the details and connect various unsolved murders possibly attributable to the recently apprehended Silveria, investigators confront this ontological condition in the form of a logistically baffling situation. Palmini writes, “[W]hat stuck in my mind was the unique situation Barry and I were in. Here we were, more than 150 miles away from our department, talking to a detective from Salem, Oregon and one from Placer County about the same prisoner” (52). Later, he muses, “The speed with which Silveria traveled from place to place and the distances he covered in short periods of time continues to amaze me” (193). Building the time line for the case required detectives to overcome their preconceptions about the limits of mobility, so that they might understand, for example, how the suspect might have traveled from western Texas to northern California and back in a matter of only three days. Not only did he pose a literally moving target, but Silveria’s use of multiple aliases in order to take advantage of social services in a various locations provided him with a shifting—or mobile—identity, further inhibiting legibility. When the Savage Tramp’s savageness expresses itself as murder,
his incomprehensibility becomes that much more terrifying. In Sliveria’s case, his apparently random spatial patterns find a mirror in the patterns of his crime, so that no one is safe: as Palmini reports it to his readers, Silveria would get high, feel the rage well up within him, then “pick a fight with a victim. It could be anybody” (60). The violence is unpredictable, meaning that one cannot take precautionary measures. And while Silveria often attacked other transients, full integration into the social order did not offer sufficient protection, as riders frequently travel with a clean change of clothing, “enabling them to mingle and mix with public,” undetected, when they get off a train (57).

The Freight Train Riders of America plays a central role in the narrative of Silveria’s killing spree. Formed in the early 1980s in a Montana bar by a group Vietnam veterans who never reintegrated into society, felt neglected by their country and government, and used freight trains to extend the scope of their transience, the organization is generally regarded as something akin to a rail-riding Hells Angels—and it can be seen as the modern manifestation of the vast tramp organizations imagined by Harris and Bellew. According to the group’s mythology, the initials originally stood for “Fuck the Reagan Administration,” derived from an offhand comment that nonetheless was indicative of a “strong anti-government sentiment,” and only later revised as the loose fraternity grew and adopted a more formal hierarchical structure (80). The popular press had a brief flirtation with the group in the mid-1990s, turning tramps like New York Slim and Dogman Tony into minor celebrities, when America’s Most Wanted aired a profile and the Los Angeles Times and other publications ran investigative feature stories, often (if not necessarily accurately) characterizing the members as white
supremacists and neo-Nazis while emphasizing the exotic details, such as their road names, geographically color-coded bandanas, and coded graffiti as evidence of an elaborate underground and threatening symbology. (By July 1998, the myth of the FTRA had become so firmly entrenched that science fiction writer Lucius Shepard both evoked and undercut it in the title of his profile of the group for *Spin* magazine: “Attack of the Freight Train-Riding Crazed Vietnam Vet Psycho Killer Hobo Mafia … or Not.”) Like the tramps of the 1870s and vagabonds of the 1560s, these rail riders have developed their own distinct lexicographical usage: good guys, *Flintstones*, silver mining, FTW, butchered up, STP, *San Francisco circle*, SWP, Uncle Pete, and other words and phrases all have specific meanings largely divorced from the original (Palmini 83, 84). As with Silveria on an individual basis, illegibility becomes the problem when approaching the FTRA, because with a group that can communicate in a manner that remains opaque to the rest of society, there is no way to determine what they might be plotting; the group’s strict code of silence further perpetuates this problem. They even insist on resisting observers’ categorical assessments; Silveria remarks, “Just because I didn’t have a bed or a toilet doesn’t mean I was homeless,” adding, “Only in your world” (280).

Although the rail companies downplay their significance and treat them as they would any other trespasser, various law enforcement officers claim FTRA members number in the thousands, use the railroad to operate massive drug trafficking and food stamp fraud operations that span the country, and have murdered hundreds of people. Indeed, the scope of their criminal activity knows no boundaries; according to a detective who has been studying the gang since the 1980s, “They’re a criminal element
that can do just about anything” (qtd. in Murphy). Yet, aside from Silveria, arrests remain rare, and successful prosecutions almost nonexistent, largely due to the same two factors that made Silveria such a formidable object of pursuit: the group’s occupation of a physical and social space entirely excluded (and exempt) from the organizing structures of mainstream society, and the radical and untraceable mobility afforded by their mode of travel. “These people, they fall through the cracks. They don’t live in houses like we do, they don’t have cars,” explains one exasperated detective who has been unable to make charges stick against a train-hopping suspect in a murder case. In their rejection of work, home, family, and accepted means of transportation, these people have become so thoroughly Other that they remain illegible to the usual interpretive disciplinary techniques: “Our system is not designed for these kinds of people, so they can just ride the rails, they can commit murder and mayhem almost at will.” The detective goes on to emphasize repeatedly the problem created by mobility, as it if were itself ontologically a species of deviance or criminality, explaining that “Building a case with solid evidence is the problem because the crime scene is mobile. The minute I got through with the crime scene and released it to the railroad, they were out of there. The scene was mobile. The victim was mobile. The suspect was mobile” (Murphy).

As did Harris and Bellew, Palmini describes the rituals and customs, and general culture of the FTRA, which commence with the adoption of a train-hopping identity, a name bestowed on the new initiate by other members of the organization and representing one’s position outside of the society that provided his birth name. (Silveria’s moniker “Sidetrack” actually impedes the solution of the case in a very real
way when for a period investigators remain under the mistaken impression that they are in pursuit of two different men and so fail to share pertinent information amongst themselves.) Members wear bandanas around their necks, using different colors to signify various regional affinities. During the induction process, longstanding members throw the appropriate bandana onto the ground, urinate on it, and then grind it into the dirt, after which the initiate must wear for a week, effectively symbolizing his commitment to the group and, as does his tramp name, his estrangement from society. According to Palmini, all of these customs reflect a commitment to communal brotherhood and mutual aid, recalling the collectivist ethos described by both Bellew and Harris, even if Harris revealed that the position was ultimately mere posturing (80).

Most strikingly, Silveria is alleged to have ascended through the ranks of the organization, ultimately “recruited by the executioners in an enforcement group,” who wear steel-toed and carry axe handles as weapons (82). Of course, “executioners” is precisely the name given to the shadowy figures in Bellew’s text who administer the initiation oath and render the punishment for those who violate it.

Like Bellew, Palmini finally adopts a relatively liberal position with regard to the tramps he describes, rather than replicating Harris’s calls for harsh punitive measures against those individuals who fall through society’s cracks. While he did not have direct experience as tramp, unlike Bellew’s narrator, his involvement in the Silveria case brought him into sufficient contact with the tramp world to alter his perspective. He now rejects the view that “their lifestyle is their choice,” even if he once “might have agreed with the comment” (288). He even expresses his sympathy for Silveria, whom he believes to be mentally ill, and attempts to understand the killer’s beliefs and motives.
More than once he notes that Silveria himself, recognizing his inability to control his desire to kill, attempted to get help by entering a mental health clinic, only to be rebuffed; in response, “his rage grew fiercer and he wanted to kill even more” (197). Tramps are made, not born, he argues: “with every war and economic downturn there is a burgeoning of rail riders” (304). But this willingness to deemphasize personal responsibility while pointing to the influence of socioeconomic factors does not, in the end, temper the threat posed by the Savage Tramp. Even if the individual tramp is not at fault, whatever the causes of his actions, he remains at large, unseen and uncontainable.

Indeed, the threat of the Savage Tramp remained after Silveria’s arrest, inspiring new levels of anxiety among the general populace: emerging in the national media and consciousness as a personified object of fear a mere three years later, Angel Maturino Resendiz traveled throughout the southern, southwestern, and mid-western regions of the United States by freight train, bludgeoning his victims to death, apparently for no other reason than they happened to live in (or be visiting) communities situated near rail lines and yards in Kentucky, Texas, Illinois, and Florida, during a killing spree that lasted from 1997 to 1999, with evidence eventually surfacing that he may have murdered his first victim as early as 1986 (Kimberly). Once it became clear that all these brutal crimes were the work of a single person, they triggered a nationwide manhunt for the latest incarnation of the Savage Tramp—a coordinated effort involving more than a dozen local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies, including the FBI (he made the agency’s Ten Most Wanted list on June 21, 1999), the INS (subject to charges of general incompetence after it came to light that Border Patrol had released the
Resendiz from custody despite his status a suspect in multiple homicides), as well as the Texas Rangers (the eventual heroes of the entire narrative)—which culminated in serial killer’s arrest in 1999, followed by his trial and eventual execution by lethal injection in Texas in 2006. The Mexican national (as he was invariably identified in the media) proved an even more sensational subject than Silveria, and the press coverage once again easily yoked murder to tramping, generally referring to him as the “Railroad Killer” (with minor variations including the “Railway Killer” and the “Railcar Killer,” although Time initially offered up the less terror-inducing appellation “Boxcar Bandito”) as well as one of a plethora of aliases he had adopted since first entering the United States illegally from Mexico in 1976 (and, in fact, the media would not settle on his “real” name until after he was in custody). While he remained a fugitive, programs like America’s Most Wanted featured segments with the latest details of the case, while following his arrest, he would not only inspire highly fictionalized renderings (such as the episode of Criminal Minds discussed at the beginning of this chapter), but several true-crime television shows produced episodes focusing on Reséndiz, including Crime Stories on the Discovery Channel; The FBI Files, a docudrama also airing on the Discovery Channel; “Death in the Country,” an episode of Infamous Murders on The History Channel; and “The Railroad Killer,” an episode of CBS News’s long-running 48 Hour Mystery: Live to Tell.

The last of these television documentaries, which in tone and presentation typified the approach of many visual media outlets offering representations of the narrative of these events, focuses on the story of Holly Dunn, the lone person to have survived an attack by Resendiz. The program opens with a series of frenetically edited
shots of a freight train rolling through the foggy darkness, its eerie and mournful whistle blowing, and then cuts to the flashing red light of a railroad crossing accompanied by the sound of a clanging warning bell. Images of trains and railroad tracks alternate with tracking shots of modest homes located on tree-lined streets, glowing light spilling from their windows and illuminating only so much of the surrounding inky blackness, while ominous horror-movie music plays on the soundtrack. The camera continues to creep down the block to reveal finally the uncomfortably close proximity of the homes to the rails: the harsh, cold, dirty, and industrial nature of the latter contrasts with and impinges on the warm, clean, and domestic qualities of the former. This juxtaposition expresses visually one of the themes that appears again and again in the discourse that develops around Resendiz: railroad technology, so central to the story of America’s geographic and economic expansion that it forms the background noise of our communities, so familiar as to be rendered almost invisible—so much so that we all take it for granted as we do the wires draped from pole to pole that bring electricity to our homes—also brings with it a dark, irrational, illegible, deadly Other. Just as it did over a century before, the railroad continues to bring the chaos and violence of urban centers, embodied by the tramp, to small towns and rural communities in the heartland.

These dramatizations are intercut with interviews with Holly Dunn and her sister. The show’s tagline emerges in fragments on a black screen: “What if someone … wants you dead … but you … LIVE … TO … TELL.” Without a doubt, Holly does proceed to tell a horrific story: she and her boyfriend Chris, walking along the tracks on an August night in 1997 after leaving a college party in Lexington, KY, find themselves confronted by a man who emerges from the bushes and demands money before tying them up,
going in search of a rock, and beating Chris to death. The attacker then rapes Holly and proceeds to beat her with a length of board, leaving her for dead. The program then allows others involved in the investigation and prosecution of the case to describe some of the murders that Resendiz is alleged to have committed in the subsequent two years. His *modus operandi* remained relatively consistent over the duration of his career, in that he seemed to select both his victims and weapons based on nothing more than simple opportunity, although significantly almost all of the attacks occurred in the victims’ homes. Drew Carter, a Texas Ranger who played a lead role in the apprehension of the train-hopping transient, expands on this last point when he asserts that this killer “is like the bogeyman coming into your house. He supports the fact that true evil exists in this world.”

Variations on this theme—the violation of American domestic space by an irrational and inexplicable evil force of foreign origin—continue to develop through much of the reporting on the crimes. A reporter for *Texas Monthly*, visiting the small town of Weimer (located between Houston and San Antonio) where Resendiz murdered three people on two different occasions, gives voice to the residents who try to comprehend the killings while the perpetrator remains at large. The article, simply titled “Evil,” returns again and again to the town’s collective struggle to grasp how something so fundamentally random and unjust could have happened.

In the Bible, good is always triumphant. “No ills befall the righteous,” reads Proverbs, “but the wicked are filled with trouble.” The Sodomites were obliterated; Job kept the faith and was rewarded. The people of Weimar have heard these stories their whole lives. They believe that living right will bring the good life, and for the most part it has. They believe in an orderly world and an all-powerful God. They couldn't understand how something so evil could happen to two people so good—two of God’s finest, who had
lived their lives for their community and taught God's love by example. (Hall 107)

In the 48 Hours Mystery episode Harris County Prosecutor Devon Anderson recalls that “the sense of urgency” before Resendiz’s arrest “was unbelievable because people were dying. He was continuing to kill, and he was killing effortlessly. No one was stopping him. He killed two women in one day, ninety miles apart. Four days later, he’s in a different state. People were scared.” In archival news footage taken from a press conference at the time of the trial, Anderson seems to suggest that this figure has sprung from the depths of our collective unconscious (echoing Carter’s “bogeyman” remark), asserting that “If what we know about him is true, he is everyone’s worst nightmare.” In a later interview segment, she confirms that in her first courtroom encounter with him, she could see that Resendiz had “no humanity.”

Throughout the press coverage from when he remained at large, was tried, and and even after his conviction, it is clear that the fear Resendiz generated stems in large part from his status as a railroad tramp. While still a fugitive, he seemed to possess an almost supernatural ability to traverse great distances in a manner unfamiliar to all but a sliver of the population—a manner of travel that produces no paper trail or witnesses, requires no fuel or money. “He rode the rails—the country’s secret highway—unseen. The cops said he was like a ghost,” one journalist writes. Much like the randomness of the killings, the killer’s continued elusiveness seemed unintelligible, or like some kind of mistake. “Somewhere out there, the Mexican drifter was one step ahead of hundreds of well-trained American cops” (Hall 109, 140). Trains once again acquired the threat they had possessed in the nineteenth century, when they were new and startlingly modern, although now part of the technology’s menace emanated from its antiquated nature; the
railroad for most had become ever less relevant, and so once again unfamiliar. By the late twentieth century, few Americans traveled by rail as paying passengers—throughout the 1990s Amtrak ridership remained steady at twenty-two million annually (compared with seven-hundred million enplanements per year) and accounted for a mere one-percent of passenger-miles traveled in 2000, with air and bus transport accounting for the rest—so that it remained a largely alien mode of transport to the vast majority of the population, relegated to a bygone era (Vranich 43, Nice 23).

A veritable mythology developed around Resendiz’s continued capacity to elude the ever-expanding dragnet set for him by authorities, a capacity facilitated by his appropriation of the industrial technology of the railroad, with the media coverage deploying terminology more becoming some sort of apparition, relating this quality to his twenty years of tramping experience that facilitates his “vanish[ing] into the scruffy world of hobos and migrant camps” after each murder (Klaidman). Other news reports likewise noted his tramp knowledge. A Texas investigator would note following Resendiz’s arrest, “by hopping trains he effectively canceled out any record of his actual movements across the country. It’s no wonder he kept committing crimes. He could just disappear into thin air” (Clarkson 55). This figure seems completely uncontained precisely because of his mode of transportation. Individual news items regularly emphasized the “extraordinary” intelligence of a killer tramp who, toying with his pursuers, deliberately left behind his fingerprints and other messages at crimes scenes, all the while proving to be “a master of disguises” who changed his appearance at will so as to move effortlessly from place to place, deftly negotiating various social circumstances, moving among us undetected (Sanders, Kolker).5 During the summer of
1999, when “Much of Mid-America … [was] looking over its shoulder for the phantom railroad killer,” Newsweek reminded its readers of the Faustian bargain their forefathers had struck more than a century before when they manically laid down mile after mile of crisscrossing rail lines in a ceaseless campaign to widen the national marketplace into every community of the United States and its territories: “If he’s still hopping freights, as the FBI thinks, the Union Pacific alone has more than 33,000 miles of track in the 23 states west of Chicago” (Klaidman). Shrinking the world through transport technology not only accelerates commercial exchange, it exponentially multiplies the pathways and velocity by which “true evil” (to recall Carter’s words) traverses the distance between communities, distributing fear much as it distributes consumables. This bogeyman could appear anywhere reached by tens of thousands of miles of track, hopping on a freight train carrying consumer goods in the middle of the night, slitting the screen to one of your windows, and beating you to death with one of your own household objects, and disappearing again—perhaps even on the same train—to be carried several states away before your bloody corpse is even discovered by a concerned loved one. Even observers from abroad speak to the way in which the killer’s mode of travel plays a central role in the terror he generates: in a story headlined “Hobo Serial Killer Terrorises Texas,” the Times of London explains for a readership unacquainted with the hobo tradition particular to the United States that “Train-hopping travelers … have always held a romanticised place in American culture,” but acknowledges that because the fugitive “travels on the great goods trains that rumble across the continent, emerging from wagons to attack whoever [sic] he finds,” these tramps “may never be regarded in the same way again” (Whitworth).
The circumstances of his arrest only appear to confirm the speculations about his tramping abilities, in that he ultimately was not caught by the hundreds of law enforcement officers systematically stopping and inspecting the country’s freight trains—only a tiny fraction of which they could have ever hoped to search—nor was he even “caught” at all. Indeed, so long as he continued to live as a tramp and ride the rails, he effectively remained utterly invisible and uncatchable, again and again slipping through the traps laid for him by the all the rational methodology of U.S. law enforcement. In the end, Operation Train Stop, the FBI’s two-hundred-person Houston-based task force charged with coordinating the dragnet, proved insufficient, demonstrating the validity of Anderson’s frustrated claim that “no one was stopping” Resendiz from killing. The multiagency effort constantly lagged behind, learning where the tramp had been only once another body had been discovered. Instead, the killing spree ended after Texas Ranger Carter worked gradually to gain the trust of Resendiz’s relatives, in turn persuading them to convince Resendiz to turn himself in, so that he was only apprehended when he voluntarily surrendered on July 13, 1999, once more electing to cross from Mexico (where, at the very least, he would have remained safe from the death penalty) to the United States after having negotiated the terms of his surrender, walking across the bridge that connects Ciudad Juarez with El Paso, Texas, where, “calm, dingy-looking and utterly unprepossessing,” he “pleasantly extended his hand” to Carter—thus exhibiting a disturbing, almost taunting level of individual agency for a lowly railroad tramp (Kolker). In essence, this Savage Tramp quit killing only because he had decided to stop.
Wensley Clarkson, author of the true-crime paperback *The Railroad Killer: Tracking Down One the Most Brutal Serial Killers in History* (published in 1999, after Resendiz had been arrested but before his trial had commenced), takes pains to establish a tenuous connection between Resendiz and Richard Ramirez, the self-appointed Night Stalker killer whose apparently random killings terrorized L.A. in the 1980s, pointing out that Resendiz had often used the alias Rafael Resendez-Ramirez (his uncle’s name), that he would have seen the news coverage of the Ramirez case while serving time in Florida’s State Penitentiary, and that both men “had never even had a proper job” (47). Almost as a non sequitur, Clarkson goes so far as to close the book with a quote from Ramirez, yet the Boxcar Killer (and the Night Stalker himself, for that matter) could be said to share in a lineage that extends to a far more notorious figure: Charles Manson. Coincidence of biographical and criminal details abound: the murders in both their cases took on an explicit class dimension, even if their victims appeared otherwise random; observers often remarked on their intelligence and verbal dexterity; they both ended their formal education prematurely and struggled with the written word (the previously mentioned commentary notwithstanding); both were abandoned before birth by their fathers, both of whom in turn had eked out livings as transient laborers; both felt they had also been neglected and ultimately abandoned by their single mothers; both spent much of their youth and young adulthood incarcerated, where they were repeatedly raped by other inmates; both were physically rather small; both began their criminal lives long before the onset of adolescence (Manson at seven, Resendiz at six); both had relatively fleeting experience—and soon became disenchanted—with socially sanctioned employment during their lives; and both
discovered young the value of the radical mobility afforded by freight trains. His grandfather having been employed by the B&O line, Manson had ancestral ties to the railroad and underwent his tramping initiation at the age of twelve when he escaped a reformatory in Indiana and made his way to Indianapolis. During his journey, he served an apprenticeship under other transients who enacted a collectivist life practice and eschewed participation in market activity, along with other accepted signifiers of citizenship.

I walked the railroad tracks some and hopped a freight train for a short way. I slept in the woods and under bridges. I met bums, winos and hobos, who shared their meals with me. ... I lived and ate with these guys until reaching Indianapolis, and through them I learned an awful lot about survival without the luxuries of a house and modern conveniences. (37)

During this time, he learned not only the material skills necessary to negotiate the homeless underworld, but the nuances of social distinctions within that underworld. As Ben Reitman did decades before, Manson offers delineations that replicate a hierarchy based on the transient’s relationship to work:

Most people place all those derelicts in the same category, but I found there is a definite distinction between them. A bum is a guy who is down and out, maybe one who is too lazy to work and survives by begging. A wino has become so hooked on his booze that he is a social outcast, he cares or nothing but the lush and how to acquire it. A hobo is on the road because that is his chosen lifestyle. Some are honest and survive by their wits, also doing a little work here and there. Others are into doing anything that will provide for the day’s needs and stealing and lying are as natural as breathing to them. (37)

In the quote that serves as the epigraph to this chapter, however, Manson neatly collapses the categorical differences between various types of transients developed by sociologists and other observers, suggesting the three terms have become semantically interchangeable in an era when the dominant image of the itinerant laborer is no longer that of an independent native-born American male. Instead, his formulation stresses the
coiled potential for violence ("straight razor") embedded in the tramp figure, with the suggestion that this potential generates from the nexus of anonymity ("nobody"), mobility ("boxcar"), and lack of self-discipline ("jug of wine"). In speaking, he enacts the long-standing rhetorical tradition of the Savage Tramp at its most pure.

If, according to a particular hermeneutical perspective, Manson represented the demise of countercultural utopian potential—Joan Didion would memorably give voice to this belief, writing that “the Sixties abruptly ended on August 9, 1969,” the night the Manson Family brutally murdered Sharon Tate and her guests (47)—then perhaps Resendiz serves at least to complicate the promises of neoliberal economic policies thirty years later with his spree at the conclusion of the prosperous 1990s. And if treaties such as NAFTA had reduced or eliminated trade barriers and thus facilitated the mass mobilization of commodities and capital across national borders over the course of the decade, then Resendiz certainly embodies for some observers the chaos that ensues when actual human bodies deign to move between countries with as much ease. As Americans discovered in the nineteenth century, darker threats accompany the promises of modernity’s technological and economic progress. These threats inherent in mobility seem most acute in those moments when the ongoing debate regarding so-called illegal aliens reaches a fever pitch. As with the tramps of the Gilded Age, undocumented immigrants’ illegal movement across constructed borders provokes anxiety and vitriolic reactions. As it was for Harris, the metaphor of infection applies: failure of containment will lead to an epidemic. The dominant discourse continues to insist (paradoxically) that freedom has value only when it is constrained.
Doubtless, the fact that he was a foreigner who had “a 23-year history of illegal border-crossing” between Mexico and the United States compounded the anxiety generated by Resendiz’s mobility (Klaidman). In the discourse surrounding the case, these two factors appear somehow interwoven, essential, and deterministic, so that the resulting terror extended beyond the fear that accompanies any serial killer with a wide range. By moving so easily back and forth across it, Resendiz exposed the permeability of the United States border, making a mockery of national boundaries. Plus, although a foreigner, he spoke English fluently—some reports portray him as a virtual linguistic genius who excelled in the evening English courses he took in Mexico as an adult and even earned a wage teaching English in a convent—thus becoming something of a trickster figure, a threat because he may move among us, not immediately distinguishable from a native-born American. As Time assistant managing editor Howard Chua-Eoan notes, “The remarkable thing about this man is that while he gives the impression of being an illiterate Mexican immigrant, he is extraordinarily smart,” and may have tutored other immigrants in English, in turn helping them to become less apparent (Sanders). He is in America illegally, not merely to steal our jobs, but to invade our homes, raping, killing, stealing, then disappearing, untraceable as he rides the rails from town to town. While the pathologizing language once directed toward the homeless en masse rarely surfaces in popular discourse without at least some criticism, the alarmist language toward undocumented aliens certainly does not negatively impact a public figure’s career. Consequently, a narrative that stresses Resendiz’s extrinsic genesis offers a perverse comfort, much as did Harris’s insistence on the foreign origin of Black Flynn and his cohorts. Clarkson offers as an epigraph a quote attributed to
novelist Carlos Fuentes in advance of the text that speaks to the ways in which these murders have been consistently read as forming a narrative analog to the violent penetration of America’s political boundaries and thus the nation’s sense of self: “The U.S.-Mexico border is the next frontier of American consciousness.” Throughout the book—making frequent use of sensationalist clichés and borderline nonsensical figurative language (e.g., “They could see the hatred in his eye flaring by the millisecond” [xviii])—Clarkson lays the groundwork for the idea that these crimes are really all about the border, a point he eventually makes explicit when he writes that “Angel seemed to personify a fear of mayhem coming up from south of the border, bringing terror and death. His victims were white and respectable, not prostitutes or drifters” (182). He devotes several chapters to the future Railroad Killer’s confused and traumatic upbringing in Mexico, beginning with fact that Resendiz’s birth was not registered until weeks after the event because his mother could not afford the registration fee, so that from the beginning, this individual evaded the disciplinary measures of record keeping (5).

In a way that few others writing about Resendiz do, Clarkson emphasizes the way in which Resendiz lived—and how he was perceived by those who at least thought they knew him well—in Mexico, pointing out that this killer vagabond actually owed land and a home in the small isolated town of Rodeo, in the state of Durango, where he doted on his wife Julieta and eventually their young daughter, where he often took apparent pleasure in riding his bicycle, his dog running along at his side. This gesture serves multiple purposes, seeming at first to bolster the sense that this man was not evil incarnate, but rather that he was a thoroughly disturbed individual capable of
recognizable emotions. Clarkson even tentatively argues that Resendiz suffered from borderline personality disorder, going through the criteria from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* and implying that he cannot be held entirely responsible for his actions. After his arrest, this diminutive man struck many of his interrogators as shy and polite, even peaceful, rather than exhibiting the personality traits one expects from a notorious killer. “He simply did not live up to the image portrayed when he was the Most Wanted Man in America,” Clarkson notes (207). Yet, in the end, this duality reinforces the sense that the killings represent some greater assault on the United States and Americans, since—at least, as the coverage would have it—the killer restricted his brutality to that side of the border. Resendiz “found it virtually impossible to carry on a rational conversation when he was out of Rodeo,” as if the act of leaving the constriction of home and crossing the border itself sparked the psychotic compulsion to commit violence (94). Clarkson buttresses this interpretation, writing that Resendiz assuaged any guilt he had for his crimes by “by tell[ing] himself that [his victims] were American so they probably deserved it” (95). Not only Americans had this perception: “in his home country, he fulfilled a bizarre role of hero and madman, saint and outlaw” (208). If he remained normal in Mexico and only became a vicious killer motivated not by anything so comprehensible as economic gain or even personal vendetta once he had crossed into the United States, and if his actions could be received so differently in each country, then it would seem that such mobility could trigger anyone from outside to wreak havoc on arrival.

None of the ambiguity entertained in Clarkson’s version of the narrative surfaces in conservative commentator Michelle Malkin’s rhetorical deployment of the Railway
Killer, which comprises an entire chapter of her post-September 11th jeremiad *Invasion: How America Still Welcomes Terrorists, Criminals, and Other Foreign Menaces to Our Shores*. Just as Harris and Bellew posit the tramp as a harbinger of social disorder and potential national collapse, Malkin offers Resendiz as cautionary tale, demanding that policymakers correct the failure of discipline that allowed Resendiz to repeatedly violate America’s sovereign borders and murder its citizens. In her introduction, she decries “criminal-friendly immigration policies and practices” that allows entry by “the scum of the earth,” abruptly transitioning over the course of a single page from the 9/11 hijackers to a discussion of the “more than forty Islamic radicals” who have come to the U.S. legally since the 1993 World Trade Center bombing to “other enemies invading our shores”—with Resendiz at the top of her list (x). In other words, she elides a clearly mentally ill rail-riding tramp from Mexico who entered the country illegally with ideologically motivated members of an extensive and well-funded militant organization whose visas granted them legitimate temporary residence in the U.S. This conflation continues in the chapter devoted to the Resendiz case, which begins with a list of “names of twelve innocent Americans who lost their lives because the INS failed to do its job and keep dangerous aliens out of the country. No,” Malkin writes, “they were not among the thousands who died in the September 11 terrorist attacks,” although clearly some equivalency exists (87).

Much of Malkin’s rhetorical strategy depends on such apparent equivalencies, elisions, and conflations. She blurs the line between the figurative national homeland and the literal, individual “home,” suggesting not only that those we must fear come from outside this national-domestic space, but also that part of their threat stems from
their home-less status (ix). She attacks at length the voluntary departure policy that entails “releasing illegal aliens on their own volition and trusting them to return to their home country” and allowing them “to bypass tough sanctions that would otherwise legally bar them from the country for ten years and jeopardize future applications for permanent resident status,” although it remains unclear how the elimination of this policy and resulting legal banishment would have had any effect on Resendiz, given that he never entered the country legally. While other sources frequently observe that Resendiz rarely worked legitimate jobs during his forays into the States, Malkin describes him as a “transient day laborer,” perhaps once a member of those throngs of foreigners gathered on street corners waiting for someone to employ them for the day that the reader has no doubt seen (88). That Resendiz had the opportunity to commit his crimes leads to the inescapable conclusion that the “government is far more committed to cracking down on gun-owning Americans who want to protect themselves than it is to protecting those citizens from criminal illegal aliens” (111). Much of the rest of the chapter consists of “Portraits of Grief,” brief biographies of the American victims and detailed descriptions of most of their murders—murders on which we must blame bureaucratic incompetence and lack of vigilance against foreign mobility almost as much as Resendiz himself. In Resendiz, America again found a Savage Tramp who justifies the exclusion from the body politic those who appear alien, who do not work, who remain unfixed.

Since his emergence in America, the Savage Tramp has proven remarkably fungible. In the 1870s he served as a figure on which elements of American popular cultural production could displace the collective fear of Parisian Communards and other
foreign socialist and anarchist terrorists bent on the destruction of the democratic government of the United States, still in the early stages of healing following the devastation of the Civil War. In the 2000s, in the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks, another Savage Tramp acts as an embodiment of the hydra-like external existential threats to the American way of life, the multiplicity of rabid ideologues who seek to penetrate the home(land) and import chaos from the outside. Not coincidentally, the respective eras that bore witness to each of these tramp scares also underwent a round of what David Harvey calls “time-space compression,” the term he uses to designate those “processes that so revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time that we are forced to alter, sometimes in quite radical ways, how we represent the world to ourselves” (240). The rise of “flexible accumulation”—“characterized by the emergence of entirely new sectors of production, new ways of providing financial services, new markets, and, above all, greatly intensified rates of commercial, technological, and organizational innovation”—in the wake of the increasingly obvious inadequacies of the Fordist-Keynesian model as manifested in the 1973 crash accelerated the process of globalization, giving rise to conditions against which people across the political spectrum have reacted in various ways (147). One-hundred years before, the crash of 1873 combined with the acceleration of production and transportation of goods likewise fostered a profound sense of instability and disorientation. The nineteenth-century ambivalence regarding the evermore rapidly increasing velocity and pathways of mobility as represented by the railroad lingers, sometimes still located in that technology of the industrial revolution not yet banished to the status of relic. Massive shipments of a multiplicity of goods can be delivered more
quickly than ever imagined, but evil in the form of the Savage Tramp can always steal a ride, prompting the (fundamentally conservative) question: was the Faustian bargain of introducing this transportation network worth it?

1 The epigraph to this chapter is drawn from a thirty-three second video clip uploaded by user Logan3628 to YouTube, titled “Charles Manson—I’m Nobody,” which apparently is taken from a longer 1989 interview. (I have been unable to locate the original interview.) An off-screen interviewer says, “Tell me in a sentence who you are,” to which Manson replies, “Nobody. I’m nobody. I’m a tramp, a bum, a hobo. I’m a boxcar and a jug of wine. And a straight razor if you get close to me.” Manson delivers it in a whisper, after he offers a rapid series of exaggerated facial expressions. The video has been viewed more than 190,000 times as of February 10, 2013. The same footage has been repeatedly reposted, sometimes with minor variances in the editing. (Interestingly, a version of the clip that cuts Manson off after the first sentence—i.e., “Nobody”—has received almost seven million views.) The quote also yields dozens of hits in a Google search.

2 For a thorough analysis of the relationship between railroad travel, the concept of “shock,” and traumatic neurosis, see Schivelbusch, 134-158.

3 This figurative notion of social contagion has a long tradition. At the end of the nineteenth century conservative French social theorist Gustav Le Bon framed crowd psychology in such terms, writing, “Ideas, sentiments, emotions, and beliefs possess in crowds a contagious power as intense as that of microbes. This phenomenon is very natural, since it is observed even in animals when they are together in number. … A panic that has seized on a few sheep will soon extend to the whole flock. In the case of men collected in a crowd all emotions are very rapidly contagious, which explains the suddenness of panics” (78). The 1896 English translation of Le Bon’s The Crowd influenced pioneering American sociologists such as Franklin Giddings, James Mark Baldwin, Boris Sidis, Robert Park, and others (King 334). More recently, conservative pundit Ann Coulter has cited Le Bon’s work.

4 Like Lucius Shepard, some observers of and participants in the rail-riding subculture express skepticism regarding such elaborate claims about the FTRA. George Lin, a train hopper who holds a PhD in Soviet history from Stanford, notes that “the FTRA has become nearly mythical. They seem to be used almost as a bogeyman, to strike the fear of God in people.” Meanwhile, Melford Lawson, one of the founders of the FTRA, puts it more succinctly: “They call us a gang. How do you organize 5,000 drunks? We can’t even agree on what kind of beer to drink.” (Qtd. in Murphy.) Although I can speak only anecdotally, I would say that my encounters with members of the FTRA tend to lead me to similar conclusions. Also, regarding the group’s purported racism: I met at a few African-Americans (and one openly gay man) who claimed membership.

5 Interestingly, following Resendiz’s arrest, media coverage tended to deflate this sort of rhetoric as it had appeared in previous breathless reporting. For instance, much was made of the “rambling letter” the serial murderer sent to a television station, which contained “numerous spelling and grammatical errors” and discussed, among other topics, “how much he loves his dogs” (“Rail Killings Suspect”). Similarly, news stories retroactively contain the geographic reach of his threat, insisting that he merely “sowed fear throughout Texas railroad communities,” not the entire nation (“Texas Jury Hears”). Only a year later, all the hyperbole appears as just that; sure, this odd little man never scared us all that much.

6 I suspect Clarkson had the following passage in mind from Fuentes’s novel The Old Gringo: “they, the two gringos … had come to Mexico, he consciously, she unintentionally, to confront the next frontier of American consciousness, the most difficult of all” (186).
Perhaps not coincidentally, Malkin’s account of the lives and deaths of Jessie Howell and Wendy Von Huben seems almost perfunctory—and certainly far shorter—then the others. Also, although they were Resendiz’s earliest known victims, Malkin treats them last. Unlike the others, they were not killed in or near their homes. In fact, like the killer, these teenage lovers were traveling by freight train in Florida. As unemployed transients, it appears, their deaths constitute less of a loss, and their murder does not allow Malkin to return once again to emphasize the violation of the individual and national “home.”
CHAPTER 3
THE AMERICANA HOBO

“Don’t worry, I’m not a stabbing hobo, I’m a singing hobo.”
—“Simpsons Tall Tales,” The Simpsons

By 1941, the year Frank Capra’s Meet John Doe premiered in the nation’s cinema houses, the figure of the train-hopping vagabond had made numerous appearances in film, first appearing in the silent era and continuing to persist as a recognizable character type for decades. Over time and in various media, a set of tropes and traits had emerged to be refined and regularized, eventually establishing the conventions of a distinct representational tradition. The Colonel, played by Walter Brennan in Capra’s film, conforms to and epitomizes those conventions to a tee. His nonthreatening, grandfatherly unshaven visage and tattered hat and patched clothing belie the proud, rugged individualism at the core of a simple moral code that prompts him to refuse favors and handouts. While he is possessed of a fierce independence and skeptical of all organizations and institutions, he simultaneously evinces a profound sense of loyalty, albeit strictly on the person-to-person basis. He recognizes the banality and machinations of the news media, exclaiming, "I don’t read no papers and I don’t listen to radios either. I know the world’s been shaved by a drunken barber and I don’t have to read it." In his colorful vernacular, he espouses relatable apolitical and even anti-intellectual wisdom that others fail to heed at their peril. In his valuation of individual freedom above all else, he embodies certain fundamental values located in the mythology of America’s origins, a true, anachronistic pioneer spirit in the modern urban industrial age. Given the chance, he delights in dancing a jig and playing his ocarina—a
small, hand-carved vessel flute—while rolling through the countryside in an open boxcar. In short, he stands as an exemplar of the Americana Hobo.

The film’s plot centers on Long John Willoughby (Gary Cooper), a young vagabond drawn into a scheme devised by Ann Mitchell, a newspaper columnist. Ann falsely claims in one of her columns to have received a letter from “John Doe,” an unemployed everyman who vows to commit suicide in protest of society’s ills. When the John Doe letter creates a sensation with the reading public, Ann convinces her editor to recruit someone from the ranks of the jobless and homeless to play the role she has created. In Long John, they find their perfect John Doe, and through his delivery of a series of populist speeches (all written by Ann), he develops a national following, with “John Doe Clubs” springing up across the country. The newspaper’s nefarious publishing tycoon secretly funds these clubs and plans to manipulate the energy behind them to launch a political campaign to seize power, roll back unspecified New Deal “concessions,” and rule “the American people” with “an iron hand.” This being a Capra film, the democratic spirit ultimately prevails, but in the meantime John Willoughby, Ann Mitchell, and the American people all fall under the spell of vague, soothing platitudes about the inherent wisdom of the common man. Yet the Colonel, Willoughby’s hobo companion of the last three years, remains skeptical during the entire escapade, providing vocal criticism and having the good sense not to get suckered by the media and the John Doe phenomenon’s easy, phony populism. To the extent that it identifies with the Colonel’s skepticism, the audience thereby receives affirmation of its own commonsense wisdom.
Watching as his friend falls under the spell of a domesticated lifestyle, the Colonel rails against Americans’ ever increasing dependency on modernity’s consumer comforts. Offered a bed in a nice hotel, he recoils, proclaiming that the “spot under the bridge where” he and Long John spent the previous night is “good enough” for him. To stay in that hotel would risk initiating a vicious cycle. Once a fellow begins earning money, he explains, “he starts wanting to go into restaurants and sit at a table and eat salads, and cup cakes, and tea”—none of which is any good for a body—and “the next thing the dope wants is a room. Yes sir, a room with steam heat! And curtains and rugs and ‘fore you know it, he’s all softened up and he can’t sleep ‘less he has a bed.” To accumulate wealth, he declares, is to fall victim to hordes of “heelots.”

You’re walking along, not a nickel in your jeans, free as the wind, nobody bothers you, hundreds of people pass you by in every line of business. … They’re all nice, lovable people, and they let you alone. … Then you get hold of some dough, and what happens? All those nice, sweet, lovable people become heelots. A lotta heels. They begin creeping up on you, trying to sell you something. They’ve got long claws and they get a stranglehold on you, and you squirm, and duck and holler, and you try to push them away, but you haven’t got a chance. They’ve got you!

The Colonel goes on to delineate in exacting detail the ways in which this stimulation of desires—every one of which entails an unforeseen and unwanted need, with each need begetting ever more needs—unnecessarily complicates a person’s life, finally eliminating personal liberty through excessive regulation and enforced dependency.

First thing you know, you own things. A car, for instance. Now your whole life is messed up with more stuff: license fees, and number plates, and gas and oil, and taxes and insurance, and identification cards, and letters, and bills, and flat tires, and dents, and traffic tickets and motorcycle cops and court rooms, and lawyers, and fines, and a million and one other things. And what happens? You’re not the free and happy guy you used to be. You gotta have money to pay for all those things, so you go after what the other feller’s got, and there you are. You’re a heelot yourself!
Todd DePastino argues that the Colonel’s diatribes fit within a strain of subversive hobo culture that offers “an alternative to FDR’s family breadwinning ideal” (*Citizen* 211). Certainly, the Colonel’s criticism of consumerism and, by extension the capitalist state, smacks of outright subversion on the purely denotative level, but it ultimately is a safe and neutered subversion. The audience can congratulate itself for sympathizing with the Colonel, for seeing through the superficiality of modern life, the empty promises of the government, the duplicity of the corporate media. We can flatter ourselves for identifying with him, imaging ourselves kindred spirits, maybe even entertaining fantasies about shedding ourselves of all of our material possessions—which are no more than burdens that offer few meaningful pleasures—and plunging into the wilderness, just like the heroes of so many American narratives of the open road. In his restlessness and his vigilant defense of individual freedom, the Colonel—as an iteration of the Americana Hobo figure—exhibits the best aspects of the national self-imagined character. After all, official American history plainly celebrates its people’s rebellion against tyranny and movement into uncharted territory. But viewed from another perspective, the Colonel’s rebellion and movement carry no threat precisely because of their strictly individualistic nature. Wanting only to be left alone to wander as he pleases, he in no way imposes on society, which he frees from obligation, asking for no aid. In fact, his mode of existence ultimately benefits the political economic order he so vociferously eschews.

Early entries in the field of what might be called Tramp or Hobo Studies apparently struggled to develop an analysis of this particular version of the vagabond. In a seminal article published in 1963, John Seelye offers a reading of the vagrant figure’s
ontological evolution, providing a useful—if ultimately incomplete and even at times contradictory—description of various modes of cultural work this figure has performed. Seelye posits a pair of representational traditions, beginning with a sketch of what he calls the “clown tramp,” most clearly embodied in characters created by Emmet Kelly and Charlie Chaplin, which greets its audience as “a scapegoat of failure.” Of course, an audience’s embrace of and affection for this character coincides with the repulsion felt when confronted with any actually existing tramp, indicating the complex interaction between representation and reality: even if the comic tramp’s “antics have only a symbolic relationship to the ordeals of a real tramp,” the audience will “laugh at him because he is a token of something which is very real indeed” (536).

Seelye places this figure in conversation with the “hero” tramp figure as found in the writings of Jack London, Jim Tully, and other authors who chronicled their vagabond experiences immediately before and after the turn of the twentieth century, a time during which “the tramp was not always a token of failure.” In fact, “the image of the tramp” in this era remained “particularly Protean,” so much so that a writer, “casting himself as a tramp, could create for himself a heroic role” (540). This heroism derives from the character’s rebellion against civilizing influences—most pointedly the conformity imposed by increasingly regularized work—by “heading for wilderness of the rails,” much as Huck Finn lit out for the territories (550). This hero tramp’s critiques arrive in the form of easily digested folksy homilies. Given that a gulf between reality and representation forms the essence of the clown or comic tramp, the hero tramp’s distinction implicitly lies in the latter figuration’s greater degree of realism and lesser degree of abstraction—even if Seelye characterizes London’s memoir as “pure
propaganda” in the anarchist-socialist tradition (546). Often portrayed without regard for verisimilitude, and neither the object of mocking laughter nor the true radical provocateur, the Americana Hobo appears to have no place in this schema.

A meditation on the meaning of Jack Kerouac’s “new version of the tramp” serves as the catalyst for Seelye’s article (536). In his ensuing analysis, Seelye appears unable to maintain the strict bifurcation between the clown and the hero he establishes in the introductory section, at first arguing that even if Kerouac’s tramp characters “are not necessarily comical, … they are nonetheless sentimentalized, abstracted from reality. Kerouac plainly ‘sees’ the tramp through the image established by the clown tramps” (537). Like those characters developed by Kelly and Chaplin, Kerouac’s tramps are “anti-heroic” (540). Yet, Seelye also claims that London, constructing himself as a heroic tramp in his memoir The Road, “established the tradition in which Kerouac has been writing,” and he later concludes that “[t]he transition from Jack London, grimly clinging to a ladder on a speeding express train, to Dean Moriarty, fiercely gripping the steering wheel of a powerful car, is not so great after all” (540, 552). This ambiguity forces Seelye to argue that Kerouac’s tramp characters conform to the comic tradition—even if they fail to inspire laughter because the author (with “irony” Kerouac “is perhaps not aware of”) presents them as objects of reverence, “as the ghost of the frontiersman”—it also means that he must deny that Kerouac’s truly heroic characters qualify as genuine tramps (537). Instead, he must insist that Dean Moriarty “can remain a hero only as long as he refuses to become a tramp” (540). Ontologically, and even tautologically, the tramp is necessarily un-heroic—except when he isn’t.
Given that Moriarty would lose his heroic status the moment he became a tramp, then, it makes sense that Seelye also seems unwilling to commit fully to the existence of the distinct hero-tramp tradition he has identified: while the recounting of adventures by London and other tramp writers “recalls the ordeal of the epic hero,” these men also were “anti-heroes,” “members of a class hated and feared by society,” worthy not of admiration but of ridicule—much like the clown tramp (551). The tramp cannot convincingly assume a heroic position, Seelye argues, in large part because of his relationship to work. While the tramp does share the urge to wander with such industrious, masculine, heroic characters as pioneers, cowboys, and even “the Sunday driver,” a crucial difference separates them: “American restlessness is also evidenced in hard work, productivity and inventiveness, characteristics shared between the businessman and the frontiersman but lacking in the tramp” (538). Goal-oriented work stands as the dividing line, the point beyond which the tramp cannot follow these other iconic American figures, “for his purposeless wandering over the roads that were once the paths of Empire” becomes nothing more than “a parody of the energies we attribute to the western pioneer” (539). Consequently, regardless of any claims “that the tramp is a potential pioneer”—which Kerouac was by no means alone in making—in fact “it cannot be denied that the tramp, as tramp, whether or not he is a frontiersman manqué, has nothing of the heroic about him” (537). By definitionally yoking heroism to work here and elsewhere in his argument, Seelye comes oddly close to participating in, rather than merely describing, the moralizing of anti-tramp crusaders during the late-nineteenth century, as he does when he claims that “the road was a breeding ground for homosexuality and alcoholism. The appeal of idleness could be fatal, both to the body
and soul” (547). This physically and spiritually fatal refusal of work produces a “struggle between the citizen and the tramp,” which leads to both the mocking laughter directed at the fictional comic tramp and the punitive measures designed to eradicate—or, at the very least, exile from the citizenry—the actual tramp (541).

 Appropriately, given the tension apparent in adherence to the clown-hero taxonomic binary of tramp textuality, grammatical and theoretical reversals pepper the article as it nears its conclusion: “But such dichotomies are meaningless”; “But it must be remembered”; “But, at the same time”; etc. (550, 551, 552). For Seelye, these ongoing fluctuating interpretations, which culminate in Kerouac’s failure to represent a truly heroic contemporary tramp, can be explained by historical conditions: confusion over the tramp’s sudden appearance after the Civil War prompted a multiplicity of responses, not all of them negative, some of them even sympathetic. Only gradually did the image of the menacing tramp coalesce and come to dominate all other interpretations, with harsh municipal ordinances and state laws brutally and successfully (according to Seelye) combating the material phenomenon, so that “in London’s metamorphosis from braggart hero to ‘a wiser and humbler man’ we have a capsule history of the American tramp” (545). I argue, however, that this indeterminacy instead results from the limited scope Seelye ascribes to the figure’s evolution, which prioritizes something of a formalist approach (i.e., the degree of “abstraction” from reality in any given portrayal) over vital ideological considerations.

 While providing a crucial insight by identifying work’s centrality to the cultural reception and function of the fictional tramp, Seelye’s binary typology proves reductive in the end. It quickly reveals itself to have limited utility, even when applied to some of
the very examples Seelye cites. After all, Chaplin’s Little Tramp, which certainly makes the audience laugh, pursues a variety of occupations, repeatedly demonstrating his eagerness, if not competency, when it comes to work. In order to fund an operation for the object of his affection in *City Lights* (1931), he takes a job as a street sweeper. However much it may satirize the conditions and impact of industrial labor, *Modern Times* (1936) does begin by showing the character in his role as a waged employee at a factory. Most pertinently, *The Gold Rush* (1925) renders the Little Tramp as an actual frontiersman, with the character traveling to the Yukon as a prospector during the 1890s and weathering the brutal conditions and deprivations he encounters there. If the comedic value of the tramp image stems primarily from the character’s refusal of work, the Little Tramp cannot properly function as a clown tramp, yet Seelye presents him as an archetypal example of the figure. In his misadventures, the Chaplin’s character certainly does facilitate a critique of exploitative waged labor, even if he does not reject it wholesale, and so may be as a prototype to the Critical Tramp figures I discuss in the next chapter.

Given this instability, to understand what cultural and ideological meaning representations of the tramp produce we must abandon the generic comic-heroic axis. We are then left with Seelye’s insight regarding the significance of the tramp figure’s relationship to work and, by extension, to prevailing bourgeois capitalist values. By no means does this gesture immediately render the interpretative task a simple one, as that relationship diverges from text to text and from character to character, whether the character is portrayed romantically or realistically. Seelye rightly observes that the public at large often tended not to distinguish readily between shirkers and workers,
because although “many ‘tramps’ were indeed ‘honest, reluctant beggars,’ who were wandering in search of work,” to the untrained eye they remained “undistinguishable in dress and demeanor from their brothers,” i.e., the tramps, who presumably were dishonest, enthusiastic beggars who were wandering in avoidance of work (544). Yet, Seelye ultimately makes the same mistake, ignoring entirely what I am calling the Americana Hobo representational tradition, which depicts transient characters—whether they are subject to a comic or heroic portrayal—who are distinguishable from other tramps in their willingness, even eagerness, to work and their refusal to accept aid. Recognition of this tradition, in establishing a more complicated matrix against which to read various representations of the vagabond, goes a long way toward resolving the unsustainable nature of the clown-hero binary.

As I showed in the previous chapter, social scientists and vagabonds themselves provide valuable insight for this project. Sociologists formulated categorical distinctions for vagrants, drawing on both ideological inheritances from responses to the phenomenon of “masterless men” in early modern England and the terminology developed by the very vagrant community that they studied. The nomenclature applied to the particular transient functions to evaluate and reveal the individual’s relationship to work and mobility. Arranging these categories according to an implicit moral hierarchy, both observers and subjects generally agreed that the hobo traveled and worked, the tramp traveled and did not work, and the bum neither traveled nor worked. The Savage Tramp becomes an object of derision and fear because of his rejection of the free labor ideal, and apparently coincides with neither the clown nor the hero. Conversely, the Americana Hobo as represented in popular culture performs a function analogous to the
actual hobo migrant laborer: while often not fully committing to it, he facilitates the
expansion and coalescence of the free labor ideal and thus the capitalist order. If not
always precisely heroic, the figure merits admiration for participation in the self-reliant,
rugged-individualist tradition in which all Americans are generally encouraged to
imagine themselves as participants. Frequently (but not necessarily) portrayed in
romantic and nostalgic terms, the Hobo persists in the contemporary American
imaginary, performing vital cultural work.

Chronologically, the Hobo emerges as both a widely recognized figure and an
appellation in the decades following the Savage Tramp’s early reign as the predominant
figure through which homelessness was understood. In contrast to Seelye’s timeline
charting the character’s symbolic transformation, which holds that after an initial protean
phase the image of the tramp became negatively fixed, others have suggested that this
image actually became more flexible and sympathetic—and not merely clownish and
anti-heroic—as the twentieth century progressed. Christine Photinos argues that after
the turn of the century, “the very figure that had been understood as an inscrutable
‘other,’ dangerously immune to dominant ideologies of success and domesticity, is here
described as a quintessential freedom-loving man” (4). This shift had a lexicographic
analogue, in that one important “sign of change in the cultural status of the tramp was
the entry into common usage of the term ‘hobo,’” which “achieved popular currency
around the turn of the century and helped create a conceptual space for a heroic
figuration of the homeless transient” (3-4). Western transient workers probably coined
and circulated the word, which began appearing in print in newspapers published in the
West in the late 1880s before its adoption by the general middle-class speaker and
writer in the 1890s (DePastino, Citizen 65). By the 1930s, the use of “tramp” as a descriptor for vagrants had “virtually disappeared from print,” replaced by “‘hobo’ or the blandly neutral ‘transient’” (Kusmer 209). Historian Frank Tobias Higbie lists many of the predominant theories in circulation regarding the obscure etymology of the term “hobo,” some more plausible than others.

Some suggest that it derives from hoe boy, or agricultural laborer, others that it is a shortening of homeward bounders, referring to Civil War veterans, many of whom became seasonal workers in the West. One itinerant worker claimed the term originated from the French haute beau, or “high beauty,” and another from the Latin phrase homo bonus, or “good person.” Still others believed it was simply a clipped version of the railway workers' greeting “Hello Boy.” (5)

With their linkages to the language and conventions of railroad or seasonal agricultural labor, the majority of these speculations maintain that the term should be reserved solely for a person who works, someone “of a higher order than tramps and bums,” rather than one who merely idles and begs (Bruns, Knights 11).

However, the precise distinctions these various terms hold for the specialist—i.e., the sociologist, historian, or transient himself—rarely resonated as fully among the general population. For many, the words “hobo,” “tramp,” and “bum” could all apply equally to the same lazy freeloader who expects to survive through the efforts of others. Today, the distinctions have blurred even further, leading to such examples of unintentional irony as a recent Florida Times-Union editorial that enthusiastically endorses Sheriff John Rutherford's supposedly blunt terminological accuracy regarding downtown Jacksonville’s homeless population. The piece quotes Rutherford as saying, “I’m going to call them what they are. They are hoboes. They don’t want a job” (Littlepage). Much of this definitional ambiguity arises from the difficulty of making quick categorical assignments. As Seelye indicated, there were few visual cues to aid the
casual observer. Historian Mark Wyman concurs, adding that "[t]he attempt to
distinguish between hoboes and tramps was often complicated because it was easy to
move back and forth between the two groups, and many did" (37). In a sense, because
the distinction was one of character (i.e., possessing the desire to work) as much as
action (i.e., actually working), the only way to tell a hobo from a tramp was to know a
particular vagrant's motivations. Even such an authority as Jack London often used the
terms interchangeably, implying that the strict categorical distinctions did not congeal for
some time. (Of course, for London, whose laboring credentials remain unimpeachable,
tramping was a complex and explicitly political act, a rejection of exploitation, whatever
the name applied to the individual doing the rejecting.)

Yet, while not everyone uses these terms with the precision that some argue they
merit, the notion that a particular kind of person would make the decision to take to the
rails in search of work out of a determination not to burden family, friends, or society—to
better his circumstances—has long had real cultural currency. Whatever people may
call him, and however much he may at times elide with other homeless people who may
or may not engage in periodic waged labor or ride freight trains, the Americana Hobo
was specifically understood as a migratory laborer with a fundamentally sound work
ethic who remains an acknowledged stock figure in popular culture, one generally
associated with a particular moment in American history.

Several interwoven cultural and economic developments led to a wider
recognition of this sympathetic image of the vagrant in the closing years of the
nineteenth century. Hoboes themselves had much to do with the evolving perception of
their class, in that they self-consciously generated several fundamental characteristics
of the Americana Hobo representational tradition. In his pioneering investigations into the vagrant culture, sociologist Nels Anderson discovered that the average homeless person of the 1920s read extensively and that hoboes in general were a disproportionately literate, even intellectual bunch. To support this claim, Anderson cites studies revealing that a lower proportion of inferior intelligence and a higher proportion of superior intelligence existed among the unemployed when compared to businessmen, high school students, and members of the army (185, 72). Anderson further observes that “[t]he hobo who reads sooner or later tries his hand at writing. A surprisingly large number of them eventually realize their ambition to get into print,” most frequently in such forums as letters to the editor. However, “[t]he hobo writer does not concern himself with letters alone. A number of them are ambitious to become novelists, essayists, and even dramatists” (188). Such writers emerging from the ranks of train-hopping migrant workers often sought to construct a generalized hobo image in print, drawing a portrait of a cohesive and vital culture for the benefit of outsiders, correcting what they viewed as unfair misperceptions that rested on representations of the Savage Tramp. Often advocating on their own behalf, many of the more rhetorically savvy writers insisted on the hobo’s historic mission, which they tied to subtly or overtly patriotic appeals. For example, writing in 1942, Benjamin Benson asserts in his narrative _500,000 Miles Without a Dollar_ that hoboes “are the REAL backbone of the Nation. … The hoboes ARE a respectable and necessary part of our population. THEY helped to MAKE this country! They helped to make it GREAT!” (qtd. in Bruns, _Knights_ 12).
Excessive use of capitalization and exclamation points aside, Benson and others making similar claims had a point that continues even now to gain wider acceptance. In the twenty-first century, historians have taken up the subject of the American tramp with an interest not previously exhibited by the discipline, and with titles such as *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America* (2003), *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest, 1880-1930* (2003), and *Hoboes: Bindlestiffs, Fruit Tramps, and the Harvesting of the West* (2010), their work makes clear its objective of validating what hoboes themselves have claimed since the late nineteenth century: the floating army of unskilled migrant labor filled a need and played a crucial role in the expansion and development of the American—and particularly the American West's—economy and geography. By extension, the members of this floating army have made an irrevocable mark on the quintessential national character, even embodying its most important traits. Effectively positioning the hobo in heroic terms, this argument draws attention to the complex interplay between dominant ideology and shifting perceptions of the American vagrant and migrant worker within cultural discourse. Historians such as DePastino, Higbie, and Wyman insist that those who have been unfairly dismissed as shiftless, idle tramps in fact performed vital, productive functions in the development of the American economy and geography. So, even while they seek to validate the claim made by radical organizations such as the Industrial Workers of the World that hobo labor built the West, their academic efforts in their own way affirm the ideology of the work ethic and the hobo's participation in that ethic's perpetuation.
These historians also reveal that however much some contemporary critics located the emergence of the tramp in the personal disposition of the individual transient, structural elements of an ever more complex economy determined the need for the particular form of labor only transients could provide. The rapid extension of the railroad following the end of the Civil War accelerated land speculation beyond the Mississippi, establishing a pattern quite unlike that of development in the East, where slower forms of transport had prevailed so that relatively dense population centers preceded the railroad’s arrival. Railroad companies and their workers put down more than 300,000 miles of track between the end of the Civil War and the entry of the United States into the First World War, with total mileage swelling to almost 430,000 by 1930.

On May 10, 1869, during a ceremony in Utah, Leland Stanford drove a golden “last spike” to signify the completion of the first transcontinental line. This moment provides a metonymy for the conflation of governmental interests and capitalist interests, given that Sanford was President of the Southern Pacific and Central Pacific lines, a former Governor of California, and a future U.S. Senator. Already in the antebellum era legal practice had loosened state control of the economy to accommodate capitalist enterprise through the evolution of eminent domain doctrine, which provided the land railroads required, and the abandonment of the charter system and attendant strict regulatory controls in favor of the public incorporation model.2

The very nature of the enterprise meant that migrant laborers performed the actual work of putting down the tracks; even if the word had not yet been coined, these transient wage-earning men were hoboes by definition. With land becoming ever more available, routes were often built speculatively, rather than to connect pre-existing
populations. As lines moved through sparsely populated territories, temporary railroad towns moved west with transient wage-earning track layers. The most notorious of these was “Hell on Wheels,” a mobile settlement following the construction of the Union Pacific line and consisting of “knocked-down buildings, storefronts, dance-hall floors, tents, wooden sidings, and entire roofs” that housed “gambling dens, houses of prostitution, music halls, hotels, and an occasional restaurant,” all of which could be erected, disassembled, and—in a single day—reassembled as the tracks moved westward. In this railroad-dependent impermanent settlement, which saw traditionally segregated groups thrown together, young male railroad workers far from the enforcement of legal or social constraints became separated from much of their earnings, which often led to violence, with shootings occurring on a daily basis (Brown 96; Ambrose 217-218). As an exercise in mobile labor writ large, this phenomenon allows for the extension of the term hobo, which could be applied retroactively not only to the railroad employees proper but all the ancillary commercial workers (i.e., bartenders, inn keepers, prostitutes, etc.), as well. The expansion of the railroad necessarily entailed the generation of untethered wage labor on a massive scale in order to produce the massive profits reaped by the investor class.

Once a new line had granted access to a region, railroad companies out of exigency also facilitated the creation of fixed population centers in order to have customers to serve by actively recruiting hundreds of thousands of settlers from both eastern American cities and Europe to the West. As Jack Beatty summarizes the process, “The government traded land for railroads, and the railroads peopled the land” (101). At the same time, already existing towns recognized that a rail line could foster
economic sustainability and so “voted bonds overwhelmingly for a promised rail line.” The U.S. Congress also sought to encourage railroad construction by granting loans and hundreds or even thousands of acres to companies per each mile of track they laid. In turn, the railroad companies could sell the land immediately to settlers. In other words, government support enabled the railroads to manufacture customers for their services where little or no demand previously existed.

These customers procured raw materials and produced agricultural goods for an increasingly integrated national and global marketplace. According to one historian, “The railroad was creating a new West, a fruit-growing, wheat- and cotton and beet- and hop-growing West, a West transfixed by profits ahead. For this was the launching of a new era, brought into existence by the railroad” (Wyman 13). In addition to creating the infrastructure that would make farming in the West an economically viable endeavor and then recruiting settlers to potential farmland, railroad companies further encouraged agricultural production by providing material aid to these new farmers, supporting developments in agricultural sciences, and initiating massive irrigation projects. All of these factors led to a model of production that differed significantly from the small individual farm of the Jeffersonian ideal. Instead, single-crop intensive farming on large holdings predominated, and harvesting could not be accomplished without a massive, mobile labor force that could appear quickly as the seasons demanded.

Population in these newly settled areas was far too sparse to provide the pool of human labor necessary for such endeavors. So, just as settlers had been recruited from the East and Midwest to occupy the land permanently, now too did temporary transient workers respond to advertisements placed by labor agents and western growers in
eastern urban newspapers. While observers typically assumed the hobo’s mobility stemmed from an essential characteristic of the individual, high turnover rates had less to do with the desire of the worker and more to do with the fact that the need for labor in the agricultural sector fluctuated with the season and “both the mining and logging industries were plagued by shutdowns” (Wyman 102). Farming communities celebrated the arrival of these transients, who worked for low wages and without whom the crops would have rotted before being processed and shipped to market. With the harvest complete, however, those same communities sought to expel this excess and idle homeless population that now seemed a threat rather than a salvation. Rather directly, then, the railroads created the hobo by creating unique circumstances that required the specific form of labor only transients could provide, so that these hoboes “were being carried on the very form of transport that had opened the West to intensive agriculture—a form of agriculture that demanded thousands and thousands of them to bring in the harvest” (Wyman 24). Being forced to move from place to place by economic impetus as well as social and legal pressures that mounted when there was no longer work to be done, those who traveled in search of wages tended to gain a wide variety of low-level skills by virtue of responding to the fluctuating regional and industry needs. They not only harvested diverse crops, each of which required specialized technique, but they also found work in the railroad, logging, and mining sectors.

If the hobo proved so necessary to production, then, he becomes that much more difficult to vilify entirely, especially during the Progressive Era. Populist officials “began to question whether men without work—such as those searching for wheat-threshing jobs each summer—were criminals,” and by the turn of the century, “some
observers began arguing that hoboes” should be distinguished from shiftless or
dangerous tramps and bums, given that “the hobo was en route to a job,” while “the
tramp … ‘dreams and wanders’ and the bum … ‘drinks and wanders’” (Wyman 266,
265). Given the crucial role the transient worker played, attempts to malign him, much
less eradicate him entirely, would have been baldly hypocritical at best and
economically deleterious at worst.

So, the discursive construction of the hobo figure—or, more precisely, the
discursive rehabilitation of the tramp figure—was not solely a defensive measure
originating from within the transient population itself, nor from revisionist historians
seeking to uncover suppressed labor contributions. In fact, presenting an image of a
willingly migratory worker had benefits from the bourgeois capitalist perspective.
Because the complete elimination of the homeless migrant proved an elusive goal no
matter how vilified he might be in the Savage Tramp tradition, and because transient
casual labor proved essential to the national economy given the seasonal fluctuations in
demand, the representational tradition of the Americana Hobo comes to serve a vital
ideological function. The Hobo’s appearance marks an attempt to rhetorically
appropriate the figure of the homeless transient and make positive use of him on behalf
of the capitalist mode of production. As in Walter Brennan’s portrayal of the Colonel, he
is redeployed as an apolitical, folksy, anti-intellectual-yet-wise, individualistic, ultimately
hard-working and essentially American character. To paraphrase Voltaire, if the hobo
had not already existed, it would have been necessary to invent him—as a worker who
had accepted and acclimated to prevailing conditions of labor while apparently
remaining dignified and independent.
While Lee O. Harris uses his 1878 novel *The Man Who Tramps* to warn his readers about the threat of the conspiratorial Savage Tramp (as discussed in the previous chapter), the author also plays a pivotal role in the establishment and codification of the representational tradition of the Americana Hobo. While Harris portrays a large band of mostly foreign men who advocate anarchist or socialist revolution for entirely cynical reasons (rather than any real affinity with the American worker), he also offers an ontologically and ideological divergent iteration of the homeless transient, ultimately revealing the character as one of the true heroes of the story, even if he is introduced only in the last third of the narrative. Just as it rehearses all the traits of the dangerous tramp, deserving of punishment and even execution, Harris’s novel presents in clear terms the characteristics of the admirable hobo, even if that word had not yet come into common usage and does not appear in the text. By separating the two figures so deliberately, the novel attempts to provide the reader with the necessary typological tools to distinguish between the two.

In the crusty vagabond Billy Moon, Harris constructs a prototype of the Americana Hobo figure, which will eventually become the most persistent version of the train-hopping transient in the national cultural imaginary. Billy exhibits the essential character traits that surface in subsequent examples of this representational tradition that traverse multiple genres in a variety of media. First encountering the novel’s lost and wandering protagonist Harry Lawson at the beginning of Chapter 18, Billy serves as the evil Black Flynn’s contrast in every way. The intermittently intrusive narrator proceeds to interpret Billy’s disposition, drawing conclusions about his mood and, implicitly at least, his moral worth. In the reader’s first meeting with Billy, the vagabond
“walked with a light step, and apparently a light heart, for he whistled merrily” (209).

Unlike Black Flynn, who might have behaved so cheerfully only as part of some sinister stratagem, Billy thinks himself alone, so the reader feels free to trust his actions rather than worry that a manipulative cynicism motivates the performance. The character roams freely, unburdened by property, excessive ambition, or political commitment. Appropriately, it will not take long for the reader to get a sense of Billy’s colorful vernacular. Repeatedly, when explaining why he would refuse some particular action—typically something immoral, ungenerous, or radical—he says, “That’s not my style.” Billy’s basic decency, a trait lacking in all the vagrant characters depicted thus far in the novel, immediately becomes apparent when he stumbles on young Harry while the boy sleeps. He asks a series of questions prompted only by concern for the boy’s wellbeing, and then offers his empathy. “‘Yes, yes; I see,’ said the man; ‘I know. Out of work; out of friends; out of money; out of heart; tired and hungry, and all that. Been sick, too, hain’t you?’” (210). Recognizing the telltale signs of road weariness, Billy assumes the role of wise and avuncular mentor, taking Harry into his care.

During their ensuing travels together, Harry will learn valuable lessons from Billy on a wide range of subjects, and the reader will begin to see that not all men of the road are harbingers of social upheaval. Some, although obscured by a layer of dirt and occasional intemperate behavior, can be almost saintly. Harry soon realizes that transients may be separated typologically—even ontologically—according to their essential moral character. “This is an honest man” Harry thinks after only a few minutes in Billy’s company. “He is no tramp, as that term is generally understood. Such a nature would not stoop to beg, and he is too good natured to steal” (212). The narrator
acknowledges that Harry experiences the same confusion likely felt by the reader, as the protagonist and reader surrogate “was at a loss to understand his new companion, who indignantly denied being a tramp, yet, save the begging and crime which are characteristic of the modern article, he could not see so much distinction after all” (219). The narrator then helpfully intrudes in order to rehearse a subtle, yet finally profound, taxonomical delineation that occurs only on the species level. A more worldly individual, presumably such as the narrator, “would have recognized” Billy “as one of a class by no means small in this country—restless men, who acquire the habit of wandering, and are never content to settle down to any regular employment.” Like Billy, these men do not lack skill—one could accurately describe many of them as “tradesmen” and “good mechanics”—but they have no “ambition or stability of purpose,” and often they turn to drink. Still, they remain “[g]ood-hearted fellows in the main, most of them, who harm themselves more than any one else.” Unlike the Savage Tramp, members of this subset do not exploit their numbers to impose themselves collectively on industry and society, recognizing themselves as but “one wing of the great army of tramps” (219).

Indeed, as a good hobo—as a good man—Billy bristles at political discussion generally, especially eschewing any form of collectivist radicalism. Harris inserts extended editorial asides throughout the novel to debunk radical political philosophy and action, and Billy echoes the narrator’s conclusions. Explaining to Harry why he avoids tramps, Billy recounts his experiences in their midst, emphasizing their dubious political positions.

I’ve heerd ’em talk. … I stumbled onto a camp of ‘em once, and there was a feller there makin’ a sot o’ speech to ‘em, and he told ‘em that things was a goin’ to be fixed up so’s they all git rich. They was goin’ to divide up things, he said, and they’d all git a sheer. I wanted to ask ‘em how long
He understands that such speech is no mere idle talk. These tramps are constitutionally dangerous, violent men—at best deluded, at worst predatory—committed agents of chaos, one and all. “They’ve got a lot o’ fellers among ‘em that’d jest as leave cut a man’s throat as not,” he tells Harry, “and the most of ‘em would rather steal than beg any time when they git a chance” (218). Still, despite the danger, Billy sometimes he cannot help but respond directly to their lies. In a later chapter that depicts a “communists’ meeting,” he lays claim to his status as a noble Americana Hobo when, following several speeches by radical tramps, he counters with straightforward nonpartisan wisdom, and in doing so exposes their disinformation and hypocrisy.

Employing several rhetorical strategies, he begins by challenging the idea that tramps comprise a class deserving of sympathy, insisting that their complaints of material deprivation have been greatly exaggerated: “You talk about starvin’. Well, how many of you fellers is a starvin’? Come, hold up your hands. You hain’t, hay!” (256). In distinguishing himself from this ignoble audience, Billy makes it clear that he knows his social place and can admit to his failings, acknowledging that “I drinks my beer when I wants it an can git it, and I ’spect it puts more color in my nose than nickels in my pocket.” Unlike the tramps, he takes individual responsibility for his station in life, refusing to blame others. He identifies no socioeconomic forces beyond any one individual’s control that might lead that person into the precarity and poverty of irregular employment. Systemic inequity does not concern him. Proudly, he boasts, “I ain’t one of them fellers what believes that ‘cause some feller’s rich that’s the reason I’m poor.” Finally, he admonishes the gathering of tramps, “Why don’t you go to work,” but at this
point he is prevented from speaking further (257). (The narrator, meanwhile, provides an even more trenchant analysis than Billy, editorializing on both the character of the individual speakers and the illegitimacy of the labor movement’s claims.)

Billy’s last admonishment points to the crux of the matter. Crucially, the narrator characterizes Billy—a tinker—as someone who works, carrying the wares of his trade, “a bundle of old umbrella handles and wires, tied up in a piece of dirty canvas” (209). He disassociates himself from shirkers, predicting the distinction between tramps and hoboeces well before the latter term acquired the meaning ascribed to it by observers like Ben Reitman, Nels Anderson, and others. “I’m none of your whinin’, thievin’ tramps, now don’t you forget it,” he insists. “I’m a respectable travelin’ mechanic.” This assertion carries such import that Billy repeats it only a few pages later, admitting that while he may have chosen to submit to his wanderlust, “I’m none of your lousy, thievin’ tramps, I tell you that” (218). When, in a benevolent gesture, he shares his resources with Harry, he reassures the boy that his food has been obtained legitimately, in the marketplace, rather than through mendicancy: “This here grub is paid for in good, honest coppers” (211). Billy metonymically conflates money with labor, so that the currency exchanged for the food becomes an indicator of moral character. The spender of those “coppers” necessarily must possess a thoroughgoing work ethic in order to have earned the money to spend. Harry, like the presumed reader, has limited experience on the road and makes critical observations during this initial encounter with his new mentor that allow him to articulate for himself fundamental principles of laissez-faire capitalism. He comes to understand that wealth redistribution only assumes validity if it occurs free of all compulsion. This realization has ethical implications not only for the giver, but also
for the receiver. “This is not begging,” Harry can safely assure himself when accepting Billy’s food. “What is freely offered, I may take without shame” (212).

Loyalty to a newly found down-and-out friend, then, rather than pity or charity or the urge to correct some structural inequity, underpins the older hobo’s gesture. A value appropriate to the context of a friendship, loyalty does not extend across communities formed along class lines or motivate collectivized mutual aid. Rather, it bonds one individual to another, as does a formal business contract. As the remainder of the plot reveals itself, Billy has ample opportunities to demonstrate his loyalty to Harry. At the behest of Harry’s long-lost and well-off uncle, Mr. Conover, a private detective searches for the boy, eventually managing to locate Billy Moon in the course of his task. Before he has had the opportunity to assess the detective’s motives, Billy remains aloof, refusing to answer any questions or even admit that he knows Harry. Once the detective has gained his trust, Billy reveals that Harry has been ill with a debilitating fever, and responds incredulously when the detective asks if he has obtained a doctor’s services. “D’ye s’pose I’s goin’ to let the little chap lay there and die ‘thout help? That’s not my style. I hadn’t much money, that’s a fact, but I found a doctor that agreed to see him cheap, and I managed to work ‘round and git enough to pay for his medicine and keepin’” (262). When pressed by the detective as to why he would go to such lengths for a relative stranger, he continues, “Well, what o’ that? Not so much stranger, neither. Didn’t we travel together all the way from Indjijany? D’ye think I was goin’ to throw off on him when he got down so he couldn’t help hisself? That’s not my style” (262). The road breeds profound solidarity, although not the allegiance born of class consciousness, but a bond of friendship between two males who have shared a particularly intense
experience: the crucible of the road. If Billy’s drunkenness results in the occasional moment of comic relief, his generous impulse ultimately overwhelms his profligacy. As he explains to the detective, “I ‘spect I’d been drunk half the time if it hadn’t been for takin’ care of the boy. I was a gittin’ on a kind of spree to-night, and was purty considerable how-come-ye-so when you seed me; but I wouldn’t a got down as long as he’s not able to help hisself” (262).

At the novel’s climax, Harry remains bedridden with fever when confronted by Black Flynn, who has tracked him down to the boardinghouse where Billy Moon has kept vigil over his young ward. Flynn has sworn revenge for a disfiguring injury previously inflicted by Harry in self-defense. The confrontation takes place against the backdrop of the 1877 railroad riots in Pittsburgh, during which the city burns at the hands of malevolent tramps and strikers. Billy had taken leave of his place by Harry’s bed in order to get a closer view of the action, but he is unable to return, being “hemmed in by the struggling mass, and borne irresistibly along with, until he was far removed from his friend” (277). This “mass” functions analogously to any collectivist movement, trapping and dragging along even good-hearted people who interact with it out of mere curiosity. Later, recounting the sequence of events, Billy reiterates this parallel when he remarks that he “got mixed up in the crowd” (280). Billy’s error leaves Harry unprotected when the flames spread to his building, which also happens to be the precise moment that Flynn makes his entrance. Fortunately, Billy follows just in time to save Harry from Flynn’s knife and knock the tramp to the ground, while repeating his catchphrase: “You’ll not murder the young chap while I’m around. That’s not my style” (278). Billy proceeds to rescue Harry, pulling him from the burning building with the help
of the detective who has also conveniently just arrived on the scene, while Black Flynn remains trapped to perish in the flames. The reader enjoys the satisfaction of vengeance in watching this dastardly villain burn to death while knowing that the heroes’ motives remain pure. Billy remarks, “I’m almost sorry we left him there, but I forgot all about him, I’s so anxious to get the boy out.” The detective, while insisting that Flynn “deserved his fate,” also maintains that he “would not have left him to die such a death if there had been time to save him, but the fire was at our heels as we came down the stairs” (279).

Mr. Conover, once reunited with his nephew Harry, emphasizes the Americana Hobo’s heroic status, observing that “we would have been too late, had it not been for this brave fellow,” Billy Moon (280). In attempt to reward Billy, Mr. Conover asks, “Is there anything in which I can help you?” before offering to take Billy into his home and arrange for “better employment than mending umbrellas” (281, 282). Billy has earned through his moral and heroic actions a better mode of living, Conover insists, but this hobo by his very nature remains happy with his station in life and does not seek to rise inappropriately. Shifting between first and the third person over the course of a brief monolog, he explains to Conover that “Billy Moon would be a fish out of water at you fine house, and he’d only be in your way. … I’m a reg’lar vagerbon’ and I ‘spect I’ll never be anything else. I’d git the blues, and then I’d either git drunk or run away and take to the road agin. … [Y]ou can’t make anything but a vagerbon’ out’n Billy Moon, if you’d try.” When Harry makes a final attempt to convince Billy to stay, the “vagerbon’” reiterates more forcefully his position in another monolog. “I couldn’t live no other way but like I’ve been a doin’. It’d kill me to have to stay round in one place all the time. I’d
want to be out on the road agin in less than a week” (288). However noble this Hobo may appear, he remains on a fundamental level the embodied antithesis of certain bourgeois values—domesticity, thrift, accumulation of surplus capital—and so cannot successfully mix with the middle classes. Because vagabondage stems from an essential characteristic, attempts to reform the most committed Hobo necessarily fail. Consequently, while the middle class reader may now see that “‘there’s many a poor fella what hasn’t had no chance in life, and may be it’s not his fault that he’s not fit for nothin’ I’cept jet to wander from place to place’” (as Billy puts it), that reader also receives absolution from taking concrete steps to address the problem of homelessness (288). In the end, their natures condemn tramps and hoboes alike to a life of wandering, and these compulsions cannot be overcome even by the opportunity to share in the spoils of a capitalist society, rendering any attempt at structural reform inherently doomed to failure. Similarly, individual benevolence toward transients is folly by definition, as the deserving hobo’s admirable self-reliance and survival skills would prevent him from ever accepting anything he perceives as a handout, while any tramp who begs is axiomatically undeserving of charity.

Through his actions, Billy bears out these conclusions. Just as Harry accepted Billy’s offer of food reluctantly, and only after he confirmed that to do so would not constitute a form of begging, Billy refuses any and all offered rewards or gifts. Over the course of the story, while mentoring Harry, the older hobo loses his umbrella-mending kit, which defined him as a worker when he first appeared on the page. When Mr. Conover asks him what he will do, now that the adventure has come to a close, Billy explains, “I’m a umbrella mender, and work at that most of the time.” He would continue
to do so now, had not been separated from his kit. Here, he obviously sets himself apart from Black Flynn and his ilk, who all refused to labor except when absolutely necessary. Billy remains so committed to his individualism that the only generosity he will accept from Mr. Conover is a replacement mending kit, and even then he insists, “I don’t ask it, mind you; and … I’ll pay you back as soon as I make the money” (281).

For Harry’s benefit, Billy positions his life as a cautionary tale when he explains that “[w]hen a chap spends the best parts of his life a wanderin’ round, and never settles down to anything, it’s hard to break him of it” (282). As with the Savage Hobo, the Americana Hobo’s transience stems from individual and innate character rather than structural circumstances. When Harry asks why Billy, obviously an industrious and competent man, finds himself on the road rather than putting forth the effort necessary for sustained economic success, Billy explains that he is “a reg’lar born vagerbon’” (218). So, Harry must feel fortunate not have remained transient much longer, else he might have fallen forever beyond the civilizing influence of a settled life. Still, times spent as on the road under the tutelage of a genuine Hobo provides a unique, meaningful, formative experience. The reader understands that Harry now has a story to tell and appreciates bourgeois privilege to a degree that sets him apart from others who have never faced such challenges. Billy articulates this sentiment when hinting at the future nostalgia to be generated from the events that constitute the novel’s plot. Admonishing Harry, he pleads, “When you’re in your fine home, with all your friends about you to love and take care of you, don’t forget the time when you and Billy Moon paddled along the road together” (288). In this way, *The Man Who Tramps* establishes yet another common trope of the American Hobo representational tradition, according to
which the younger apprentice returns to society’s fold by the narrative’s conclusion, often poised on the brink of a sanctioned, heteronormative domestic scenario that supplants the homosocial male bonds forged in travel. In this particular case, the narrator assures the reader that Harry and Carrie (the daughter of a benevolent family that took Harry in for a brief period) in reunion make the latent manifest, “their hands met, and then—nay, sneer not, you in whose poor withered hearts the well-springs of love have perished in the desert of conventional life—and then—their lips” (291). (Similarly, at the end of Meet John Doe, Long John Willoughby carries Ann Mitchell off screen and symbolically across the nuptial threshold, while the Colonel presumably returns to the road.) As in the typical Horatio Alger story, the younger, temporary tramp at the end of the narrative stands positioned to embark on a legitimate middle-class career. In the final pages of the book, the narrator looks to the future, announcing that after a period of education, Harry will “enter a prosperous mercantile business in which Mr. Conover had purchased a partnership” (293).

That Harry emerges from his tramping ordeal unscathed, and even wiser for it, while Billy remains doomed to roam the countryside like an industrial-age reiteration of the Wandering Jew (for mocking the full rationalization of the work ethic, perhaps) suggests another valence of America’s ambivalent relationship with mobility. While the hobo exhibits numerous traits worthy of admiration and even celebration, a citizen should not wish to become a hobo. Seelye makes an observation essential to developing a full understanding of the ideological deployment of the tramp figure in its various guises: the divergent valuations of the noun tramp and the verb tramping. “Without being an actual tramp,” he argues, “Dean [Moriarty] has the tramping urge,”
possessed of “vague recklessness” as a disaffiliated seeker (538). This distinction—and the confusion regarding where exactly the distinction breaks down—accompanies other approaches to the intertwined subjects of actor and action, whether addressing reality or representation. Higbie has shown that social investigators who endeavored to explain and hopefully solve the problem of transience in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century tended to demonstrate a pronounced ambivalence toward their subjects. While the tramp was “villainous, lazy, dirty, and dangerous to the community[,] … investigators often wrote about *tramping*—as opposed to *tramps*—as a liberating experience” (75).

To spend time tramping may be good for the character, but to become a tramp entails separating oneself, perhaps permanently, from the goods American society has to offer. Stealing rides on trains and sleeping in track-side jungles, the Americana Hobo skirts the narrow line dividing the liberated and admirable from the degraded and ignoble, and by virtue of taking this dangerous path he derives both his appeal and his theoretical significance. This mode of existence stimulates a series of questions the answers to which are fraught with ideological implications: How long can a person embrace mobility before a return to productive domestic normativity becomes impossible? How should America reconcile its veneration of both the nonconformist pioneer and the nuclear family unit? How much material success must be attained to render rugged individualism an unambiguously admirable trait? How much freedom is too much?

These questions draw the line that separates the Savage Tramp and the Americana Hobo. In their bearing on efforts to define the American character, the tensions between these two cultural representations of the vagabond find rough parallel in the constructions of the indigenous peoples of America by Europeans and their
descendants. From the earliest encounters, these constructions “in texts, prints, paintings, sculptures, performances—in all conceivable media” stemmed from a need to render their subject legible through simplistic categorization (Krech 16). An understanding of the cultural work representations of the Indian as either the Ignoble Savage or the Noble Savage perform enables a better grasp of the Hobo’s ideological functions.

Sharing roughly the same sources of inspiration, the two representational traditions of the Indian produce contradictory figures. In The White Man’s Indian, Robert F. Berkhofer, Jr. delineates the characteristics associated with each of the two traditions: the ignoble Indian is depraved, naked, lecherous, promiscuous, vain, warlike, fiendish, brutal, loathsome, filthy, indolent, improvident, treacherous, deceitful, and superstitious, while the noble Indian is humble, tranquil, dignified, courageous, independent, appreciative of nature, and innocent, possessing “handsomeness of physique and physiognomy” and “great stamina and endurance” (28). Because such pure examples of malevolence on the one hand and innocent primitivism on the other exist as images rather than corresponding to real people, any meaning to be gleaned from them pertains to the authors of those images:

to understand the White image of the Indian is to understand White societies and intellectual premises over time more than the diversity of Native Americans. … [I]t is ultimately to the history of White values and ideas that we must turn for the basic conceptual categories, classificatory schema, explanatory frameworks, and moral criteria by which past and present Whites perceived, observed, evaluated, and interpreted Native Americans, whether as literary and artistic images, as subjects of scientific curiosity, or as objects of philanthropy and policy. As fundamental White ways of looking at themselves changed, so too did their ways of conceiving of Indians (xvi).
The same may be said of the homeless migrant: the way in which he is interpreted, categorized, and characterized reveals more about the dominant society that does the interpreting, categorizing, and characterizing than it does about the tramp himself.

The Indian as ignoble savage “in the clutches of Satan” appears as a trope in literary production of Puritan New England and persists through films in the Western genre well into the twentieth century (Berkhofer 83). Indolent heathens incapable of assimilation at best and capable of unspeakably violent acts against whites and each other at worst, Indians of this type justify the most reactionary measures in support of civilization’s progress. The stereotypes of both the ignoble savage Indian and the Savage Tramp transform actually existing and complex human beings into caricatures that become objects of fear, derision, and assault, and so justify ruthless campaigns of eradication or (for the more liberal minded) reform and assimilation. Although divergent in their methods, eradication and reform share as their goal the elimination of a perceived existential threat. To facilitate this goal, these parallel stereotypical representations generate descriptions of their subjects based on a lack of conformity to the standards of dominant society, rendering their objects wholly other.

Yet, in their very deviation from the normative prescriptions of the dominant society, the figure of the Indian and the figure of the tramp share the potential for sympathetic portrayals. Because “Indians lacked certain or all aspects of White civilization,” they “could be viewed as bad or good depending upon the observer’s feelings about his own society and the use to which he wanted to put the image,” Berkhofer argues, meaning that in the hands of the white observer ambivalent about modern life, representations of the Indian could serve as a vehicle for critique (27-28).
The acceleration of urbanization and industrialization of the late nineteenth century brought with it the sense of a disconnection from an unspoiled natural world so central to American national identity. The Indian had long played a central role in the narrative that produced this identity, culminating in the antebellum era with *The Song of Hiawatha*, Longfellow’s epic romantic enshrinement “the Indian brave in poetic verse … as a full-fledged heroic figure” (Mitchell 106). In the decades after the Civil War, this tendency became manifest in the phenomenon historian Roderick Nash has identified as “the American cult of the primitive,” which celebrated the Indian’s harmonious relationship with nature. It appeared that civilization entailed the potential loss of some fundamental quality that had previously freed Americans from the decadence and social rigidity of Europe, and it now seemed that the Indian—conveniently all but eliminated as a threat—could lead the way back to Eden.

The rhetoric of primitivism extended well beyond literary culture, appearing even in mainstream political discourse. Touching on these concerns in a speech delivered in 1899, Theodore Roosevelt lamented the impact of idle leisure granted by excessive civilization and promulgated the “doctrine of the strenuous life” for both the individual and the nation (1). While in large measure an enthusiastic call for the United States to engage in imperialist overseas endeavors, the speech conflates such geopolitical strivings with the personal imperative to embrace “those virile qualities necessary to win the stern strife of actual life” and escape the fate of “the over-civilized man, who has lost the great fighting, masterful virtues” (2, 7). As well, his call to reject “that base spirit of gain and greed which recognizes in commercialism the be-all and end-all of national life” resonated at the turn of the twentieth century, when the ever more integrated
marketplace engendered “antimodern attitudes” among “Americans who longed for physical vitality and spiritual insight” (Roosevelt 8; Armitage 73). For those drawn to such sentiments, “the American Indian provided a ready-made Adamic figure” (Baird 197).

Yet, Native Americans’ racial otherness remained a stumbling block. In the antebellum period, strands of literary and philosophical discourse transposed perceived admirable traits of the pure, innocent, noble Indian onto what critic R.W.B. Lewis identifies as the figure of the American Adam, “an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race; an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources” (5). In the novels of James Fenimore Cooper, for example, “the untracked American forest” and, indeed, the entire “world … lies all before the hero,” although to survive that hero must “keep … two jumps ahead of time,” before the encroachment of civilization (Lewis 100). After the devastation of the Civil War and the closing of the frontier, however, the nation’s Edenic promise had been largely erased, its innocence lost. In this postlapsarian era, with both the American Adam and his Indian analog moving inevitably toward the oblivion of history, the Hobo arrives, likewise a self-realized and self-directed figure, comfortable within picaro and isolato narratives, a latter-day Natty Bumppo who negotiates the wilderness of modernity, the railroads and track-side jungles. No longer forced to move only westward, but rather free to circulate in all directions, he is a something of secular pilgrim, with the road itself as the destination, simultaneously achieved and out of reach.
The ideological gestures that construct America’s indigenous population as the Noble Savage provide a template for the recuperative measures that recast the vagabond as the Americana Hobo, exemplified by the characters such as the Colonel or Billy Moon. Ultimately, with minor variations, both of these figurative types allow for the uncomplicated celebration of American character’s most virtuous traits. They each represent a pure distillation of independence, self-reliance, uncomplicated wisdom, and authenticity. Moreover, characterizations of the Americana Hobo and Noble Savage solidify in the cultural imaginary at roughly the same historical moment, during the decades on either side of the twentieth century’s turn. The popularity of “Wild West” shows from the 1880s to the 1930s, such as Wild Bill’s, accelerated the coalescence of the most influential images of the “Indian,” and these images would persist in filmic constructions of the character. Despite the generalizations thrust upon the members of each of these populations, both Native Americans and homeless migrants managed to assume contributory roles in the constructions of such iconic representations, exercising a degree of agency in their respective receptions. Arguing in *Wild West Shows and Images of American Indians that Native American* participants in these performances were not merely exploited vehicles for the delivery of stereotypes and clichés, L.G. Moses suggests these performers resisted assimilation—the so-called civilizing mission of the reformers who would have them stay on the reservation and become productive in the industrial sense—and were relatively well compensated for it. Of course, as discussed above, tramps and hoboes had greater access to the tools of cultural and particularly literary production than did Indians and so likely had greater influence on the development of their public image.
Through their presence in popular culture the images of both the Indian and the Hobo have been invested with the elusive and enviable trait of authenticity, inspiring a romanticizing process that at times approaches fetishism. Robert Baird points to the “imaginative mythopoeic process” that recurs in “American history, letters, and media” whereby a white man leaves behind his culture and goes native, shedding his European name and adopting a “natural name” (196, 203). Natty Bumppo becomes Hawkeye (or Deerslayer or Leatherstocking or Pathfinder) and Lt. John J. Dunbar becomes Dances with Wolves. This sequence “is the quintessential American myth—the self-made man rediscovering both America and, most important, his own true self in the process. Freed from the oppressive yoke of European tradition, self-made even to his name … , this character of literature and film has, after two hundred years, become only more solidified in our consciousness” (203). Yet, the Americana Hobo provides a way for the white American who desires an authentic experience a vehicle for a more readily available fantasy than that of the Noble Savage. A white audience shares ethnic and national backgrounds with the Hobo, and so can more readily identify with him. Like the Indian, the Hobo lives a free, simple, and true life, liberated from the bad faith that haunts so many denizens of industrial society. The ritual of becoming a hobo also often involves the abandonment of one’s given name in favor of a rail-rider’s moniker: Jack London becomes “Sailor Jack” and Leon Ray Livingston becomes “A-No. 1.” In romantic opposition to the artificiality of social convention and over-civilization, the Hobo rejects external pressures, refusing to conform to the demands of a soulless, rationalized, mechanized world of work. At the same time, he remains committed to his rugged individualism and eschews the calls of any form of collectivist politics. The last point
reveals him as a true non-conformist who presents no real threat to the structural status quo, an individualist beyond ideology—as if understanding individualism as a marker of authenticity is not itself a function of ideology.

The narrative of the Noble Savage emphasizes the compassion of the first Thanksgiving over descriptions of indigenous resistance to an invading force. Similarly, whatever the actual historical role of migrant workers played in the radical political actions of the Industrial Workers of the World and other groups, the figure of the Hobo goes a long way toward neutering that history. Rather than acknowledging Wobbly organizer E.J. Foote’s claim in a 1908 issue of *Industrial Union Bulletin* that “[e]verywhere you go … you find the spark of revolt smoldering in [the] souls” of those men who “carry their beds in a roll on their backs,” representations of the Hobo tend to conform to the assertion E.R. Lewis, an engineer with the Michigan Central Railroad, made in 1912 in the *Railway Age Gazette*: “The hobo seldom strikes. If he does not get what he considers his rights, he leaves; usually without comment” (17; qtd. in Wyman 268). When it comes to the Hobo’s place in the cultural imaginary, this process of de-radicalization takes place again and again. Jack London deliberately framed the time he spent as a tramp as a critique of capitalism, but those stories are rarely taught and read. Woody Guthrie understood the radical semiotic value of the hobo image when he overstated his rail-riding experiences in his memoir, *Bound for Glory* (1943), but children now sing a compromised version of Guthrie’s fellow traveler’s song “This Land is Your Land” in elementary school. In turn, Bob Dylan began his career imitating Guthrie, understanding the elder folk singer as a paragon of authenticity—thus creating his
persona as a pastiche of an exaggeration—but he later transcended politics to produce pure art after leaving topical folk songs behind. ³

The parallel between Indian and Hobo takes perhaps its most direct form in material culture through the circulation of “hobo” nickels. In 1913 to 1938, the United States Mint issued a coin that has become known as the “Buffalo” nickel, a five-cent piece depicting the profile of a generic Plains Indian (actually a composite of Oglala Sioux, Seneca, and Cheyenne models) on the face and a buffalo on the reverse. James Earle Fraser, the sculptor who designed the nickel, explained in an interview that he “wanted to do something totally American—a coin that could not be mistaken for any other country’s coin. It occurred to me that the buffalo, as part of our western background, was 100% American, and that our North American Indian fitted into the picture perfectly” (Burdett 224). Given that the profile occupied a significantly larger surface area than any previous American coin design and that the nickel was struck in “easily malleable metal made the coin an ideal carving canvas” for numerous and mostly anonymous “men riding the rails,” who would “while away hours transforming the coins into small tokens of folk art” (Cokeley 21). Some producers of these artifacts became well known, such as Bertram Wiegand (who filed away the “L,” “I,” and “Y” in the word “LIBERTY” in order to leave his signature, “BERT”) and his apprentice, George Washington Hughes (known as “Bo”). Their work has becomes highly valued by numismatists, with some individual pieces selling for thousands of dollars, while altered nickels produced by unknown artists still fetch a minimum of hundreds of dollars in online auctions. In this folk art tradition, the hobo artist literally superimposes himself over image of the Indian, submerging the original “100% American” icon (itself
constructed by an outside observer) and that icon’s implied narrative. Albeit through the manipulation of a limiting template and using as a medium the currency of the very economic system that relegates him to the fringes, the hobo carves a self-image—specifically, a caricatured image—to present to the world.

This submerging of the Indian illuminates other ways that the emergence of the iconic Hobo serves an important national-ethnic duty. In emphasizing the role the Hobo played in Western railroad, mining, logging, and agriculture industries, the discourse of national development obscures the role played by Native American, Chinese, Japanese, and Mexican transient labor. As DePastino explains, with the growing demand for itinerant labor, those who found themselves included in the emerging “hobo” category “forged a group identity that drew upon shared experiences of class, plebian notions of whiteness, and peculiar expressions of masculinity” (Citizen 61). The Hobo becomes coded as white and American, even if transient laborers from other ethnic and cultural backgrounds did the same work. This function illuminates a fundamental difference between the American Hobo and the noble Indian: no matter how noble the individual Indian, Indians by virtual of racial categorization remain “the quintessential Other, whose role is to be the object of the White, colonialist gaze,” and so cannot ever truly enter the socioeconomic mainstream (Bird 4). Conversely, even while many the hoboes arrive at the end of a narrative without shedding their alien social status, some of them—those that serve as audience surrogates—are allowed to return to the domestic-industrial fold by virtue of their racial position. Unlike the Indian, the Hobo remains ethnically privileged, and unlike the Tramp, the Hobo has never eschewed
labor entirely and so retains at least the potential to reintegrate socially. As we shall see, some of them do follow Harry Lawson and John Willoughby to do just that.

Even while enabling the individual fantasy of a liberated, adventurous, manly life, the freedom and even the anti-authoritarianism associated with the figure of the hobo according to this representational tradition still perform a discursive function that benefits the dominant culture attending an emerging corporate economy. Given the economic disparity and oftentimes abject working conditions that prevailed during the Gilded Age, the adoption and celebration of the Hobo figure—when precisely deployed—begins to make good rhetorical sense as part of the national narrative of classlessness and anti-elitism. To be a hobo is to make a choice, to adopt a deliberately free life irrespective of larger structural factors, so that no reforms are necessary to address the unequal distribution of benefits of economic growth. In this figure percolates a Revolutionary inheritance, a Jeffersonian vision, a rough-and-tumble Jacksonian democracy. The agricultural ladder imagined by Jefferson and rearticulated by Lincoln in the 1850s theoretically allowed a farm hand to save his wages and eventually become a landowner and employer himself, but this imagined worker no longer started from the same social and economic position in the West after the Civil War and had far fewer opportunities to exercise his right to rise.

To be sure, the ‘hired man’ had been a fixture of farm life for generations; he ate with the family, had a place in the community. But mechanization allowed farm families to dispense with his services. … As farmers specialized to realize economies of scale, they needed seasonal, not permanent, labor; and as western farms expanded—farms of 500 or more acres increased 43 percent between 1880 and 1890—they required quantities of seasonal labor. (Beatty 106)

If the ladder then no longer reliably afforded ascent in the West, the Americana Hobo provided a reassuring recalibration of the independent yeoman farmer ideal. As
the railroads covered more ground, facilitating capitalist speculation in land and commodities, production increasingly relied on intensive farming methods practiced on large landholdings. The image of the hobo entails the implicit acknowledgment that property ownership may not become a reality for all, or even the majority—but even if the average white American male can no longer realistically expect to rise from laborer to the freedom of self-sustaining landowner by dint of hard work, he can take comfort in the knowledge that following the Civil War, he may act according to the free labor ideal. The individual worker remains ostensibly free to sell his labor to highest bidder, free to quit any unemployment that fails to meet his standard and seek wages elsewhere (even if custom and even legislation will complicate this liberty).

And even then, the metaphor of the ladder persisted. Eventually, much like the penniless immigrant who builds a highly lucrative business, the revelation that some famous person or other was a former hobo would reveal the supposedly classless, or at least fluid, nature of American society. Even if they may represent a statistically insignificant minority of the whole transient population, sufficient examples exist of those white, native-born males who started on (or at least occupied for a time) the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder as hoboes yet managed to work their way up to success and respectability for opponents of regulation to support their case. Even if not all of them would come away from the experience convinced of the value of laissez-faire, at one time or another, the likes of Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglass, oil magnate H.L. Hunt, poet Carl Sandburg, novelists Louis L’Amour and James Michener, and singer and actor Burl Ives all rode the rails, demonstrating that America remains the
land of the free—however much the conceptual content of that freedom appears to be in flux.

In their specific details, representational strategies applied to the Hobo typically respond in some direct way to prevailing economic conditions, with different facets of the character coming to the fore. By the 1930s, the homeless vagabond had largely morphed into an object of sympathy, re-imagined as the “Forgotten Man” identified by Franklin Roosevelt in his speech of April 17, 1932. Kenneth L. Kusmer notes that perception, representation, and policy regarding the homeless all underwent significant shifts. “Unlike the 1870s, the huge increase in the number of people standing in soup lines or riding the freights during the Great Depression”—the period with which the Hobo is most associated, even if transient workers had played a significant role in the nation’s economy for decades—“did not generate a hostile backlash.” Rarely did editorialists or policy makers equate this population with political radicalism, “[t]he long-standing image of the lazy homeless person appeared less often, and the humorous tone of many newspaper stories about beggars and lodging-house residents was replaced, for the most part, by more prosaic factual accounts” (209). Unemployed transients in search of work stole rides on freight trains in greater numbers than at any previous point in history. Women joined them in numbers great enough to render them visible for the first time, even if they remained a small minority within the mobile population. Food lines snaked for blocks through urban centers, and shantytowns sprung up across the country. Bonus Marchers—World War I veterans demanding their payment of the bonuses due in 1945—descended on Washington, D.C. With the scope of the crisis reaching spectacular proportions, the public had more and more evidence
that poverty and vagrancy stemmed from causes greater than the personal failings of any one individual.

Popular culture in general responded to the Depression in a variety of ways, from escapism to direct confrontation. In The Cultural Front, Michael Denning delineates between the era’s “proliferation of populist rhetorics” among and between divergent ideological actors that in aggregate reflected “a crisis of representation” following the 1929 crash (126). Various “authoritarian movements used images of class, race, religion, nation, and gender to define and organize the ‘people,’” while cultural producers of the Popular Front sought to portray a “pan-ethnic Americanism” informed by an internationalist perspective (127, 130). Eschewing the radical implications of these two oppositional positions, “an official, mainstream populist rhetoric emerged in the New Deal state and in the culture industry” that offered a sentimental portrait of a people neither “oppressed [n]or exploited,” but rather “merely ‘forgotten’” (127). This version of the people found reiteration in multiple venues beyond Roosevelt’s 1932 speech, perhaps most obviously in the close working relationship between the National Recovery Administration and Hollywood film studios, with the N.R.A.’s Blue Eagle logo and slogan of “We Do Our Part” regularly appearing in the credits of those studios’ films before the Supreme Court declared the Act unconstitutional in 1935. These representations tended to avoid identification of any structural condition or socioeconomic class as a site of blame for the people’s woes. After all, the people need fear only fear itself. The solution to the plight of the people, then, was as emotional or attitudinal as it was material.
In vying for representational authority regarding the character of the American people—of Americanism itself—cultural producers invested in any particular thread of populist rhetoric often evoked the determination and authenticity embodied by the figure of the hobo. While hobo characters generally assumed a less prominent position as representatives of the people in Popular Front rhetoric, a “hobo vogue” permeated the popular culture more generally in the middle years of the 1930s as folklorists catalogued artifacts, songs, and lore, and writers again turned to the romantic narrative of the road in rejection of commercial artifice and in pursuit of authenticity (DePastino, Citizen 213, 212). Serious literature featured realistic portrayals of vagabond characters. In 1935 alone several novels centered around hobo or tramp narratives appeared: Tom Kromer’s Waiting for Nothing, Nelson Algren’s Somebody in Boots (discussed in chapters 3 and 4 respectively), and Edward Anderson’s Hungry Men.

Anderson’s vagabond protagonist, Acel Stecker, again draws attention to the limitations of the clown-hero formal schema, as he certainly is not a clown, yet does not readily conform to a conventionally heroic model. Mostly, he is an admirable survivor, and as such he serves as a particularly complex iteration of the Americana Hobo figure. Unlike The Man Who Tramps, Hungry Men earned a positive critical reputation immediately following its initial appearance and, although it remained out of print for decades, reviews of editions published in the 1980s and 1990s announced the rediscovery of a lost literary classic of the Depression. Stylistically, the novel exhibits a self-conscious modernism, with the terse, hard-boiled simplicity reminiscent of Hemingway’s syntax and diction. The novel employs a picaresque structure, moving the character not only through geographic but also social space.
with no through-plot more complicated than a recounting of Stecker’s periodic efforts to get back on his feet, for the most part it does not over-romanticize the hobo life, nor does it portray that life as wholly degraded, lacking any hint of joy. Still, although the novel is more artistically and ideologically nuanced than Harris’s novel, in no small part because it willingly acknowledges that its homeless characters inhabit a historical moment of severe economic crisis, Acel ultimately conforms to the Americana Hobo model exemplified by Billy Moon. Motivated by loftier literary ambitions, Anderson paints a serious portrait of a hobo appropriate to the Depression milieu, when his audience would have been unshielded from the visible and widespread deprivation and homelessness. Given the circumstances that accompanied the production of this novel, a hobo as footloose and carefree as Billy Moon would have seemed naïve at best, yet he and Acel are of the same species, distant cousins each living a simple, authentic life enabled by wide-ranging mobility, and each surviving through a commitment to an individualist work ethic, eschewing collectivity, and avoiding charity (or, at least, in the realist narrative, accepting it only in order to persevere long enough to repay it). Both maintain a philosophical perspective on life without becoming mired in political struggle, even if Acel feels a temporary attraction to radical slogans and solutions. Perhaps most importantly, although they may encounter particular indignities stemming from the prejudices of others, neither character appears to suffer systemic persecution or exploitation. The reader, then, may feel admiration and even compassion, but not outrage or a sense of responsibility. These men, both possessed of core American traits, will survive because they will take care of themselves.
From the start, Acel’s ongoing internal monolog, presented through a close third-person narration, addresses several thematic points that the novel will return to again and again, illustrating the ways in which its representation of homeless mobility will vary greatly from that of The Man Who Tramps while also revealing how closely aligned they are on several points of ideology. Contemplating the registration process at a mission in the novel’s first chapter, Acel thinks to himself,

I don’t mind this registering business so much. … I gripe out on the road about having to go through all this red tape for a bowl of soup, but I don’t mind this so much. I guess it’s because I like to have somebody ask me questions. It’s an illusion that somebody is interested in me personally. Who is interested in me? The government. That’s because I am a social menace. That’s being something, anyway. (4)

These few lines touch on multiple complicated and interrelated ideological concerns. They offer a critique of the representational strategies of the Savage Tramp tradition. The thinking individual has been reduced to a category (“social menace”) that defines him negatively, by what he lacks: a job, a residence, and a support network. By immediately addressing the personal affronts an impoverished transient faces in his peregrinations, it provides the necessary details to establish narrative authority regarding the hobo life, distinguishing it from more romantic or nostalgic representations. Acel also announces his cynicism toward the impersonal government, yet his loyalties do not lie with the hobo community, either, however much his current material circumstances may suggest that he shares its interests. He resists membership in this group by maintaining that he shares their complaints only outwardly, “out on the road,” in order to avoid standing out, but his heart is not in it. He continues his efforts to reap the benefits of this class while remaining apart, hoping perhaps that his self-criticism affords him some distance.
Much of the Hobo’s appeal lies in his capacity for far-flung, cost-free, independent movement around the country, which presents a means to an end and serves as a virtue in and of itself. Time and again, Acel demonstrates an understanding of mobility’s inherent value from the distinct perspective of a hobo, and the novel’s episodic structure reflects his almost perpetual motion. At the beginning of the narrative, mobility for him has already become a technique for survival, materially and psychologically. To stay on the move—to become a hobo—requires initiative and stamina, whereas a merely inert bum (who neither works nor wanders) lacks the will. Movement offers no guarantee that a person’s lot will improve, but failing to move condemns a person never to rise. Any pioneering action entails the risk of failure, and in a national culture that celebrates the pioneer spirit, this truism allows for the noble portrayal of the Hobo. It makes sense, then, that the novel’s hoboes respond to rumors of New Deal initiatives intended to stabilize transients—both by providing government-regulated shelters and by “‘vagging everybody they catch on the highways and around freight yards’”—with anxiety and resentment (218).

After an introductory chapter that establishes the novel’s tone and the general deprivations of the transient life, the second chapter announces the conditions that motivate Acel’s movement: he has been on the road for almost two years, ever since losing his job as a trumpet player in an orchestra in Juarez. (According to Acel, he was fired because he knew he was better than the rest of the band, not because of any deficiency of talent on his part.) He now plans to quit the nation’s capital, where he has just recently arrived, and continue on to New York, where he plans to reenter the music industry. “There’s a fellow up there from my home town who’s a pretty big shot in the
music game," he explains to one of his many temporary traveling companions. “I’m going to look him up and tell him I need a job” (15-16). Although it gradually becomes apparent that this big shot, Red Gholson, will provide no such opportunity, Acel does not give up hope on his larger plan of once again earning his living as a musician. After a brief period of aimlessness, he takes a job as a messman in the galleys of the S.S. Picfair, a local pleasure boat, resolving to save his earnings so that he can buy a suit. In presentable clothes, he reasons that he will be in a better position to approach Gholson once again. “With a new suit and everything and money in my pocket I’d feel different,” he reasons. “That is what has been the matter with me. It’s psychological. A man can’t get a job looking like a bum or feeling like one” (80-81). Even if Gholson will disappointment him, Acel’s reasoning regarding the importance of personal appearance and confidence seem sound and his ambitions laudable. At the same time, that reasoning places an emphasis on individual character while ignoring other causes of unemployment, subtly endorsing the free labor ideal. When Acel quits his mess job, it seems at least as much an expression of justifiable dissatisfaction with working conditions as a reckless whim. Even in the depths of the Depression, he finds it possible to make this choice without disastrous consequences. This is the advantage of the hobo worker: unattached to a particular location, Acel sustains the optimism necessary not only to pursue employment, but eventually to determine the conditions of that employment, as one ideally should in a free labor market.

Even if not directed toward the pursuit of a specific job, mobility allows for the homeless subject to exercise agency. “Just keep moving and you will always run into something,” Acel reminds himself after yet another avenue fails to yield employment. It
turns out this sage advice has been passed down from hobo mentor to apprentice:

“That was what that old bum in Omaha said. Just keep moving and something will turn up—a flop, a handout, a ride, a cigarette, a piece of change. All you have to do is keep moving” (209). He finds that after two years on the road he himself is now in the position of dispensing such plain-spoken wisdom. “When a man is on the move it isn’t so bad,” he opines to another tramp. “A man on the road has something to look forward to even if it’s just the next town. And you’re so busy going that you don’t have time to think about how tough things are” (17). Throughout the story, he embraces mobility almost compulsively, at times finding himself moving “toward the highway … as if something were prodding him in the back and if he walked fast he might escape its pressure” (24). From mobility the Hobo derives not just opportunity, but the strength to continue searching out that opportunity.

Understanding the hobo life as the prerogative of unattached men, those for whom such mobility remains unavailable express tempered envy. Joe, a crewmate on the *Picfair*, says that he “can’t be independent” like Acel because his earnings go in part to support a dependent mother and sister (80). Yet, in contrast to Billy Moon, Acel does not wholly reject the allure of domestic attachments. Throughout the novel, he unsuccessfullly seeks to resolve the contradiction between mobility and romantic domesticity. On the one hand, he reminds himself and others that “I don’t have any money to blow on women” and “‘A man out of work doesn’t have any business thinking about any kind of women’” (97, 223). On the other hand, not long after his first encounter with a woman named Corrine, he tells her, “This is the best time I’ve had in a long time. I was lying in a park not so long ago, and I saw a couple pettin’, and I
wondered then how long it would be before I had someone. It’s mighty nice sittin’ here and looking at you and knowing that you are mine” (113). It becomes clear that what may have started predominantly as sexual desire evolves into something more overtly connubial when he amuses himself by lettering “Mr. and Mrs. Acel E. Stecker” on the slip above the mailbox of the small apartment they have taken together (140). Given that this romance began on the day that Acel quit his mess job and thus cut off his one reliable source of income, it does not take long for the contradiction between mobility and domesticity to assert itself. Acel had already acknowledged its existence on meeting Corrine for the first time, lamenting, “I’m beginning to feel sorry I met you. I was getting along pretty good without a girl” (104). Without employment, he struggles to maintain the integrity of their relationship. Pointedly, Corrine reminds Acel of the gendered nature of their respective options when faced with poverty, observing, “The difference is that you can sleep on park benches and get by now. … [A] down-and-out man begs and a woman sells” (131). Acel manages to postpone both of these fates when he secures a loan from his friend Boats, but only for a short while. Fleeing a violent melee during a labor protest, Acel is falsely charged with criminal assault after the fact, so he decides take advantage of his access to mobility, telling Corrine, “If I got down South maybe I can find something to do.” Unconvincingly, he adds, “I’ll send for you” (157).

As a result of this tension, Acel’s thinking betrays an attempt to collapse the opposition of mobility and romance by drawing a parallel between transience and sexual promiscuity. In a chapter titled “New Orleans,” he wanders about without a particular direction, meditating on his mode of existence.
I like this street. It’s a street for a guy like me. It doesn’t matter how you look or who you are on a street like this. … I have walked down a lot of streets, just moseying around like this. In Frisco and Minneapolis. In Denver and St. Louis. In little towns like Paducah and Ranger and St. Augustine. I have kind of liked them all and sort of hated to leave them. Each new town makes me forget the other. They’re like girls. (208).

A girl, then, remains as fixed in space as any town, and both girls and towns are visited by the uprooted men who travel between them. Echoing Corrine, a woman Acel encounters at night seated on “shadowed steps” on Royal Street understands transience as the privilege of men (210). “I guess it is pretty good,” she wonders aloud, “just going around from town to town and seeing different things” (214). In asking this question she performs the role of reader surrogate, her romantic vision of life on the road deriving from the characterizations found in popular culture. Her geographic position anchored, she has turned to the one available endeavor Corinne had identified that will enable a woman to alleviate her economic deprivation. A more important option for the impoverished male than begging is the freedom mobility. Their movement restricted, these women must resort to selling their bodies for unsanctioned sexual labor and so incur bourgeois society’s castigation, while Acel’s mobility facilitates the socially approved sale of his laboring body.

Acel does experience a temporary crisis of faith in mobility while in New Orleans where, after a series of failed attempts to establish some modicum of financial security, he comes to see constant movement as an inhibitor to success. Only in becoming fixed, he reasons, can a person establish a steady revenue stream. Acel fantasizes about securing employment registering applicants at one of the new federally funded shelters for transients rumored to be opening soon, having invented the position as well as his qualifications for it. Steady employment would mean a chance to amass capital, which
would allow him to invest in marketing his talents as a musician, now that he is “getting ideas that will get a man someplace” (229). Urging himself on with more enthusiasm than he has shown in the preceding pages, he thinks, “I could get me a horn if I got this job and get up a lip and sit in now and then with some of these bands and get acquainted, and the first thing I would have a job.” Having met a pair of fellow musicians, Lou and Wayne, who have likewise been hoboing around the country, he admits to himself that in some ways he has been his own worst enemy: “That’s been my trouble, changing towns and not just keeping ding-donging at some of these bands” (228). He reiterates this point in conversation with one of the musicians with whom he hopes to start his band, describing mobility as a trap, a mode of living that becomes a compulsion, an addiction, rather than a means to an end.

“You know yourself now, Lou, that when you got out in California you’d stick there a couple of months and then you’d wanta start for some place else. Just about New Orleans, too. That’s the trouble with us fellows, we’re always wanting to go on and not sticking in one place long enough to run into something. … There’s nothing to this runnin’ around, I’m telling you” (245).

And yet, after failing to secure employment at the shelter, Acel recovers his faith and once again embraces the mobility afforded by the railroad. Lou proposes the idea of getting out of New Orleans and catching a hot shot to Chicago, explaining how railroad workers in a nearby yard collaborate with hoboes: “The engineer stops for the bums on that S.P. train outa Gretna every morning,’ Lou Said. ‘They call it the Hobo Special. They say they stop to let everybody on’” (252). Acel, excited about the prospect of renewed mobility—not aimless, but toward a job—laments, “How in the hell are we going to pass away the time in this damned town between now and in the morning?” (253).
In the end, as with many of the protagonists in hobo narratives, Acel triumphs by coming home—or, at least, settling in one place—after having survived the crucible of the road. Once in Chicago, he implements his plan to form a band with Lou and Wayne and appears positioned to begin a successful run on the last page of the book. In this way, Acel occupies a position between *The Man Who Tramps*’s Harry and Billy. Unlike Harry, Acel’s narrative does not include tutelage at the hands of an older, more experienced hobo mentor. Yet, unlike Billy, Acel has not fallen victim to the road’s perpetual allure. He has hoboed, but he has not become a permanent hobo.

This finale—Acel’s decision to leave the road—does not dilute the authenticity of his experiences on the road, however. A protagonist need not remain in perpetual transit in order to fulfill the primary discursive functions of the Americana Hobo. In Acel, the reader encounters an individual capable of leading an admirably and even enviably uncomplicated life. The decadence and consumerism of the 1920s apparently led to a fall as Americans lost sight of fundamental national values, and the portrait of a simple, authentic life entailing modest pleasures can serve as a balm for readers who experience anxiety rooted in economic precariousness. Wandering through the streets of New Orleans, utterly broke, Acel’s contemplations carry an almost Epicurean flavor.

I feel better like this, in cotton pants and this old jacket with two bits in my pocket, than I do when I’m dressed up and with a couple of dollars. When I’m dressed up I want tailor-mades and I see people with things and it makes me feel bad, but like this I don’t care. I can flop right over there in that doorway if I want to, and two bits seems like a lot to me. (209)

These sentiments rearticulate the central thesis of the Colonel’s “heelots” speech. The hobo life offers a valuable shift in perspective as one embraces the comfort that accompanies absolute poverty and produces an attendant freedom from desire. Released from the desire spurred on by covetousness, a hobo experiences a freedom
from the pain of disappointment that necessarily results from the inability to fulfill that desire. Almost paradoxically, the loss of economic choice results in a profound sense of agency.

Written in a far more realistic mode than *The Man Who Tramps*, *Hungry Men* does not deny the deprivations of poverty and homelessness even as it suggests that such a life has the potential to provide relief from the chaos and anxiety of modern life. Through Acel’s thoughts as much as his actions, the novel didactically describes various survival strategies used by hoboés. In a narrative striving for verisimilitude, it is impossible to represent characters who steadfastly maintain the strict refusal of all charity both Billy and Harry exhibit in *The Man Who Tramps*. So, Acel must confront the fact that he does at times find himself reduced to accepting charity and even to begging in his pursuit of a job. In a telling moment of self-critique, Acel even evaluates his reluctance to beg. He has been on the road long enough that he has learned the best panhandling tactics, even if he is loath to use them. Seeing a couple on the sidewalk, he thinks, “A good bum … would approach the fellow and put the bing on him. A fellow with a girl makes a good touch. He could go up and say: ‘Bud, could you help a man who hasn’t had anything to eat today?’” (21). More often than not, however, Acel chooses not to be a good bum, but rather—even if the two terms are used interchangeably in the novel—a good hobo.

As the novel’s title suggests, the threat of hunger looms large in a hobo’s daily life. Kromer observes in his review, however, that the novel spends little time depicting the effects of hunger. Instead, it becomes a given condition that permeates the characters’ lives, something to be endured with quiet dignity or, at most, only little
comment: “‘You know when I was a kid,’ Acel said, ‘I used to think hunger was something like the toothache, only worse. I mean when you went a long time. But now I know there isn’t much to it’” (16). This statement coincides with the novel’s perspective on poverty in general. The suffering that results from deprivation, if not explicitly positioned as such, at least implicitly infuses the sufferer with a kind of nobility. Pre-Enlightenment religious thought viewed suffering as a virtue, an end in itself, and that sentiment informs conservative reaction to the perceived decadence of modernity. Appropriately, then, Acel does not expect other individuals or society to rectify any pain that he experiences as a result of his social position—although he does at times come to resent the denial of that pain’s existence. After a confrontation with a law enforcement officer who declares that tramps and hoboes are the cause, rather than the symptom, of America’s problems, Acel formulates an unspoken, sarcastic response.

This is fun, runnin’ around looking for a place to flop. I don’t want to work. Me, want to work? It’s too much fun running around from town to town and seeing the country from nice freight trains. It’s the bums’ fault. A bum shouldn’t be running around the country without money. He should make it a point to have two or three hundred dollars when he gets in a town. He should attend to things like that. (176-177)

This statement encapsulates the novel’s goal of puncturing the image of the more egregiously romanticized hobo without deflating it entirely. Unlike Billy Moon, the hobo in Anderson’s universe lives a hard life. Economic circumstances more than disposition have put him on the road, and his mobility facilitates his pursuit of employment. Yet, the thinker of these thoughts defends his mode of existence reasonably, maintaining his independence and dignity in his refusal of self-loathing and excessive sense of victimization.
Besides, whatever its hardships, in *Hungry Men* life on the road offers its share of rewards, as well. Boxcars and especially hobo jungles comprise a primitive and egalitarian homosocial space where uncomplicated principles govern relations. During his travels, Acel enters one such jungle in “a clearing in a woods of scrub oaks within a stone’s throw of the railroad. … A dozen hoboes occupied the clearing. One of them had a mirror fixed in the bark of a tree and was shaving. A hobo, naked to the waist, came up out of the gully with a can of water” (190). If this space separates the hobo from female contact, it makes up for it with an abundance of male camaraderie: “A bum never lacks companionship, [Acel] thought. On every train there is a new buddy to pal up with, and in every jungle there’s a bum going your way” (188). Acel travels briefly with several such men, forming bonds, no matter how ephemeral they may prove to be, that are based on trust and common decency so lacking in the modern world. “A road buddy is someone to watch your bundle while you go get a drink or he dings the salt and bacon if you agree to get the pepper and bread,” Acel thinks, helpfully explaining hobo social relations for the reader (188-189). Prompted by their shared interests, these road buddies practice an informal mutual aid both on freight trains and in hobo jungles. “Maybe he has been over the route before, … and he knows whether the crews are tough or if there is a hard bull ahead. You can talk to a road buddy like you were talking to yourself.” All in all, Acel concludes, “[t]here were some good guys on the road” (189).

 Appropriately, the railroad plays an essential role in the authenticity of Anderson’s hobo character, in that it allows him to maintain that independence and dignity. In an early chapter, Acel does opt to hitchhike rather than hop a freight train, but he makes his preference for the rails clear, telling another hitchhiker he meets, “I ride
trains mostly when I’m traveling, but I’m only trying to make Baltimore today, and I thought I’d take the highway. I don’t like this thumbing myself” (26). Thumbing a ride equates to begging: the hitchhiker is dependent on generosity of others, rather than taking what he needs from an indifferent source on which he will ideally have no impact. The hitchhiker also must face rejection of every driver that passes. When someone does stop, the unique social dynamic obligates the hitchhiker to accede to all the driver says, or else risk losing the ride. Acel endures a lengthy self-aggrandizing lecture on opportunity and hard work from a driver, who tells of his rise from humble beginnings as a twelve-year-old worker in the Kansas City stockyard to chairman of the Chamber of Commerce bridge committee. (Acel understands and fulfills his role as the attentive audience, asking the prompting questions the driver clearly wishes him to ask.) After recounting the triumphant fulfillment of his vision—a bridge that has not yet been built, but for which government has appropriated funds—he condescendingly assures Acel, “You can do the same, young man. Don’t think there is not opportunity in this world” (29).

Conversely, a freight train, like a river, follows its route oblivious to any passengers, passing no judgment, rejecting no one, requiring nothing in return. Still, even if the hobo does no damage and depletes no resources in riding a train—his attitude toward it is respectful and his interaction with it benign—the railroad detectives, acting as agents of capital, seek to deprive him of it. Thus, the defining element of hobo life and the hobo narrative genre becomes not only a means of seeking work but an adventurous masculine ritual. In a chapter titled “On the Road,” Acel demonstrates his determination sneaking through a freight yard, playing cat-and-mouse with the railroad
bulls who have just rounded up a bunch of hoboes, escaping the detective who spots him as he catches a car on the fly. Although trains may be indifferent, they are described in animate terms; hidden down an embankment, Acel watches as “[t]he locomotive of the long freight puffed and labored as if held in a giant’s leash” (160). Sentient if not cognizant, the train provides not only mobility, but shelter to the hobo. Acel sits in a stationary “warm and dry car” while wind gusts and the “rain crack[s] against” it (180).

Aware that through his travels he reproduces and participates in an established oral and literary storytelling genre with broad appeal, Acel provides occasional commentary on the conventions of hobo narratives. He even envisions his experiences as the basis of a commodified literary production from which he might directly benefit: “Writers got one hundred dollars for those stories” (162). Contemplating the particular details of his situation as it unfolds, he thinks, “A hobo in a refrigerator hole and his throat all gluey! It would make a short story, one of those short stories they print in Liberty” (162). Acel’s thoughts serve as a critique, or even a parody, of the set of conventions attached to the hobo narrative. Imaging himself as the protagonist, Acel begins sketching the plot of his story:

There wasn’t nothing, though, to just a hobo riding in a reefer. Something had to happen. It would be something if I got off at the division to get a drink and the bull nabbed me? And I got thirty days? When the train stopped, the hobo in the story would crawl out and make a run for the hydrant in front of the shanty. The bull would jump out and grab him and say: “You got your guts, you son of a bitch.” (162-163)

Acel understands that his pass at a plot remains insufficient, because such “stories had to have surprises at the end” (163). So, he takes his premise and imagines a thirsty train rider arrested while attempting to steal a drink of water from a hydrant in a freight
yard and thrown in jail, where the man in the next cell laughs and explains in a twist worthy of O. Henry, “Don’t worry. That’s what you get in the man’s town for riding freights. *Three days on water*” (164). In having Acel catalog the beats of apparently typical literary hobo narratives, the novel challenges the authenticity of those narratives and makes a case for its own. In contrast to such stories that use the hobo as vehicle for either entertainment of a larger social observation, the novel positions itself for the reader as the *real story of an authentic hobo*.

Meanwhile, Acel grants that any portrait of hobo life, once it has been packaged for mass consumption, will likely obscure that authenticity. After all, he concedes, “You couldn’t put ‘son of a bitch’ in a magazine” (163). To some degree, he himself has bought into the romantic appeal of the hobo story even if his own experiences provide a counterpoint. He later imagines hobo life as the basis of a work of visual art on seeing hoboes sitting the door of a boxcar, “silhouetted against the Gulf and a sky stained in smoky gold and orange. The silhouettes, Acel thought, would be something for an artist to sketch. Maybe some day I’ll see a sketch like this and I’ll have money then and will buy it” (187). In these thoughts, he projects himself into a future when he has come off the road and become a consumer of hobo-related popular culture.

While Acel does not directly address the rhetorical or political significance of the hobo in popular culture, critics have debated and come to radically different conclusions regarding the ideological sympathies of Anderson’s novel. Given its time of publication and subject matter, it may seem obvious to group it with other proletarian novels of the 1930s such as *Jews without Money*, *Bottom Dogs*, or *The Disinherited*. In an article published in 1938 while the Popular Front was still actively theorizing the role that
cultural production could and should play in the dissemination of ideology, Madeleine B. Stern surveys then-recent American fiction that seeks to propagandize on behalf of an alternative to capitalism, whether implicitly or explicitly. Stern loosely categorizes such proletarian fictions “as a single type of American propagandist literature, the picaresque novel: ‘picaresque,’ because it traces the wanderings of the hero from town to town, from one odd job to another, and ‘proletarian,’ because the peripatetic in every case belongs to the propertyless class” (47). Two variations exist under this broader formal designation: those works that feature “the leit-motif of the gradual growth of proletarian class consciousness, in which case the propagandist method would be called ‘delayed revealed,’” and those that follow protagonists who never undergo the development of class consciousness, “in which case the propagandist technique would be designated as ‘concealed’” (48). Generally finding the latter technique more persuasive “because it disturbs the reader more keenly, prods him more sharply with the desire to rouse these men from their chains,” Stern observes that *Hungry Men* fits second this type, concluding that “[t]he concealment of propaganda in this book is unusually effective. Better than any blatant plea for Communism, this vision of a youth completely helpless in the society to which he was born, and completely unwilling to change that society, this vision propagandizes” (51, 50). While Stern rightly notes that Acel never undergoes a full radical conversion—even when he apparently sympathizes most heartily with the Communist movement, so much so that when a fellow tramp takes him for an orthodox socialist evangelical, he confesses that he has never joined any left-wing organization, saying that “I don’t know what I am” politically—other critics disagree that this failure
operates in service of a greater propagandistic goal, or that the novel would even endorse such a transformation on the part of the reader (E. Anderson 192).

In a 2009 article published in *Dissent*, Morris Dickstein does concur that “[b]uried in *Hungry Men* is a mild revolutionary anger,” but argues that the book’s minimalism subdues this anger, so that it arises only intermittently, “and then quite ambiguously. Though Boats fits the part as the communist martyr, Acel takes on only a fragmentary, inarticulate version of his faith” (92). In the forward to a 1993 reprinting of the book, James N. Gregory goes further, arguing that “Anderson has nothing good to say about Communists and, more important, has little enthusiasm for the project of political inspiration that occupied a good number of his literary colleagues. No call to revolution here” (x-xi). Indeed, it became obvious that Anderson’s personal politics fell to the right of most proletarian novelists when he voiced his anti-Semitism with increasing frequency (xi). Tom Kromer—who, as noted previously, published his own autobiographically informed hobo novel the same year that saw Anderson’s book come to print—wrote the one of the most direct and partisan assessments of the book’s propagandistic quality in a scathing review. After ridiculing at length the authenticity of Anderson’s knowledge of transient subculture (which reviewers from 1935 to 2009 have almost universally extolled, however they interpreted the book’s politics), Kromer declares hyperbolically that “*Hungry Men* could run serially next to the ‘Thank God For Our Supreme Court’ editorial in the San Francisco *Examiner*” (238). ⁸

Whereas Billy Moon effortlessly rejects the allure of socialism, *Hungry Men* presents Acel’s relationship with radicalism as a far more nuanced struggle with the temptation of collectivism. This temptation temporarily overcomes his willpower, yet
proves inadequate in the end. (This arc shares elements with that of the title character of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, who eventually rejects his association with a left-wing group in which the individual’s will is suppressed on behalf of collective goals.) Although Acel flirts with radicalism during the middle section of the novel, the skepticism he displays at the narrative’s opening resurfaces at its conclusion. Acel’s equivocation on the issue of socialism renders a clear political interpretation difficult. Dickstein argues that an analysis of the text’s politics is beside the point, observing that—unlike so many works by proletarian writers of the era—in *Hungry Men* overt political material “remains peripheral, taking up barely a handful of pages” (92). Although Acel does at times talk and even argue about politics with various characters, Anderson rarely reveals Acel’s thoughts on these matters, despite how much time the reader spends in the protagonist’s head. Completely absent, too, are the editorial asides of *The Man Who Tramps*, not to mention the entire chapters devoted to pedantic lecturing. Yet, if the explicit discussion of radical politics is kept to a minimum, and Dickstein may rightly declare the “handful of pages” devoted to such discussion “among the weakest in the book,” the novel ultimately betrays a political stance as coherent as any properly proletarian novel (92). That stance remains seemingly obscure in large part because it is of a type so unlikely to be found in a realistic, sympathetic portrait of a disaffected and destitute worker written in the 1930s.

To be sure, from the beginning, Acel does harbor resentments based in a rudimentary class consciousness—or, more precisely, a sense of misfortune based on his current economic situation. It comes to the fore in those moments when he envies others, when he has not fully embraced his hobo status. Walking along a road while
trying to hitch a ride, he watches a young man in blue sweater hop into a “mirrory”
sports car with a pretty woman.

If there should be a revolution, on whose side would the fellow in the hot
sweater be? Would the revolution be between fellows in cotton pants like
myself and fellows in sweaters with girls in shiny roadsters? Would the
revolutionists say that all men who lived in houses that cost more than ten
thousand dollars were their enemies? … If somebody came along and
picked me up, I’d think the world was level. If I were a revolutionary leader,
though, I’d like to have one of these rich bastards come before me. I’d
say: “Did you ever give a bum a lift? No. Take him out. Off with his head!”

This passage reflects the pervasiveness of such discourse in the 1930s, especially
among the transient population—just as all the radical talk in Harris’s novel is
appropriate to the 1870s, likewise a time of economic crisis and social turbulence—
while it also appears to demonstrate Acel’s limited understanding of any serious
revolutionary project. Although much less articulate than Black Flynn of The Man Who
Tramps, Acel seems similarly motivated in his anger by a desire to obtain what others
possess. Yet, he lacks Flynn’s nefarious characteristics and rather is constructed as an
object of sympathy. Significantly, traces of the question of taking sides mark the entire
narrative. To put it another way, the question Acel leaves unasked here is where his
aspirations to rise would leave him in the event of a revolution.

Both these aspirations and radical political rhetoric come into sharper focus when
Acel meets Boats, a seaman and anti-capitalist agitator, at the Seafarers’ Home while
seeking a job on a ship. Boats takes Acel on a special project, apparently seeing
promise in the younger skeptic, urging him with relative gentleness to read and think
more broadly, and to attend meetings and participate in collective action. Significantly,
all of the other sympathetic characters, including Acel, express respect for Boats. Even
those who remain reticent about his politics speak highly of him, noting his
assertiveness, effectiveness, and lack of hypocrisy. "Most of these Communists are dopes, but Boats isn’t exactly a Communist," one of them assures Acel, intending the distinction as a compliment (45). Despite his initial dislike, Acel eventually concedes, “He might be bullin’ some, but that man has been around. He’s not any South Street bum” (49). (Not unlike Dos Passos, who never lost his affection for Wobblies and certain other anarchists even after his conservative turn, Anderson demonstrates the capacity to portray individual anti-capitalists as heroic even if he rejects their larger agenda.)

Yet, Acel resists, reiterating his aspirations and insisting that he does not “intend to be like this the rest of [his] life” (37). Regardless of his current socioeconomic circumstances, he remains convinced of his abilities to raise himself up through the exercise of individual talent and will. He responds to Boats in the language of Social Darwinism:

“I haven’t read Shaw and I haven’t read Marx,” Acel said, “but I know this, Boats, that there is a survival-of-the-fittest law. The strong are always going to have more than the weak. I’m sittin’ in this dump here, and the reason for it is because I’m not strong enough to be sittin’ in Childs’. However, I’ll be eatin’ in Childs’ before it ends.” (44)

Throughout the story, Acel remains convinced of his own exceptionalism, despite moments of despair. He has little doubt that figures of authority and financial success can make the distinction and see that he is “no ordinary bum” (270). By its conclusion, the narrative confirms that Acel has been justified in thinking himself apart from the mass of unemployed men among whom he moves, not only because as an artist he possesses a certain amount of cultural capital denied the unskilled migrant laborer, but also because he has generated innovative ideas and implemented entrepreneurial plans.
Acel’s skepticism of revolutionary projects often appears to have less to do with rigorous political thinking or strongly held convictions than with the passive impression that such projects are implausible. His doubts may be taken as another example of the Hobo’s simple pragmatism. Shortly after they first met, Acel tells Boats, “It’s too big a job. … You’re not going to reform this world,” and at the end of the novel, he assures as a traveling companion that “[i]t won’t do you no good” to join the Communists (45, 252). He does not believe that hoboes and other dispossessed classes could ever be harnessed as a force for structural change: “A revolution will never start among a bunch of bums” (192). (In their own novels, other writers obviously sympathetic to socialism, such as Kromer and Algren, would seem to agree with this assessment.) While he agrees with Boats that economic disparity exists—he did, after all, resent that fellow with the sweater, the car, and the girl—he sees little use in the solution Boats proposes. In his view, revolutionary change simply does not exist as a plausible option, meaning that only individual initiative remains. When Boats challenges, “If we men down here struggling in this kind of life can’t see the injustice in the capitalistic system, then even a god wouldn’t help us,” Acel’s chides Boats for failing to adopt an individualist perspective. “‘I don’t see that you have any kick coming,’ Acel said. ‘You’ve got a job, and you got you a good suit and some money to spend. What do you have to gripe about? … Like I’ve told you before, this is a dog-eat-dog world, and if I don’t get mine I’m not going to whine’” (71). At this point, Acel still refuses to criticize capitalism, instead seeing his circumstances as a matter of personal responsibility.

In the novel’s middle section, Acel does adopt radical rhetoric, first circulating a petition for Boats, and then vocally participating in a rally. Within ten pages of Acel’s first
positive assessment of radicalism, however, Boats is killed when the rally turns into a melee. Not long after, Acel leaves New York to avoid arrest on false charges of criminal assault. On the road, he continues to espouse socialist ideals for a while, parroting the critical language he had absorbed. But even then, much of what he says sounds more like plain-spoken populism than purposeful radical agitation. When he speaks of “reading the other day about a poor bastard who got five years for robbin’ a pay telephone of eighty-five cents, and right beside him was a picture of a banker that got one year after the bank he was president of went busted,” he expresses a nonspecific anti-Wall Street sentiment then generally acceptable (as it is now) according to a wide range of political orientations (183). Finally, one day, with no apparent motivational shift other than an entrepreneurial inspiration, he simply announces, “I used to be interested in things like that, but what I’m interested in right now is an orchestra I’m planning on organizing” (236). His commitment to collectivist alternatives now seems little more than an excusable and temporary folly.

At the novel’s conclusion, as a direct result of his rejection of radicalism, Acel finally begins to achieve the success he has long sought. He leads his little musical band—Ace’s Vagabonds—through the streets of Chicago, committed to his goal of supporting himself as a musician. He expresses his embrace of the traditional work ethic in an exchange with an I.W.W.-sympathizing “bum” who has been characterized as grotesque (Acel calls him “One Eye” for a reason), violent, and lazy, after this bum argues that begging constitutes a radical act that will draw attention to the country’s ills. “I’d rather work for mine,” Acel says in response (259). Acel’s return to this ideological opposition then leads to a climactic moment (in a novel otherwise especially light on
plot) when, in a subsequent encounter, One Eye makes the deliberately provocative request that the band play “The International.” Acel refuses, telling One Eye to “Go to hell,” One Eye makes a grab for him, and Acel jerks away, dropping his cornet (266). He then attacks One Eye, striking him repeatedly, with the fight ending in the arrest of both men. Recounting the event before a judge, Acel explains that the fight erupted when he refused to play “‘The Communist song’” (272). When the judge asks him why he refused, Acel replies, “That tune? We don’t play tunes like that” (272). Moved by this display of patriotism, the judge decides that “‘there is something significant in this case, and I wonder if you realize its significance, too. But I am sure you do. The fact that you refused to play the hymn or the song, or whatever it is, of a corrupt foreign country is significant and a patriotic gesture to me that deserves consideration’” (272-273).

Although he had not recognized the title of the song just minutes before, the judge proceeds to expound at length on its meaning and merits relative to the U.S. national anthem, proclaiming the former represents miscegenation and “riots and bloodshed and sabotage and civil war,” while the latter “stands for liberty and justice and freedom” (273).

Anderson’s presentation of this juridical diatribe reads as parody, and the judge seems little more than a buffoon. Nothing suggests Acel would go so far as to harbor such reactionary views himself; rather, he merely benefits from his wily manipulation of the judge’s prejudices, exposing the ignorance behind the inflated self-importance. As an Americana Hobo, Acel does not conflate respect for governmental institutions with American values or characteristics. If anything, a healthy distrust of such institutions lies at the core of the Hobo’s particular brand of common-sense patriotism. For his actions
and words, he is rewarded not only with the dismissal of the charges, but with a real
opportunity to finally become successful on his own terms, by merit of his own talents.
As Acel and his bandmates leave the courtroom, a reporter approaches them, asking,
“You just play American tunes? Is that the idea? … I’m planning on doing a little feature
about you boys. I’d like to get your pictures, with your horns and things” (274). He also
offers to get them a job that pays fifty dollars playing at a veterans’ smoker. Although
Acel waffles momentarily, he sees that this is his big chance to get the publicity he
desires and pursue the career he has envisioned. He promptly rechristens the band
“The Three Americans” and decrees that he and his cohorts will work up “some war
songs,” along with “a dirty song or two.” Triumphantly, he exclaims, “I know damn well
we can get some more jobs. … I got some ideas, by god” (275).

While Acel’s various political pronouncements cannot be safely conflated with the
novel’s ideological sympathies, the text gives the reader no reason to think that Acel’s
confidence in the novel’s final moments is misplaced or that the journalist who has
offered publicity and a paying gig will fail to provide both. Given that Acel is not truly a
member of the proletariat—he is more a member of the bourgeoisie without money (to
paraphrase Mike Gold’s title)—he does not actually fail to develop an appropriate class
consciousness. So, the novel’s conclusion does not entail a tragic betrayal of his class
solidarity, strictly speaking. The novel does not “conceal” its proletarian propagandistic
technique, as Stern has argued, as it does not propagandize on behalf of either the
proletariat or socialism, but the individual. Unlike, say, The Rise of David Levinsky, in
which the titular character successfully engages in a capitalist enterprise (as Acel is
poised to do at the close of Hungry Men) and builds a thriving business through
independent initiative, never experiencing the critical socialist revelation that author Abraham Cahan no doubt hopes for among his readership, Anderson’s novel ends on a note of hope. In his rejection of class consciousness and collectivist action, Acel achieves a superior position in virtually every way, and he does so entirely by his own merits, never even getting that break he had hoped for from Red Gholson. Whereas David Levinsky finds himself alone and miserable in the final pages of his story despite all his success—the last chapter of the novel bears the title “Episodes of a Lonely Life”—having cut himself off from his culture and potential intimate relationships, Acel’s not only appears to have revived his career as a musician without having hurt anyone who did not deserve it in the process, but the prospect of paying gigs ensures that he can now afford to pursue the romance he desires with Suzanne, the woman he had been fantasizing about before his fistfight with One Eye. Earlier, Boats had declared that despite the fact that Acel “should be doing the thing [he] can do best”—playing the trumpet—he cannot, “because under this system of government they call democracy one man can pay a crooner one thousand dollars for one night and another man can’t let his child give a penny to a grind organ,” but the novel’s ending proves him wrong (133-134). Although Acel himself had previously rationalized that “[i]f a man doesn’t have a job to give, he certainly can’t make one,” he has in fact created a source of income for himself, as if out of thin air (209). He has rejected the radicalism Boats preached—and literally fought against it in the street scuffle with One Eye—instead following the advice of the driver who picked him up hitchhiking at the beginning of the novel: like a pioneer, he had a vision, and by following that vision he has manufactured his own opportunity.
Both the advent of the relatively inexpensive automobile and United States’ entry into World War II rendered train-hopping transients less common and therefore less visible, but they have never entirely disappeared. Similarly, representations of the Americana Hobo persist in various forms of popular and material culture, much like the Savage Tramp. The quote at the head of this chapter, taken from an episode of the long-running prime-time animated series *The Simpsons*, in which the eponymous family finds itself forced to hop a freight train, speaks to the continuing currency of both representational traditions. While the Savage tramp of the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries overtly serves a function similar to that of the Savage tramp during the Gilded Age, the Americana Hobo’s rhetorical implications have been subdued. Although a rail-riding transient labor force still exists, “[t]he ‘authentic’ hobo is seen … as mostly dead, and with his supposed death, the revisionist memorializing has begun” (Lennon 215). This memorializing strives to wipe away any of the implicit subversive radicalism that might have lurked below the surface of the portraits like those of the Colonel, Billy Moon, or Acel Stecker, which had already undergone a fairly rigorous cleansing process in the journey from reality to representation. Relegated safely to the past, the Hobo becomes an object of nostalgia, feeding an eccentric and vibrant cottage industry that produces and disseminates hobo culture of a highly flexible historical accuracy. The word “hobo” itself pops up in ever more questionable contexts, seemingly further separated from the object it once signified. Perhaps it makes sense that a consumer would welcome the association between the homeless transient and the menu of simple American-style food available at several locations of The Hungry Hobo restaurant chain throughout Iowa and Illinois. Less clear is what connection would lure
Fourth of July revelers to Hobo Joe’s Discount Fireworks off of I-95 in South Carolina. Perhaps most surreal, and certainly most ironic, is the phenomenon of designer hobo-style handbags: a genuine Bottega Veneta can cost well over $3,000.

In many cases, however, the evocation of the iconic figure is far more specific and deliberate. The figure retains positive associations and sufficient appeal to serve as the organizing principle in the branding of a themed tourist train ride through the White Mountains near Lincoln, New Hampshire. Started in the mid-1980s, not long after the Lincoln Paper Mill had ceased operation, the Hobo Railroad repurposed a track originally built to serve the mill. As the proprietor explains in an online video, “We took this historic asset that had been part of the community’s fabric since the late-1800s and breathed a little new life into it with a tourism concern and the Hobo Railroad began.” The Railroad beckons passengers with the slogan, “Free from work, free to play, come be a hobo for a day” while riding trains consisting of refurbished vintage cars built between 1930s and 1950s. During the ride, passengers will encounter Archie Prevost, identified as “a former railroader,” who performs the role of “Choo Choo, the Hobo Clown,” looking a bit like Weary Willie and doing balloon tricks for children. They can also enjoy the “Famous Hobo Lunch,” which includes a sandwich, chips, cookie, and beverage, “as well as a souvenir HOBO bindle stick.” Off the train, activities include a round of “Hobo Hills Miniature Golf,” a “Hobo Jungle” children’s playground, and a Hobo Gift Shop, which sells engineer hats, hobo shirts and sweatshirts, canned “Hobo Soup,” as well as vintage books, periodicals, and advertisements (Plymouth and Lincoln). In this case, the consumer experience provides a connection to a meaningful epoch in American history and includes a celebratory portrayal of a vital American figure,
however vague the definition of that epoch and artificially uncomplicated that portrayal. Ticket buyers have the chance to act out the fantasy of life on the open road. The Tramp has been erased in this family-friendly environment, replaced entirely by a friendly, safe, grandfatherly Hobo. The kids might even come away from the scenic ride having absorbed a few factoids about those independent, footloose, carefree men of a bygone era.

The most consistent and perhaps the most prominent evocation of the Americana Hobo figure has long been and remains the Hobo Convention held in Britt, Iowa. The first convention took place in August of 1900 when, as a publicity stunt, a group of boosters from the small, young town invited the members of Tourist Union # 63—an organization formed in 1897 by itinerant workers with a collective sense of humor—to relocate their annual gathering from Chicago. The promoters advertised the event widely, with the program announcing that “All Tourist, Printers, Bindlestifts (can cook anywhere), Nestocrats (can sleep anywhere,) [sic] and Society Tramps are Invited” to this “Hoboe Reunion,” and newspapers from across the Midwest and as far away as Philadelphia arrived to report on the proceedings (Britt 203, 201). Following a subsequent gap of thirty-three years, the convention was established as a yearly event that continues to this day, playing a large role in the local community’s economy. Drawing up to 25,000 people, the Hobo Days celebration takes place over the course of almost a week, and includes a parade, a carnival, crafts booths, musical performances, poetry readings, fireside storytelling, mulligan stew served in the Hobo Jungle Park, memorial services at the Hobo Cemetery, and—most ceremoniously—the coronation of the new Hobo King and Queen. Much as Wild West Shows solidified the generic image
of the Indian in the collective American consciousness, the event at Britt from its beginning helped establish and still perpetuates many of hobo culture’s most widely recognizable tropes, with hoboes themselves actively participating in and influencing the direction of the process. Britt also hosts the Hobo Foundation, established in 1974, which runs the Hobo Museum, home to a collection containing a wide variety of books, recordings, carvings and crafts, clothing, convention memorabilia, and other hobo-related artifacts.

The Britt Convention stands as an example in miniature of the Americana Hobo archetype’s cultural ascension as well as the barely submerged threats to the stability of its position. The tension stemming from the difficulty of separating the hard-working noble Hobo from the lazy ignoble Tramp—so that the former may be venerated and the latter shunned or punished—makes an appearance in the handbill for the inaugural event in 1900. While it announced the presence of “good fellows” and promised family-friendly events including bicycle races and baseball, the accompanying illustration depicted an unshaven man with tattered clothes and vaguely menacing countenance. A short poem accompanies the image: “Hark! Hark! Hark! / The little dogs bark, / The beggars are coming to town / Some in rags and some in tags / And some in velvet gowns” (reprinted in Britt 202). Those hoboes in figurative velvet gowns—those who would come to represent the safe and sanitized figure of the past—continue to find welcome at the event through the years, while the active riders whose rags and tags revealed them as nothing more than tramps still encounter hostility. In his pointedly titled article, “Too Dirty to Be a Hobo?,” John Lennon describes how these tensions came to the fore at the 1999 Convention, which I also attended as a train-hopping
participant. The lines were clearly drawn: on one side were the grandpa figures, often as not arriving in campers and RVs, donning snow white beards and bright red bandanas, entertaining family crowds with quaint hobo songs; on the other were the active train riders, ranging from alcoholic Vietnam veterans to the dreadlocked anarchist punks, who treat the gathering as a time to reconnect with other members of their transient subculture. As Lennon observes, the purpose of the Convention—at least as far as the many of the older hoboes and the townspeople of Britt are concerned—is to commemorate a particular, narrowly defined figure who exhibits “certain culturally acceptable traits” as “either the quirky, eccentric freedom-loving caricature or the hard-living but morally upright individualistic member of society” (215). For townspeople and other tourists who attend the event, true hoboes “are 'gentlemen' and 'respectful' and 'hard-working,'” while the less presentable characters—who, paradoxically, actually arrive by freight train—“are ‘fakes’ and ‘bums’” (218).

Lennon identifies two key moments during that year’s proceedings as central to the battle over the representation of the rail-riding vagabond and, indeed, the very meaning of the word “hobo.” The first involved a struggle over the use of an ornamental boxcar permanently located on a short section of unconnected track in the town’s small park. In previous years it had remained open to provide shelter for Convention attendees, but this year riders arrived to find it locked. Along with a few others, a younger rider named Lee (with whom I had traveled to the convention via freight train from California, and who was actually well into his forties at the time) broke the padlock and occupied the car in order to escape the rain at night. When the police arrived, Lee refused to move, and was promptly arrested, rendering “the quintessential symbol of
hobo travel" into “a pseudo-museum piece that could be looked at as a historical artifact but not used by the ‘stars’ of the convention—the railriders themselves—for the practical use of sleeping” (220). The second incident involved one of the highlights of the annual Convention, the election of Hobo royalty. Each year, hoboes and tourists alike gather in the town square so that those seeking the offices of Hobo King and Queen can each make a speech, and applause from the crowd determines the titles’ winners. Controversy erupted when the judges announced Slow Freight Ben, an eighty-eight-year-old railfan, as Queen, while most observers agreed that “Firecracker, a teen-aged-looking hobo who did a cheerleading routine, complete with some occasionally salty language” had received the most applause by far (Skipper). Concern that Firecracker, an attractive, energetic anarchist train-hopper might inappropriately inspire younger girls to become radical tramps (just as reviewers had once worried that hobo memoirs by Jack London and others would draw boys to the life of the open road) motivated the judges to intervene. As Lennon notes, “the town enjoys (and makes money off of) the notoriety of older male hobos” who know how to perform their iconic role, but “a young woman with dreadlocks, spouting feminist propaganda cannot be allowed to speak so freely in the middle of town square” (222). Following the convention, a group of train riders conceded to Britt both the hobo image and the term itself and embraced their status as unwelcomed Tramps. Circulating a flier announcing that “Britt is a pathetic joke,” they resolved to start a new gathering in a genuine jungle in St. Paul, away from tourist on-lookers. A century after the establishment of the Convention, a decisive battle in the war over the transient rail-rider’s representation further ensconced the mythology of the Americana Hobo.
Yet, given the Americana Hobo’s unsavory origins, it should come as no surprise that the tensions on display at the 1999 Hobo Convention continue to surface in a variety of texts and venues. The 1985 Tim Burton film *Pee-Wee’s Big Adventure* acknowledges and gently satirizes the national cultural relationship with the contradictory romantic stereotype through its use of clichéd scenarios and images. At one point in the story, Pee-Wee Herman (Paul Rubens)—carrying a cartoonish version of the iconic bindle—hops a freight train for the two reasons most easily grasped by an audience whose understanding of the hobo life derives from popular culture. First, he seeks to escape an immediate crisis tied to a specific locality, when a jealous hulk of a man gives him chase after coming to the mistaken conclusion that Pee-Wee has been wooing his girlfriend. Second, he resumes a larger road-quest narrative, motivated by his desire to reach San Antonio, where he believes he will locate his beloved stolen bicycle, which an unscrupulous fortune teller has told him he will find hidden in the Alamo’s non-existent basement. Immediately after he masterfully catches a boxcar on the fly, Pee-Wee descends into a fitful sleep on a convenient bed of hay, and awakens the next morning to find himself lying intimately close to a representative of the Americana hobo—bearded, patched clothes, battered fedora, missing teeth—who offers him a sardine. Although initially repulsed, Pee-Wee soon joins with this free-spirited traveling man in watching America roll by, the two outcast transients sitting with their arms over each other’s shoulders and their legs dangling out of the open boxcar door, belting out folk songs such as “Oh! Suzanna” and “Skip to My Lou.” The joke of the scene lies in Pee-Wee’s gradual loss of enthusiasm for the company of this folkloric figure who, because of his limited song repertoire and repellant hygiene, becomes
oppressively boring rather quickly. Even if Pee-Wee seemed to possess endless enthusiasm when singing “She’ll Be Coming ‘Round the Mountain,” with each transition to a new song his smile fades, so that by the time the hobo stretches out the chorus of “Jimmy Cracked Corn” well beyond its breaking point in his raspy, atonal shriek, Pee-Wee has had enough and hurls himself with a scream from the fast-rolling train. The iconic image of the carefree hobo clashes with the reality of an actual homeless person (even if that homeless person is still a caricature). Barely more than a minute long, this scene offers a compressed critique of the sanitizing process that occurs through ongoing efforts in popular culture to ignore the Bum and vilify the Tramp, appropriating a few key elements in a patriotic celebration of the Hobo, thereby reinforcing the artificially sharp divide between each of these three homeless figures.

As important those divides may be ideologically, however, the actual terms “hobo,” “tramp,” and “bum” are often employed with even less precision in the contemporary moment than when they first came into common usage. This is unsurprising, perhaps, given that these categorical distinctions were generated from within the transient community and subsequently self-applied, their nuances often recognized only by social scientists who adapted them for their own academic purposes. And, as always, when confronted by actual homeless people the general public still regularly fails to distinguish readily between transients seeking work and transients avoiding work. Now used primarily to designate a promiscuous woman, people rarely apply “tramp” to someone living on the street. With the general increase in linguistic sensitivity—if not a corresponding attitudinal shift—the word “bum” has largely been set aside in favor of “homeless person” in public discourse. Yet, “hobo” seems to
have undergone something of a revival, coming back into relatively widespread popular usage since the turn of the twenty-first century. The term’s appeal may stem in part from its phonetic characteristics—this snappy, almost silly word is fun to say—and its apparent lack of connotative malice. Increasingly, “hobo” has a broad application that in many ways undercuts the debates in Britt but further illuminates the culture’s complex response to homelessness in general and transient labor in particular.

Characters on the pre-teen-oriented television program iCarly, which aired on Nickelodeon from 2007 to 2012, frequently used the word “hobo” to make flippant or mocking reference to homelessness in general. The website affiliated with the program went so far as to feature a series of photos depicting the show’s stars throwing their own “hobo party,” with the explanation that “At iCarly we LOVE hobos.” The individual photos featured captions like “Carly got her hobo costume from that new store in the mall called C.J. Penniless.” These images, as well as the casual use of the term, has influenced the vocabulary of the show’s young target audience while inspiring an outraged response from critics who felt such usage made light of the experience of actual homeless people (Sharp). The word appears to have held appeal for the producers of the show and its audience by virtue of its nostalgic connotations. The hobo party photos depict the youthful, healthy, and clean cast members in wildly mismatched and colorful clothing. Bearing little if any resemblance to the sartorial conditions of contemporary street people, these costumes instead evoke nostalgia for what was already a cartoonish image in the first place. Pointedly, the caption accompanying a photo of one of the show’s attractive teenage female stars reads, “If hobos actually looked like this, Freddie [a character on the show] would start volunteering at more soup
kitchens.” Still, such playful masquerade cannot be wholly divorced from reality; the original referent has not vanished from contemporary society. This ambiguity surfaces in debates on online message boards when parents anxious about the use of an offensive term encounter assertions that the word “hobo” actually has a legitimate usage with positive connotations. Josh Leo, in a comment posted to a relevant article published in *The Society Pages*, “an online, multidisciplinary project” designed “to bring measured social science to broader public visibility and influence,” attempts to untangle the complex relationship between real people and representational types (“About The Society Pages”).

I do think it is interesting that everyone seems to defend the use of the word Hobo by showing that they are an actual group of people related to choosing to ride the rails. That is all fine and dandy but the real problem here is the kids equating people who are homeless and on the street (be it because of drug addictions, mental problems, financial problems, etc.) with this lovable character in history.

I don’t think the men and women who are struggling to find something to eat and a place to stay see their life as part of a fanciful story of bandanas on sticks and life riding the rails.

Using the term hobo to describe people who are down on their luck and homeelss [sic] is incorrect.

[T]he key we need to be focusing [sic] on is homeless does not equal hobo. Using “fun” terms to distance us from the depressing reality in our cities is not healthy for any society. (Sharp)

Certainly, the concern expressed by Leo and others regarding the implication and potential impact of these photos has merit. The use of the word “hobo” and the associated images on *iCarly* may have amongst an impressionable audience the effect of distancing and desensitizing the viewer to the plight of actual homeless people who find themselves struggling to survive for a whole host of reasons. Yet, in his comments, Leo also reduces the homeless population to a stereotype of abjection, thereby denying
all of its members agency while insisting that “kids” (and, by extension, the adults they become) understand people lacking jobs or homes as nothing more than “down on their luck” victims. Significantly, he locates the “lovable character” of the hobo not in popular culture but in “history,” suggesting that the cartoonish images he now decries as degrading may once have accurately reflected reality. In any case, he is right to say that “homeless does not equal hobo,” but not necessarily because the term is “fun” and therefore demeaning and inaccurate in all cases. Rather, the term applies to a narrow, self-identified and self-characterized segment of the homeless population that values mobility and independence.

The hobo party phenomenon did not originate with this television program or the affiliated website’s photos. Websites such as eHow, Yahoo! Answers, and Epinions have all featured articles or postings that offer instructions for throwing a hobo party. One such article stresses both the affordability and the inherent hilariousness of such an event—“When looking for a funny party theme, you can prepare a hobo-themed get-together your guests will be laughing about for weeks. From the invitations to the hilarious contests, all you need are a few ideas and some supplies to get the hobo party started”—while helpfully linking to step-by-step instructions on “How to Make a Hobo Stick” as well as suggestions for designing and constructing “Hobo Party Decorations” (Miller; Mahoney; Johnson). Like the iCarly photos, the self-documentation of these hobo-themed events has tended to draw criticism. In August of 2011, several blogs responded to the description of a “Depression-Era Hobo”-themed wedding posted to Etsy, the e-commerce site that features handmade crafts and vintage items. According to the description, apparently written by the bride after the fact, the ceremony comprised
“what very well may be the first hobo-themed wedding,” and featured “hobo-chic outfits,” “authentic Depression-era garments,” “cocktail hour snacks—brown bags of popcorn and burlap sacks of peanuts, complete with hobo signs,” moonshine, a jug band, and other era-specific artifacts (Hunt). The numerous desaturated digital photographs of the wedding party accompanying the verbal descriptions imbue the ceremony with a technologically manufactured and instantaneous nostalgic glow. Because they look like old and faded photographs, these images also provide a veneer of authenticity, a quality the bride stresses when she recounts how she and her groom researched the culture of 1930s transients. They were charmed to learn that the term “hobo” derives from the phrase “homeward bound,” and set out to recreate with precision and specificity the material culture of the Depression era, which distinguishes the event from the generic and cartoonish iCarly party. A sarcastic posting typifies the outraged reactions generated by the wedding in the blogosphere: “it’s a poverty wedding! How fun is that? They dressed like actual poor people!” After enumerating the material hardships faced by transient workers during the Depression, the post facetiously concludes, “The important thing is, hobos were all clowns who had bandanas tied on sticks, like in cartoons” (“It’s Called ’Poverty’”).

Perhaps most notoriously, at a 2010 Halloween thrown by the New York state law firm of Steven J. Baum, which “represents banks and mortgage servicers as they attempt to foreclose on homeowners and evict them from their homes,” the office had been decorated to look like a homeless encampment and employees dressed as homeless people. Many of them held panhandling signs that mockingly decried their eviction (Nocera). Given that the costumes and decorations deliberately evoke images
of contemporary economic crisis and homelessness, thus reducing the temporal and spatial difference between the impersonation and the original referent, the Baum party brings to the surface buried implications of other, more nostalgic or generic hobo parties: not much separates the Americana Hobo, deserving of admiration, from the Savage Tramp, deserving of ridicule. It is this uncomplicated and callous mockery of poverty and suffering by the very agents of that suffering that so worries observers like Leo when he hears children, mimicking the language and images from shows like iCarly, casually using the word “hobo” to refer to homeless people.

Such uses of the popular image of the hobo present an incongruous conjoining of the playful and the degraded. Like the “white trash parties” thrown by middle- and upper-class college students, hobo parties constitute a form of kitschy virtual slumming that involves none of the perceived threat involved with actual contact with the occupants of a lower socioeconomic stratum or inhabitants of a physical space that might be legitimately considered a slum. Consequently, the sense of an exotic and authentic experience typically conferred through of actual slumming goes missing from these events even as they retain the practice’s appropriative and exploitative elements. (Actual hobo slumming does exist, as well: yuppies who ride freight trains on the weekends are discussed in the previous chapter.) These parties form a subtype of the more general category of “poor chic,” that “array of fads and fashions in popular culture that make recreational or stylish—and often expensive—‘fun’ of poverty, or of traditional symbols of working class and underclass statuses” (Halnon 501). These hobo impersonators broadly adopt a transient subculture’s practices and artifacts and render them as consumer items. The practice entails an odd appropriation of the carnivalesque
that, rather than allowing the subaltern to temporarily upend social hierarchies for subversive purposes, allows the socially and economically privileged to caricature and ridicule the disadvantaged explicitly. This “rational consumption of poverty is a class-distinguishing activity that controls against fears of declining into vagabondage by consuming it as a short, safe, socially-distanced and sanitized experience with commodified poverty” (Halnon 514). By taking the principal iconography of the friendly, train-riding Americana Hobo and ascribing it to the broad swath of the homeless population, and then temporarily appropriating that iconography in a controlled and commodified environment, participants in these hobo parties further on-going efforts to neutralize social fear of the mobile homeless population. These efforts—certainly examples of the clown-tramp tradition Seelye identifies—speak to both the fear of victimization at the hands of the (potentially collective) action of that population and the anxiety of finding oneself as part of that population.

In all of these contexts, constructions of the Americana Hobo figure signify attempts to elide the cultural contradictions of modernity, as do those of his Savage cousin, although the two figures are deployed according to divergent strategies. Whereas the Savage Tramp embodies the social, economic, and geographic destabilizations of modernity and thus provides a focal point for reactionary sentiment and policy, the Americana Hobo performs an ameliorating function, providing reassurance that the individual will not become submerged and lost amongst the upheavals of modern life. The figure at the time of its emergence—once the typological schema had divorced it from the Tramp—provided a sort of instant nostalgia appealing to those in sympathy with a general conservative romanticism that, according to Michael...
Löwy and Robert Sayre, draws “on the organic values of the past” in its “critique of capitalist-industrial modernity” (63). In his apparent rebellion against modernity, the Hobo becomes a (frequently deskilled) permutation of the self-directed artisan-producer.

The connection of the Hobo to an imagined idyllic national past obscures his utterly modern character, so that the system of which he is a product and in which he plays an essential part becomes more palatable by virtue of his presence to those who would otherwise decry modernity. The creation of accelerating corporatizing and globalizing processes, the Hobo nevertheless appears to be a representative of certain bedrock American values. This association becomes increasingly apparent when considering his folksy anti-intellectualism. In his book on the subject, Richard Hofstadter explains the operational rationale behind anti-intellectual sentiment as a series of false dichotomies:

Intellect is pitted against feeling, on the ground that it is somehow inconsistent with warm emotion. It is pitted against character, because it is widely believed that intellect stands for mere cleverness, which transmutes easily into the sly or the diabolical. It is pitted against practicality, since theory is held to be opposed to practice, and the ‘purely’ theoretical mind is so much disesteemed. It is pitted against democracy, since intellect is felt to be a form of distinction that defies egalitarianism. Once the validity of these antagonisms is accepted, then the case for intellect, and by extension for the intellectual, is lost. (45-46)

Feeling certainly motivates hoboes like the Colonel, Billy Moon, or even Acel Stecker, whose commitments to a moral code (e.g., “That’s not my style”) reveals their strong character, while their peccadilloes infringe on no one else’s liberty. Given the minimalist existence prompted by his chosen transient existence, the Hobo necessarily values practicality. Of course, the persistence of his humble self-reliance in the face of deprivation and the fact that his social position prevents him from looking down at anyone other than the truly wicked renders him an embodiment of egalitarian values.
His nonconformity, however, does not threaten the prevailing order, because it never involves more than a singular, personal assertion of autonomy. Indeed, by his very nature, the Hobo tacitly accepts the free labor model that posits each individual worker as a private contractor free to bid on jobs on an equal footing with capital. He knows he can quit any job that does not suit him, but he also will not resort to organized collective action, or even to complaining about his lot. While representations of the Savage Tramp, often yoked to anxiety regarding the Paris Commune or the Haymarket bombing, portray a coward who can offer seductive syllogisms to justify the embrace of traitorous collective movements, the Hobo simply uses common sense to explain his individualist rejection of faith in mass action. The central characteristics of his existence rhetorically legitimize the pay and treatment he receives, as determined by the market. For all of the Hobo’s apparent and admirable independence—those traits that have allowed for his representation as a quintessentially American icon—his labor serves to facilitate a radically new production model that both requires and ensures the individual worker’s precarity.

This is a crucial part of the Hobo’s legacy, as much as the colorful characters, the bindles, or the picturesque views from open boxcar doors. From his first appearance, the Hobo has found company among other, less celebrated, itinerant laborers who were putting down railroad tracks, harvesting crops, mining ore, and felling timber: immigrants from Mexico, China, Japan, Ireland, and Eastern Europe, as well as Native Americans, all played crucial roles in these industries. Yet, xenophobia, racism, lack of access to the means of cultural production, and other factors prevented the development of an equivalent heroic mythology applicable to these groups in the national cultural
imaginary. We may see the Hobo figure as an embodiment of the neoliberal ideal of an untethered, precarious labor force that comes to understand its precarity as freedom in a rejection of collective action or government regulation, a labor force to which capital has no particular long-term obligation. Analysis of this superstructural function retains on-going relevance, as the rhetoric surrounding the Hobo’s particular version of free labor ethos—and the ideology behind that rhetoric—continues to inform current relations between labor and capital. The positive valuation of the Hobo finds subtle reinscription in the realm of digital labor, an industry in which the predominance of freelance work allows the creative worker or content producer a high degree of agency, yet offers little in the way of job security or even adequate compensation (Fish and Srinivasan 148). The reserve labor army model gains ever more ground in academia, where, as Marc Bousquet observes, the prevailing rhetoric “ascribe[s] choice to what [is] an involuntary dislocation” for growing numbers of “contingent faculty and graduate students” (Williams). In a more global context, “critics of state regulation … celebrate the entrepreneurial gusto of the informal sector,” a sector in many ways pioneered by the hobo (Denning, “Wageless” 90). All the while, of course, workers from Latin America ride freight trains north to the United States, following the harvest, feeding the world, and generating profits for ever-larger agribusiness concerns, as hoboes have done for a century and a half.

1 Interestingly, according to Anderson, one particular study “found also that the higher the intelligence of the individual the shorter the period of holding a job among the unemployed” (72).

2 For specific numbers as well as historical analysis, I have relied on Gordon, Passage to Union, and Beatty, Age of Betrayal.

3 Bob Dylan’s complicated negotiation between self-conscious mythologizing and the pursuit of authenticity receives a compelling treatment in I’m Not There, an unconventional film biography directed
by Todd Haynes (2007). Six different actors portray Dylan, including a preadolescent African-American boy. Calling himself “Woody Guthrie,” this version of Dylan rides freight trains around the country with a guitar (in a case that has “This machine kills fascists” printed on it, as did the real Guthrie’s guitar) singing blues and folks songs. No doubt Dylan, like other young whites dissatisfied with the perceived artificiality of the dominant culture, venerated (and appropriated) black culture as more natural and authentic.

Guthrie/Dylan eventually ends up at the home of an African-American family, where the matriarch advises him to “Live your own time, child. Sing about your own time.” The audience understands that Dylan would gradually take this advice, stop aping Guthrie, and develop his own persona (which, of course, involved jettisoning his birth name of Robert Zimmerman).

4 Roosevelt, in fact, here appropriates a term coined by William Graham Sumner to mean something entirely different. This original forgotten man is the one who pays to the taxes to support the social reforms intended to benefit the person at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

5 I have drawn heavily on Kusmer, Chapter 10, for my understanding of the conditions of and response to homelessness during the Great Depression.

6 A 1935 review in the New York Times notes that “Anderson writes in a style which at the same time is both gripping in its frank realism and stirring in its occasional swift flights of poetic feeling” (Feld), while in 1985 the Christian Science Monitor equated the novel with The Grapes of Wrath and Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, calling it “a raw and potent fiction slouching toward history, and a book that feels close to the truth of its time” (Kaufmann).

7 The title to Seelye’s article notes that the tramp narrative in general constitutes a version of the genre, although the article itself does not elaborate this idea in any depth.

8 In his review, versions of which appeared in both the Pacific Weekly and the New Masses in June of 1935, Kromer insists that “[i]n this ‘land of plenty where nobody starves,’ Mr. Anderson would get thrown off a freight train if he pulled some of these yarns on the two or three hundred stiffs with no more notches in their belts” (237). He then mockingly suggests that Anderson “should not be traipsing around the country. He might get run over by a train. Only once in the book do you think he is maybe too smart to go to sleep on the track” (238).
CHAPTER 4
THE CRITICAL TRAMP

Raconteurs and bowsies, rebels and tramps
Travelers who ramble from camp to camp
Dodgers and swagmen, vandals and rounders
Wandering hobo town-to-towners

Come join the circle of jolly fools
Squatters and crusties who make their own rules
Riverbed beggars, carousers and thieves
Our only motto: anarchy!

—Casey Neill, “Riffraff”

Until a final reel deus ex machina, William Wellman’s 1933 film *Wild Boys of the Road* appears to offer a scathing critique of civil authority in all its forms. As one in a series of social consciousness titles produced by Warner Bros. studios, it strives to depict the harsh realities of unemployment, poverty, and transience more directly and graphically than was typical of the typical Hollywood picture. The plot centers on Eddie (Frankie Darro) and Tommy (Edwin Phillips), two teens from a small town who seem insulated from the world’s larger problems as they attend high school dances, date girls, and tool around town in a jalopy. The first hint that all is not well appears when Tommy, humiliated, reveals that his widowed mother has had a hard time getting work and so relies on the community chest. Later that night, Eddie jauntily enters the kitchen of his home to cut himself a ludicrously large slice of apple pie, only to discover that his mother is weeping in the study because his father has been laid off. Eddie immediately makes personal sacrifices to aid his family, first selling his car to a scrap dealer, then deciding that he and Tommy should drop out of school and take to the road in search of work, rather than remaining a burden on their unemployed parents, saying, “I can’t go on having fun in school while my dad’s in a breadline.” Just as an estimated 250,000
other teenagers did during the Depression, the duo hops a freight train, headed for Chicago, teaming up with the androgynous Sally (Dorothy Coonan) along the way, who has left her home for similar reasons (Uys 11).

The film exhibits a clear and unequivocal sympathy for its protagonists, despite the litany of crimes they commit. Selfless, virtuous motives prompt their decisions to become tramps. Their actions are clearly borne of material necessity. They demonstrate an admirable camaraderie. At no point do their characterizations suggest any moral ambiguity. This narrative sympathy extends most remarkably to the teenagers’ response to various forms of institutionalized power, which is by contrast—until the film’s final moments—largely construed as lacking legitimacy. Two dramatic scenes of active, mass resistance to corporate and state authority best illustrate this point. In the first, railroad detectives purge dozens of teenage riders, boys and girls, white and black, from a train that has stopped to take on water. The kids flee until they encounter an older hobo, who tells them that they’re ten miles from the closest town. He then asks them, “Hey, what you let them put you off for? … There’s only seven or eight of them. There must be close to, what, a hundred of you here. What’s a matter, ain’t you got no nerve? … You got an army, ain’t you?” Eddie embraces this mathematical logic—“We got them outnumbered, twenty to one,” he notes—and leads his fellow travelers back to the train, where he confronts the detectives. “You better get away from that train and let us on or somebody’s going to hurt, see?” he warns, before the kids begin pelting them somewhat comically with eggs and fruit, forcing the detectives to retreat. Once the train starts moving again, the kids discover that one of their number, an adolescent girl, has been sexually assaulted by a brakeman, whom they then corner, beat, and ultimately
throw from the train, presumably to his death. Although Eddie does express concern that the police in the next town might connect them to the act, nothing comes of it. Rather than serving as an example of mob violence, this incident portrays an exploited group finding strength in numbers and resisting agents of oppression.

Later, in Cleveland, this transient band receives permission to squat a yard filled with sewer pipes, which they convert into shelters of ersatz domesticity, forming a loose community varied in gender and race, and practicing mutual aid. A newspaper headline describes them as forming a sort of autonomous city-state: “Sewer Pipe City Becomes Boys’ ‘Republic’: Busy Community of Waifs Functions Under Own Leaders.” Tommy, by this point, has lost a leg in a train accident, so he stays behind as the rest of the teens roam the town looking for work and begging for spare change. Their presence inspires fear in the larger community, so city officials announce plans to evict the kids and run them out of town. This time, the young tramps have prepared in advance for the confrontation, amassing a load of rocks as ammunition, with which they bombard the police officers who arrive to carry out the eviction. The rearguard action ultimately fails, however, and the trio moves on to New York City, where Eddie finally secures employment, only to be mistakenly arrested for robbery and brought to trial. In court, Eddie remains defiant, refusing to tell the court where he lives or who his parents are, making an impassioned speech that verges on becoming a class-conscious call for insurrection: “You say you gotta send us to jail to keep us off the streets. That’s a lie. You’re sending us to jail because you don’t want to see us. You want to forget us. Well, you can’t do it, ’cause I’m not the only one. There’s thousands just like me, and there’s more hitting the road every day.” This accusatory oration reflects the collectivist ethos—
locating strength in overwhelming numbers—imparted by the older, wiser hobo earlier in the film. It sounds as much like a revolutionary threat as a statement of fact.

In his review in *The Nation*, William Troy declares, “Never before does one recall having witnessed an American picture whose climax is made to consist in a pitched battle between a band of ragged outlaws and the police, in which the sympathy is manifestly with the former” (qtd. in Roffman and Purdy 93). Of course, this review neglects to mention that the pitched battle at the sewer pipe city is not actually the climax. When contrasted with the conclusion, the scenes of violent confrontation serve to emphasize the schizophrenic nature of the film’s final cut. In the last scenes, the government suddenly finds embodiment in the form of a paternal, benevolent judge, who looks more than a bit like the nation’s president. To Eddie and his companions, Judge White says, “Let me be your friend. I want to help you.” He advises Eddie on the dead-end of any collectivist resistance to authority, observing that through his actions Eddie is only “making a bad matter worse.” Moved by Eddie’s speech, he promises personally to find jobs for all three defendants, and promises vaguely “that things are going to get better now. Not only here in New York but all over the country. I know your father will return to work shortly. That means you can go back to school.” During this era, the National Recovery Administration’s Blue Eagle logo and slogan of “We Do Our Part” regularly appeared in the credits of Hollywood studio films, but *Wild Boys* incorporates it into the set: an NRA emblem hangs on the wall of the courtroom behind the judge. Thus, in the end, *Wild Boys* appears to offer a general endorsement of the solution presented by New Deal legislation rather than proposing revolt.
Yet, the film’s awkward and abrupt transition in tone and theme in its final moments undercuts that endorsement. In fact, this disjunctive quality results from an intervention designed to limit the implications of the preceding action. Both Dorothy Coonan, the actress who played Sally and later became Wellman’s wife, and Wellman himself would later reveal that the original ending for *Wild Boys* was far bleaker than the New Deal boosterism that audiences saw in the theater. Instead of coming under the wing of a fatherly judge who responds to his earnest plea, Eddie finds himself in the state reformatory until the age of twenty-one, while Sally and Tommy receive shorter sentences (Shindler 168; Roffman and Purdy 94). The reason for the alteration is not hard to fathom. The studio had a particularly close—and mutually beneficial—relationship with the Roosevelt Administration: Jack Warner raised money for the Democrats from Hollywood figures and was later “named the Los Angeles chairman of the NRA” (Shindler 165). Colin Shindler argues that “for a few years Warner Brothers in the 1930s was a New Deal studio” (166). Just as producer Darryl Zanuck rewrote the ending of Wellman’s previous picture, *Heroes for Sale* (1933), so that the downtrodden protagonist approvingly talks about and then reads aloud from Roosevelt’s inauguration speech, Jack Warner insisted the ending of *Wild Boys* be changed (Shindler 40, 168-169). Consequently, both films end by suggesting the government’s definitive action will imminently produce recovery. Still, Wellman’s original vision cannot be fully suppressed. While the final cut of *Wild Boys* may seem to promote the palliative measures of New Deal programs, in its earlier scenes that draw attention to society’s persistent flaws and sympathetically portray collective resistance to authority it also suggests a critical stance and an alternative response to a crisis of capitalism.
At least until the film’s ending undermines the implications of their actions, then, these wild boys (and girls) of the road serve as examples of what I call the Critical Tramp. The vagabond of this representational tradition exhibits much of the same behavior as that of the Savage Tramp tradition, embracing the radical mobility of the railroad, defying institutional authority, often eschewing labor, rejecting bourgeois morality, disrupting heteronormative domesticity, and as such posing an existential threat to liberal-democratic nation state. Yet, in contrast to portraits of Savage Tramps, Critical Tramp narratives employ a vastly different evaluative perspective to frame the figure, providing a sympathetic portrayal akin to that of the Americana Hobo. Unlike the Americana Hobo tradition, however, which diffuses the railroad vagabond figure’s implied threat by safely circumscribing the range of his opposition, tales of the Critical Tramp present unbounded and undiluted critiques. Furthermore, the category encompasses several subtypes, with figures distinguished from each other primarily by their varying levels of agency and the explicitness of their critique: the Exhausted Tramp, the Revolutionary Hobo, and the Outlier Tramp. These tramps are not clowns, in that they do not serve as the objects of fun even when their actions may inspire laughter, yet neither do they consistently achieve hero status. Still, all iterations of the Critical Tramp are united in their profound antipathy toward the established order.

While his narrative entails an often unforgiving critique of the state and the economic system it protects, the Exhausted Tramp does not openly advocate for revolution. Rather, through the textual representation of the conditions in which he lives and his subjective response to those conditions, this tradition seeks to destabilize established social categories and moral imperatives sufficiently to inspire its audience to
develop its own critical stance. Stephen Crane’s “An Experiment in Misery,” originally published on April 22, 1894 in the New York Press (followed a week later by “An Experiment in Luxury”) provides a prototype of the genre and illustrates many of its primary gestures. By the 1890s, news publications often included the journalistic “experiment” as a regular feature that had acquired its own conventions, typically focusing on some unfamiliar milieu, which Crane employs “for radical ends” (Robertson 95, 101). Like many Exhausted Tramp narratives, “An Experiment in Misery” straddles the generic line between fact and fiction, and has been received and treated as both; a preamble and coda in which the reporter discusses—in the form of a third-person dialogue—his motives for and results of his experiment were excised when the piece was recast as fiction. Employing a third-person narration throughout even as it ostensibly represents Crane’s actual experiences, the piece follows a young male protagonist who goes undercover as a vagrant in order to record the true conditions endured by homeless people. After he dons ragged clothes, onlookers assail him with the epithets “bum” and “hobo” before he makes his way to the miserable flophouse where he spends the night (248). There, one of the warehoused men begins to moan and wail in his sleep, but to the protagonist, “these were not merely the shrieks of a vision-pierced man: they were an utterance of the meaning of the room and its occupants[,] … the protest of the wretch who feels the touch of the imperturbable granite wheels, and who then cries with an impersonal eloquence, with a strength not from him, giving voice to the wail of a whole section, a class, a people” (253). In this passage, Crane provides the reader with the interpretation that the representations of the Exhausted Tramp are meant to inspire. Pitiable and barely surviving, this tramp
operates from a subject position that belies the public anxiety surrounding the large floating population of the era. As Michael Robertson observes, the sketch “never directly addresses the issues that were central to other discussions of poverty and unemployment in the 1890s: the Tramp Menace, politics, economics, morality, public safety, property rights, charity, reform, and revolution,” yet it “is a fundamentally radical work that challenges belief in a stable identity,” tying subjectivity to environmental circumstances and thus “upsetting his audience’s beliefs in class divisions as natural and inevitable” (101).

Crane’s article had specific implications during the period of widespread unemployment that followed the economic panic of 1893, but the general approach retains its relevance during any period of economic crisis, particularly the Great Depression. On accepting the Republican presidential nomination in 1928, a prematurely optimistic Herbert Hoover opined, “We in America today are nearer to the final triumph over poverty than ever before in the history of any land” (qtd. in Singer 33). This jubilant assessment was rendered absurd as the effects of the Depression grew more severe and widespread in the years followed the stock market crash. Five-thousand banks failed, industrial production plummeted, and international commerce slowed to a trickle compared to pre-crash activity. Between 1929 and 1933, the number of jobless climbed into the millions—peaking at 15 million, or 25 percent of the labor force, with a third of those workers employed only in part-time positions—and the effects of poverty continued to spread (Fraser 10). Malnutrition resulting from “inadequate diets meant more cases of dysentery, pellagra, and chronic illness. Starving children picked over garbage. Homelessness soared, while those fortunate
enough to have shelter shivered through the winter, unable to purchase fuel” (Boris 25-26). Testifying before a Senate subcommittee in January 1933, sociologist Nels Anderson reported on the results of a three-day census he had recently conducted, conservatively estimating the number of homeless people in the United States to be 1.5 million (Kusmer 194). As noted previously, a quarter of a million teenagers would take to the road in order alleviate the burden on their families. Shantytowns—derisively called “Hoovervilles”—appeared in cities across the country. Yet, in response to these conditions, Hoover maintained that municipalities and states bore the responsibility for administering relief, not the federal government. Industry leaders also appeared unable or unwilling to acknowledge, let alone move to rectify, the crisis. In 1931, only a short time before laying off 75,000 employees, Henry Ford pronounced that “the average man won’t really do a day’s work unless he is caught and cannot get out of it. There is plenty of work to do if people would do it” (qtd. in Zinn 378). Given the dire circumstances and the apparent inefficacy of government and industry, especially before the implementation of New Deal relief programs after Franklin Roosevelt took office in March of 1933, it is perhaps not surprising that many began to question the desirability of a society and economy organized according to capitalist principles.

While Crane sought to occupy the perspective of homelessness only for a night and a day in “An Experiment,” Tom Kromer based his novel Waiting for Nothing on the five Depression-era years he spent roaming the country via freight train in a largely fruitless pursuit of employment, during which time he contracted the pulmonary tuberculosis that would one day render him an invalid and cut short his writing career. For Kromer, this was not an experiment or a journalistic investigation. He was not an
author in search of vital material, even if his experiences would serve as the foundation of his self-consciously literary production. However, in an irony so profound it seems almost absurd, as a young journalism student Kromer, not unlike Crane, did once go undercover as a mendicant for a class assignment and wrote up the experience in an article cynically titled “Pity the Poor Panhandler; $2 an Hour Is all He Gets.” In those pre-tramp days he had been attending Marshall College, supporting himself by working in a glass factory and as a proofreader at a newspaper, but his funds ran out at the end of the 1929 academic year. As did so many others, he took to the road, hoboing to Kansas in a failed attempt to find work in the wheat fields, thus initiating an extended period of transience. He would go on to compose the bulk of his one published novel in 1933 and 1934 while enrolled in the Civilian Conservation Corps and working at Camp Murphys in California.¹ This biography performs an extra-textual role in determining the reception of the book, as does the grim dedication: “To Jolene, who turned off the gas.” A brief preface affixed to the British edition of the book provides additional gravitas, going so far as to blur the book’s genre by claiming that “[s]ave for four or five incidents, it is strictly autobiographical,” although Kromer allows that he has altered the chronology somewhat “in order to better develop the story” (Casciato and West 259).

The title of his sole published novel, which appeared in 1935, only begins to suggest the crushing pessimism of the story told in its pages. Worthy of Sartre or Beckett, the title comments quite directly on the existential condition of the characters. The first-person narrator, Tom, who also shares a last name with the author, literally waits for nothing throughout the entire story. While he has no choice but to wait, he also has no reason to expect that any personal and social change looms on the horizon.
Formally, the book employs an episodic structure far more radical than even other loosely plotted tramp sagas, in that it abandons any semblance of forward progression, in effect allowing the text to perform the title’s meaning. Time loses all linearity, with the episodes described in each of the self-contained chapters failing to accumulate sequential significance; their order has no bearing on the plot, nor does the time elapsed between them. Rather, each presents a vignette of America’s failure to construct a society in which all people have the opportunity to earn enough money merely to eat three meals a day and stay off the streets. The protagonist seems to have lost all sense of time, and one must read well beyond the halfway mark before learning that he has been on the road for two years. Tom occasionally alludes to the seasons, but only to note their impact on his well-being—it mostly seems to be oppressively, dangerously cold—not to suggest any chronological relation between them. Likewise, even if the geography changes when Tom rides freight trains from one location to the next, its particulars apparently merit no mention. Like his experience of time, his experience of space appears indistinct, each urban area interchangeable with the last, or the next. Significantly, no character besides the narrator carries over from one chapter to the next, relationships being as ephemeral as any other material element in Tom’s isolated existence as a tramp. Rearranging the chapters, then, would have little if any effect on the reader’s experience—which is, of course, precisely the point. This story has no beginning and no conclusion. These characters endure misery without end, and such an emotional and tonal monotony makes the differentiation of experience almost impossible, or at least beside the point.
Repetition itself becomes a motif not only in terms of form, but also language, with the narrator repeatedly offering nearly identical simple statements of a deadened consciousness only able to grasp basic sensory data stemming from exposure to elements, or hunger. The present-tense narration, as William Solomon observes, “lend[s] a startling sense of immediacy to his work, giving the reader the (illusory) impression that he or she is with the narrator at the exact moment of each incident” (804). In addition to fostering that immediacy, this technique reinforces the sense of temporal stasis established by the strictly episodic, almost circular, plot structure. Put another way, the present tense narration becomes a mimetic device through which to represent the Exhausted Tramp’s subjectivity, which cannot afford thought beyond the immediacy of the present moment. Thinking of a past when times were better only draws further attention to the profound lack one knows now. Thinking into the future constitutes an exercise in futility. So trapped in an unchanging moment, Tom has no agency and cannot act.

From its first page, the novel announces this impotency as one of its major themes. Tom hides behind a tree on a darkened street, clutching a heavy stick, poised to clobber and rob someone, anyone “in the dough,” but when the perfect target passes, Tom admits that “my stick does not come down. Something has happened to me. I am sick in the stomach. I have lost my nerve” (5-6). Hunger had motivated the plan, but so had a simmering resentment toward those who seem to benefit from an economic structure that treats life as a zero-sum game according to which some can achieve financial security only at the expense of others. In Tom’s simple observations, a clear line separates the two, so that he “can tell” which side of the divide his intended target
occupies: “He walks with his head up and a jaunty step. A stiff does not walk like that” (5). This resentment transmutes into unspoken rage when the police arrest and taunt a bunch of “stiffs” who have been sleeping in an abandoned building during a wet, cold night. “I want to take this bull by his dirty neck and choke him till his tongue hangs out,” Tom thinks, but of course he does nothing, because there is nothing he can do, so that his threats of future retribution sound merely pathetic: “We are cattle to them [the police]. Damn them. Some day they will pay for this” (23). Tom sees both society’s essential inequity and the apparatuses that maintain it, but he deploys what he knows only in the service of an interior monologue through which he voices an on-going critique. This impotence finds its most symbolic expression during an ultimately aborted bank robbery. Moving toward his objective, Tom reviews his meticulous plan while fingering the “gat” he has obtained off the page, but at the moment he approaches the bank clerk he once again confronts his powerlessness.

I give this gat a yank, but it does not come out of my pocket. Only the handle comes out. Only the handle and a part of the lining of my coat. Something has happened. It is stuck in the torn lining of my pocket. I yank hard again, but it does not come out. This guy back of the wire cage thinks that there is something wrong. He steps closer to the window and peers out. … I cannot take my hand out of my pocket. I am afraid he will see the bulge. (61)

The very materiality of Tom’s impoverished state has prevented him from brandishing his weapon, however much he yanks on it, transforming the entire scene into an analogue for a failed sexual encounter.

Indeed, the novel ruthlessly drains Tom of agency, so that he seems little more than a passive husk of a character pushed along by events and circumstances on which he can have no impact. He rarely speaks in terms of choice, instead repeatedly observing why he cannot take this or that action, whether because of his lack of energy,
his lack of will, his lack of “guts.” But even if a naturalist determinism constricts his behavior, he repeatedly insists on his interrelated abilities to “see” and to “know.” On one hand, these affirmations appear to expose Tom’s defensiveness, his oft-admitted overriding fear, and his desire to lay claim to authority in the one area in which he has expertise: living on the road. On the other hand, it is precisely through this expertise that the narrator performs his critical function, ultimately belying the pretense that he concerns himself only with whether he is warm or cold, dry or wet, sated or hungry. He “sees and “knows” material and economic reality. He sees and knows the true character of the people he meets in his wanderings. For instance, approaching a cashier at a restaurant to ask for a handout, he observes, “She has a hard face. She is not going to be friendly. I can see that” (55). He knows the limited options available to the “stiff.” He knows his own psychology. He has acquired this ability to see and know only through experience, which has exorcised any naivety he once had. “I was new then. I am an older-timer now,” he says of a time when he would have participated in the religious proceedings at a mission (36). Although on occasion he would like to think otherwise, he recognizes that he does not have exclusive rights to this type of knowledge. Others who have undergone similar experiences have developed similar insights, amassing the data and the interpretive skills that allow them to survive. He describes waiting for a train with other tramps: “We lie down on the tracks and place our ears to the rails. We can hear the purr that tumbles through them. We look at each other and shake our heads. Too fast. … We are old-timers. We know by the sing in the rails when a drag is too hot. … We know. We can tell by the puff, and the sparks that fly from her stacks” (120). By the end of the novel, he shifts from an empirical to an emotional form of
knowledge acquisition and interpretation. Having watched a stiff die in a filthy bed in a mission, Tom glimpses his own fate, and transitions from seeing to feeling; regarding life on the road, he thinks, “It will get me, too, like it got this guy. It is getting me. I can feel it” (129). In narrating the knowledge he acquires and the interpretations he performs so that he can endure, Tom simultaneously acts as the reader’s critical and trustworthy ambassador to a world populated by the subaltern.

In its stark depiction of prevailing economic conditions, Tom’s narration devalues the work ethic as a taxonomical tool, in effect subverting and exposing as absurd the binary opposition between the worthy and unworthy poor generally, and between the hobo (migratory worker) and the tramp (migratory non-worker) specifically. Given that it rests on the individual’s relationship to work, the distinctions between the hobo, the tramp, and the bum have little meaning in Tom’s world. From the beginning of the narrative, he has occupied the margins of the work force for so long that he has essentially given up his Sisyphean quest for employment and become what would now be called a “discouraged worker”: “I am tired of walking the streets all day long asking for work. They laugh at you for asking for work” (57). Yet, virtually everyone in the novel who is not a tramp approaches unemployment as a matter of choice, demonstrating the persistence of the work ethic as “the official morality” (Weeks 38). This morality informs the responses of the non-tramps Tom encounters—those who have an income, who remain at liberty to think of something other than the fulfillment of their most basic biological needs—who appear periodically throughout the novel to comment as a kind of productivist Greek chorus. Choice has long since been beside the point—Tom insists, “I am not like this because I want to be” (83)—but the utterly abject characters in Waiting
remain subject to an outmoded categorical schema. Arresting a group of tramps who have sought shelter from the rain in an abandoned building, a police officer sneers, “You’re a lousy bum, and you wouldn’t work if you had work” (24). Similarly, a man Tom has approached for “‘a few dimes to get a flop’” offers only a condescending reply, asking, “[D]o you know what I would do if I was down on my luck with no place to get in out of the rain? … I would get me a job and go to work” (20). Tom’s unspoken response reveals the absurdity of such an injunction: “Go to work, would he? Does he think I would be standing here in the rain and the cold if there was work to be had? There is no work” (20).

The phrase “there is no work” functions as a refrain, almost a mantra, periodically thought or even uttered aloud as a truism. It prompts the question: What function does the work ethic have if there is no work to be done? Given that in the worst years of the Depression the unemployment rate approached 25 percent, Tom’s assertion is not without validity (S. Carter). Circumstances have destabilized Tom’s worker subjectivity, altering the way in which he sees and experiences the world—not to mention the way others see him—in turn allowing him to accumulate a previously unavailable store of knowledge. Necessarily, this destabilization entails a defamiliarization of the work ethic, a process that, in The Problem with Work, Kathi Weeks argues will begin to expose the ethic as “irrational at its origins and to its core,” despite the fact that “it is prescriptive of what is taken to be the most rational forms of practical economic conduct” (42).

Specifically, the unavailability of work facilitates the abandonment of bourgeois morality. When Tom plans the aforementioned aborted bank robbery, his proposed actions appear rational and even justified. After all, he reasons while contemplating his targets,
“They would let me starve to death on the streets without lifting a hand to help me” (59). Society dictates that he must work in order to eat, but everywhere he goes, people tell him, “There is no work,” thus effectively denying him the capacity to sustain his own life (57). It makes sense that Tom rejects the right of his pursuers following the failed bank robbery to judge his actions: “What do they know what is right and wrong? How can they know? They have not lived for years in lousy mission flops. They have not eaten swill from the restaurant garbage cans. They have good jobs? They do not know what is right or what is wrong” (63). Far from being universal, his narration implies, morality derives from specific material experience.

To replace the dichotomy between tramp and hobo, the novel proposes a new binary that jettisons moral implications: want and freedom-from-want. Tom constantly reviews his current position in relation to this distinction, which hinges on those most basic physiological factors at the bottom of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Casciato and West 279). His life has been reduced to a perpetual quest for food and shelter from the elements, or “three hots and a flop,” as he puts it in the novel’s final words (129). Thus, he peppers the narration with commentary regarding his immediate material circumstances, always framed as simple contrasts. Looking through the window of a restaurant, he notes, “It looks warm in there. Warm and dry. Out here it is wet and cold” (78). While lying on the floor in an abandoned building filled with homeless men, he thinks, “It is wet outside and cold. But I am not wet or cold. I am warm and dry” (22). In much the same way, he later comforts himself during a tedious sermon by noting, “It is damp and chilly in the parks, but it is warm in here” (33). Tom lives in a state of constant precarity, unable to predict moment by moment whether he escape privation in the
immediate future. With no opportunities to change his circumstances, his ambitions have reached their nadir, so that his ideal of the good life now consists of having enough money to afford the fundamental resources for survival. Watching a man pay his thirty-cent dinner check with a dollar, Tom “wonder[s] how it feels to have a buck in your jeans. Four bits will set me on top of the world right now. A good warm flop tonight and breakfast in the morning.” Even when fantasizing, he can only dare to project twelve hours or so into the future what security such capital would provide. Still, he elaborates on his fantasy in another way, well aware of the social legitimacy that accompanies such wealth. “That’s the way to live,” he thinks. “Pay for what you get, and look every copper you pass on the street straight in the eye, and say: ‘You bastard, I don’t owe you a cent’” (11).

Kromer’s novel derives much of its critical import from this radical reorientation of the protagonist’s priorities away from more familiar plot catalysts and toward the mundane, an approach that links it to a seminal iteration of the genre. In his monomaniacal focus on his immediate material conditions—as in his episodic peregrinations—Tom recalls the malnourished narrator of the anonymously authored Spanish picaresque novel *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554). Much like *Waiting for Nothing*, this sixteenth-century text takes the form of the fictitious “autobiography of a marginalized indigent whose mishaps serve to denounce … society” (Cruz 2). Understandably preoccupied with food and the lack of it, Lazarillo admits to a new acquaintance that he “know[s] how to sleep one night and even more, if necessary, without any food in [his] stomach” (33). He is often subject to such craving for sustenance that even a bit of bread he obtains at one point “was like the very face of
God” (21). Hunger motivates the actions of both characters, and lengthy descriptions and catalogues of food appear throughout both narratives. Employed temporarily as a priest’s servant, Lazarillo watches in envy as his master boils a sheep’s head and proceeds to gorge himself, eating “the eyes, the tongue, the neck, the brains and the meat on the jawbone” (19). Tom likewise describes the food that others eat in simple, yet sensual language.

I pass a restaurant. In the window is a roast chicken. It is brown and fat. It squats in a silver platter. The platter is filled with gravy. I stand there and watch it drip. It drips over the side, slow. I stand there and watch it drip. Underneath it the sign says: “All you can eat for fifty cents.” I lick my lips. My mouth waters. I sure would like to sit down with that before me. (6)

As ever, the promise of nourishment, even extravagant indulgence (“All you can eat”), lies just out of reach, on the other side of a pane of glass that demarcates the tramp from the citizen, those who want and those who are free from want. Frequently starving, both narrators find themselves surrounded by inaccessible nourishment.

While the disparity represented by such scenarios implies a critique of society’s base, both novels proffer far more overt criticism of certain superstructural institutions. In their daily confrontation with these sorts of physiological deprivations, both Lazarillo and Tom adopt a cynical view of those who would privilege the spiritual over the earthly. (Lazarillo, like Tom, has learned that lofty moral standards become unfixed when one has been denied the material resources necessary to sustain life.) Lazarillo abounds with hypocritical religious representatives who counsel piety while indulging their baser desires. Similarly, in Waiting a preacher at a mission ironically sermonizes that “[w]e are too much taken up with worldly things” (34). While Lazarillo initially attributes his actions to noncorporeal motivation, first claiming “[t]he Devil … put temptation in front of my eyes,” then professing to have been “enlightened by the Holy Ghost,” later he is
“convinced that hunger was my guiding light” all along (14, 21, 24). In like manner, Tom has little faith that the divine plays an active role in the daily lives of the impoverished: “These stiffs are in this joint because they have no place to get in out of the cold, and this bastard asks them to stand up and tell what God has done for them. I can tell him what God has done for them. He hasn’t done a damn thing for them” (39).

Comparison to another text (one not produced almost four-hundred years prior and on the other side of the Atlantic) also illuminates some of Waiting for Nothing’s strategies and central concerns. Although Kromer would likely have rejected any suggestion of equivalency, his novel’s second chapter contains a scene that closely mirrors the conclusion of Edward Anderson’s Hungry Men, published the same year as Waiting, yet the point at which the two texts diverge on the level of plot reveals their fundamental ideological differences. Kromer despised Anderson’s novel, and wrote a scathing review in which he attacked what he saw as its lack of authenticity, declaring that the reader will encounter “no working stiffs dying of malnutrition on lice-infested blankets of three-decker bunks in the missions”—as, not coincidentally, one such stiff does in a pivotal scene in Waiting for Nothing—and “no soup-lines that stretch for blocks in the city streets and never start moving” (237). For Kromer, no novel purporting to address the reality of current economic conditions can be without such images. Yet, much as Anderson’s protagonist Acel Stecker makes appearance in court after being arrested for fighting on the street, Tom finds himself waiting in the prisoner’s box to go before a judge on charges of vagrancy. In parallel circumstances, both Acel and Tom silently contemplate their defense strategies. Both men mount their imaginary arguments less on claims of innocence than on their abilities to demonstrate their
respective exceptionalism through the use of what they imagine to be sophisticated and utterly persuasive rhetoric. Even these characters’ imaginary speeches contain remarkably similar syntax and diction. Acel thinks, “The judge will know I am no ordinary bum when I address him,” and goes on to practice a monologue peppered with appropriate legalese (Anderson 270, italics added). Tom similarly readies himself by carefully selecting just the right terminology: “Let me see. I will plead guilty with mitigating circumstances. That sounds all right. This judge will see that I am no ordinary stiff” (28, italics added). If only to himself, Tom insists on his cultural capital: “I have got a good education. I’ve had good jobs in my time” (29). He goes further, fantasizing an entire exchange in which he eloquently explains those mitigating circumstances, beginning by situating his act of trespassing within the “world-wide crisis in unemployment.” After first establishing the broader context for his actions, unafraid to indulge in a bit of pathos, he will point to the weather as a factor, claiming, “We had no alternative. We must sleep. We cannot sleep in the rain” (29). He will conclude by noting quite reasonably that this crime had no particular victim. After all, “[t]his building was empty. We did not break in. It was empty” (29).

Despite these striking similarities, a comparison of the reception of each vagrant’s defense reveals that Kromer’s complaints about Anderson’s novel have some merit, for it is at this point that the stories go in separate directions. In Hungry Men, the stirring speech, although it does not come out quite as smoothly as planned, actually works. Over the course of three pages, Acel engages the judge in an extended conversation after pleading not guilty, convincingly asserting that he is the innocent victim (despite the fact that he actually threw the first punch), earning praise for his
patriotism, and generating positive press coverage for a musical combo that he recently formed. He even gets offered a paying gig, bringing about the hopeful conclusion of Hungry Men’s Americana Hobo narrative. Tom, meanwhile, manages only to spit out the words “I am guilty with—” before the judge cuts him off and sentences him to sixty days in jail. The Critical Tramp does not receive justice, even as Tom attempts to protest, rising to his feet to recite his rehearsed defense, only to sit back down when approached by a police officer with a blackjack. “I will not stand for this. I don’t have to stand for this,” Tom thinks, but, of course, he does; “What the hell can I do against a cop with a blackjack. … They know a stiff hasn’t got a chance” (29, 30).

The two novels contain other noteworthy parallel elements and plot points that ultimately bifurcate in ways that reveal the differences in their ideological underpinnings. Both Acel and Tom encounter feminized homosexual men in urban settings. Yet, while Acel’s interactions with “Queenie” consist of only a brief exchange, adding a bit of exotic local color, Tom’s episode with Mrs. Carter takes place over the course of an entire chapter and raises questions generally skirted or suppressed in Anderson’s novel. Due to its potentially scandalous nature, in fact, Waiting’s British publisher excised the entire chapter just before going to press (Casciato and West 272). It begins when Tom meets a transvestite in a public park and ends when Tom quite frankly acknowledges his willingness to engage in sexual relations with another man in exchange for food and shelter. In the world of Hungry Men, the prerogative of mobility naturally affords men alternatives to prostitution. As Acel’s girlfriend Corrine flatly states, “The difference is that you can sleep on park benches and get by now. … [A] down-and-out man begs and a woman sells” (131). Waiting for Nothing, however, does not make this gendered
delineation. As directly and pragmatically as Corrine, Tom sells his body as a sexual object when he has no other options—that is, when no one will purchase his body for its utility in the service of socially acceptable labor. Even the opportunity for such an apparently feminized and degraded (according to the novel's point of view) form of labor is rare, and competition remains fierce, a fact Tom recognizes when he notes, “I am a luck stiff running into this queer. For every queer there is a hundred stiffs to make him” (46). This relationship model has apparently been normalized, at least within the communities of its respective participants, such that Tom can remark on its conventions: “We are playing a game,” he says of preliminary flirtations (43). It has even received the tacit approval of the authorities, perhaps because these relations only involve those deemed “other” by society. Although both homosexuals and vagrants remain subject to punitive measures, enforcers of the prevailing moral standards will look the other way, exposing the hypocrisy of the dominant order. “The coppers will let you whistle low,” Tom explains, “but not loud” (47). Indeed, among the down and out, no one offers judgment. Instead, another stiff remarks on Tom’s luck and proceeds to offer specific advice based on information gleaned from other transients. Indicating the regularity and acceptability of this particular mode of economic exchange, the stiff goes so far as to correct by example Tom’s use of the male pronoun, consistently referring to Mrs. Carter as “she” without additional comment (46, 47). Even if he was previously unfamiliar with this particular individual, Tom reveals that he has made this sort of arrangement before. When Mrs. Carter asks if Tom has “ever go[ne] out with any fellows?” Tom responds in the negative, but immediately contradicts himself in the narration, admitting, “I am lying,
but if this queer wants a virgin, that’s what he gets” (45). It becomes clear that Tom’s physical transience elides with his sexual transience.

Although the novel does not condemn Tom’s actions, the narration does not assume a progressive stance on homosexuality. Mrs. Carter conforms to the particular stereotype of the bitchy, duplicitous, lascivious “queen” with “sharp-pointed and painted … flaming red” nails that the narrator assumes would be used to scratch out the eyes of anyone foolish enough to cross her (49). Apparently, in the world of this novel, a host of wealthy gay transvestites has escaped the ravages of the Depression so that they can use their capital to pick up homeless men who would otherwise spend the night in the park. In fact, Tom’s desirability is such that his presence sparks a bidding war between Mrs. Carter and her roommate Gloria, also a male transvestite. Walking with Mrs. Carter back to her apartment, Tom cannot help but consider the opinions of staring onlookers, fretting, “Maybe they will think I am queer, too.” This moment of muted gay panic inspires an incongruously aggressive assertion of his masculinity: “I’d like to see some bastard accuse me of being queer. The first guy that calls me a pansy, it will be just too bad for that guy. That guy will never call anyone else a pansy” (48). By this point in the novel—the fourth chapter out of twelve—it has become clear that Tom lacks the capacity for such action. Not once has he carried out a threat of violence.

Yet, in keeping with the prevailing tone, the narrator presents the incident through a relatively disinterested delivery. Tom, justifying his actions, simply says, “What can I do? What am I doing is all I can do. A stiff has got to live” (51). The point remains that a crisis in capitalism renders bourgeois morality irrelevant. Regardless of what the reader with regular access to shelter and food may think about homosexual
relations or prostitution, in the absence of those essentials, a person will do what is necessary. A scene in another chapter subtly returns to this point, when Tom meets a woman named Yvonne in the midst of her tentative, awkward first attempt to earn money by selling sexual access to her body. Tom’s experience as a transient again affords him insight that might elude the casual observer, in this case allowing him to interpret Yvonne’s acts as those of a novice. Taking in her ragged clothes, Tom thinks, “I can see that she is the same as me,” and the two strike up a friendship (78). Given that Tom has previously exchanged sex for food, the reader understands that this acknowledgement of similarity does more than suggest a potential dispositional bond—it also entails a certain fatalism, implying a course of action overdetermined by economic realities. In other words, even if Yvonne has not yet learned to sell herself effectively, she inevitably will have to do so. Noting the double bed in Yvonne’s apartment, Tom thinks, “That is thoughtful of the landlady, because if the beds in the rooms were not double beds, there would be no use for a hot plate. There would be nothing to eat” (83). This simple equation demonstrates how everyone in this scenario, including the landlady, is implicated in society’s failure to provide either employment or essential resources. Motivated less by generosity than the same pragmatism that has separately driven both Tom and Yvonne to prostitution, the landlady understands that she must provide accommodations that allow her tenants to conduct such exchanges if those tenants are to have enough money to pay their rent.

Tom’s capacity to understand and even identify with Yvonne’s inevitable decision to engage in sex work puts him at odds with *Hungry Men*’s Acel, who could not tolerate Corrine’s similar decision and thereby simply replicates prevailing bourgeois moral
codes. Although the termination of neither relationship is dramatized, the text implies that Acel and Corrine split up because Corrine opted to support herself through prostitution, while practical economic circumstances most likely caused Tom and Yvonne to part ways. (The end of their relationship takes place between chapters.) Acel comes to the end of his narrative poised to begin a new romance, confident that this relationship will be free of the sordid conditions that marred his union with Corrine. Suzanne, the new woman in his life, “isn’t but nineteen, and she hasn’t been around much. You could tell that in her eyes. Corinne’s eyes got hard at times, but she was older, and she been around a whole lot. She had been around too much” (263). So, by the last page of the novel, Acel has not only started to make money playing music, but he has become involved with a woman uncontaminated by excess sexual experience. This fact helps the reader part company with Acel, understanding that the young man has finally begun to turn his life around.

Rather than similarly endorsing this moral perspective, *Waiting for Nothing* pushes the reader to see neither Tom nor Yvonne as somehow fallen or sexually deviant, but as two people engaged in the only form of waged labor available to them. In this way, the text again reveals a central contradiction of the dominant socioeconomic order that simultaneously venerates individual liberty while strictly circumscribing the exercise of that liberty. Herbert Marcuse argues that within “[b]ourgeois society … the prohibition of pleasure” has always been “a condition of freedom” (115). In accordance with this principle, organizing the deployment of human resources in the service of generating “profit was considered a natural activation of freedom,” such that, among the laboring classes, “hiring oneself out to work in a factory became a moral duty, while
hiring out one’s body as a means to pleasure was depravity and ‘prostitution’” (115-116). The Kantian categorical imperative that humans be treated as ends in themselves, and never exploited as means, disallows the commodification of the body “as a manifestation or bearer of the sexual function,” yet permits “[t]he sale of labor power” (116). Ostensibly, the latter does not entail the reduction of the individual to mere means, as the laborer freely makes the choice to go to work and thus still retains “as a sacred preserve the abstraction that is his person-in-itself, separated from its socially valuable functions” (116). Tom and Yvonne have both found it impossible to sell their labor power under socially sanctioned conditions and consequently are unable to secure the necessary material requirements to sustain life. This state of affairs essentially renders bourgeois moral taboos inapplicable while also belying the notion that work is somehow freely chosen. If labor is enforced, it becomes exploitation of the individual as a means rather than an end, and the distinction between work and prostitution collapses.

By this point in the novel, the reader has come to understand that economic conditions doom all of Tom’s relationships to failure, so this brief moment of domestic companionship will necessarily provide only a brief respite, not only for the novel’s narrator, but also for the novel’s audience. As Tom told Mrs. Carter, economic circumstances dictate emotions: “I haven’t any girl now. I haven’t got any dough. No dough, no girl. … What good would it do a stiff if he was in love with his girl?” (52). So, unsurprisingly, the relationship with Yvonne does not endure, and at the beginning of the next chapter, Tom’s life has been reset once again to its default position of homelessness and solitude. Whatever happiness Tom might have experienced as a
result of Yvonne’s invitation to stay with her happens off the page, not worthy of representation, as it can be considered little more than an interruption. At no point will Tom reminisce about Yvonne, just as he never mentions any other character outside of the boundaries of the chapters in which that character was first introduced. Once again, the episodic form of the novel makes clear as much as any particular description that precarity is the only consistent factor in Tom’s life.

Written during the depths of the Depression when the Communist Party actively and successfully organized among the impoverished and unemployed, and describing the experiences of those people who would have the most immediate reasons to question the legitimacy of capitalism, Kromer’s novel necessarily addresses the question of revolutionary change. Yet, discussions of such measures occupy an even smaller portion of the book than they did in Anderson’s more conservative Hungry Men, and become explicit during only a single chapter. Tom has managed to sneak past the watchful eye of the landlady into the room rented by his friend Karl, an aspiring writer in the realist tradition who actually gets what little money he has through a job at a restaurant taking out the garbage, for which he earns two dollars a week. The two men became friends when they met in the park, and Karl allows Tom to sleep on his floor “[w]hen it is too cold to sleep” outside (67). The room costs Karl half his earnings, and he reserves the other half to feed himself, although a food budget of only a dollar a week means that Karl “is always hungry”—and, according to Tom, Karl’s artistic aspirations guarantee that he “will always be hungry” (67). Tom has brought with him a sack filled with two-day-old rolls, doughnuts and a squashed coconut pie that he begged from a baker. Tom, Karl, and Werner, a destitute artist who lives across the hall, crowd
into the small room and gorge themselves. Afterward, Tom listens to the following exchange:

“Some day there will be an end to all this,” says Karl. “Some day we shall have all we want to eat. There is plenty for all. Some say we shall have it.”

“Revolution?” says Werner. …

“Revolution,” says Karl. “Not now. There is no leader. But some day there will arise a leader for the masses.”

“You are right,” says Werner. “Some day there will be plenty for all.”

(71-72)

When contrasted with the dialogue in the rest of the chapter, these lines seem especially stilted. Their false ring, however, suggests less a momentary faltering of the author’s ear and more the sense that these words have been mouthed by these characters so often they have been drained of meaning. With given names that evoke Karl Marx and perhaps Werner Sombart, author of the 1906 study *Why Is there no Socialism in the United States?*, their muted and perfunctory sloganeering on behalf of a (perpetually deferred) proletarian upheaval implicates the theorists who have predicted capitalism’s inevitable supplanting by communism.

Significantly, both Karl and Werner engage in unremunerated cultural production, each of them striving to communicate the truth of the subaltern experience. Karl’s stories effectively portray “the starved cries of babies” and “the hungry look in men’s eyes,” while the subjects of Werner’s paintings all “have a hungry look in their eyes,” as well (67, 69). While Tom recognizes the artistry of these works, or at least their verisimilitude, he sees little value in maintaining one’s integrity if one’s immediate, basic material needs have not been met. Tom understands that people do not want to read stories about hungry men and babies, and that they will buy Werner’s paintings only if
he would eliminate “the hungry look” (69). Yet Tom remains aloof, acting only as an observer, claiming he does “not understand such talk as this” when Karl and Werner denounce any suggestion of pragmatic compromise in their artistic output for the sake of commercial viability as “sacrilege” (69). He becomes even more frustrated with the mention of revolution, his thoughts echoing, “I am tired of such talk as this.” If the underfed masses have not yet risen up to overthrow their oppressors by now, given the dire circumstances, Tom sees little chance that it will happen in the future. He claims to have “seen one bull [railroad police officer] kick a hundred stiffs off a drag [train]. When a stiff’s gut is empty, he hasn’t got the guts to start anything. When his gut is full, he just doesn’t see any use in raising hell.” Ultimately, Tom concludes that “You can stop a revolution of stiffs with a sack of toppin’s [leftovers]” (72). For Tom, solace exists in neither art nor the promise of revolution. To put faith in either, as Karl and Werner do, is naive. Experience offers sufficient testimony to this truth. Material conditions are all that matter.

As if commenting upon Crane’s “Experiment,” the chapter comes to a close with Tom’s contemplation of the limited efficacy of such forms of representation, which he links to the individual’s limited capacity for true empathy—the capacity to “know.” He looks through the room’s window and sees a stiff caught in the rain, and begins to imagine what the rest of the night holds for him. Tom narrates a likely scenario: “He passes houses and sees into the front windows from the street. He sees the people who live in these houses. They sit by their firesides.” As always, Tom uses simple language to emphasize immediate material conditions, drawing attention to the direct contrast that characterizes the tramp’s existence moment by moment: “They are warm and dry. He is
wet and cold.” Unlike Tom, who “knows” and “can see,” those on the privileged side of that circumstantial binary will forever fail to grasp the meaning behind textual representations of deprivation. The people in the houses “are reading about [the stiff] in the papers. They do not know it is about him, but it is” (76). As much as these people may lament the worsening of the economic situation—“Too bad things are tough”—their position affords them the luxury of forgetting. Kromer the author necessarily must disagree with Tom the narrator regarding the value of representation, as he has written a book that describes in detail “the hungry look in men’s eyes,” but in this passage he comes close to making a plea, or perhaps an accusation, aimed directly at the reader: even if you close the pages, put this book aside, and forget its characters, “the stiff in the rain cannot forget. The water trickling down his soggy clothes will not let him forget. The gnawing pain in the pit of his belly will not let him forget” (76). In this passage, Tom demonstrably embodies his role as critical ambassador, speaking as one who can see and thus one who knows.

Instead of deliberate advocacy of a particular revolutionary program, the novel relies on Tom’s typically unstated and ineffectual resentment to develop its political themes. He questions economic inequality, asking, “Why should one guy have a million dollars, and I am down in a hole with pecans on top of me for covers?” (98). He questions the legitimacy of private property, asking, “Who is there to say that this world belongs to certain guys? What right has one guy to say: This much of the world is mine; you can’t sleep here?” (98). He keeps up a running critique of official rhetoric. In court, listening to the charges against him, Tom thinks, “He mumbles something about vagrancy. What this guy means is, we slept in an empty building to get in out of the rain.
He don’t say that, though” (28). “Vagrancy” is mere legalese, divorced from reality. The Exhausted Tramp narrative offers a politically innocent socioeconomic critique throughout the story. The narrator at times expresses a vague desire to achieve justice against “them”—someday they will pay—but he rejects the feasibility of revolution, especially if it is supposed to originate from the social strata he occupies.

Even if Tom does not put his faith in the tramp as potential revolutionary vanguard, he does exhibit a fundamental solidarity with this class. As discussed previously, he freely shares his food and his knowledge with other needy tramps. More significantly, his experiences draw attention to the specific ways in which the tramp’s railroad-enabled mobility creates a site of alternative practice among the subaltern. In the novel, the hobo jungle functions as a communal space that in its very nature performs an equalizing function, uniting its inhabitants in a bond founded on shared material circumstances: “I look from face to face about our fire. We are not strangers. The fire has brought us together. We do not ask questions about each other. There is nothing to ask. We are here. We are here because we have no other place to go” (115). From the first page of the novel, he has demonstrated his moral willingness (if not his practical ability) to rob the more fortunate—his social and economic antagonists—but he still maintains firm ethical boundaries based on shared interests, insisting, “I have my opinion of any stiff who will hold up another stiff and take his chicken-feed away from him. Any guy who will do that is a low-livered bastard” (110). It is important that Tom has these thoughts while he and other tramps are being held up in a boxcar by a pair of armed transients, but Tom himself will lose nothing in this robbery, having hidden his money under a medically unnecessary iodine-soaked bandage. In other words, even if
he will not suffer personally, he retains the capacity for sympathy, unlike the bourgeois subject who reads employment statistics in the newspaper.

*Waiting for Nothing* supports historian Kenneth Kusmer’s observation that “[m]ost of the significant books about vagabond life published during the 1920s and ‘30s were too realistic to present the tramp as a heroic figure” (179). Tom may offer critique, but as he himself admits, he does not have the “guts” to become a truly rebellious hero. Yet, if Depression-Era representations of the passive Exhausted Tramp such as *Waiting for Nothing* primarily serve to destabilize the audience’s faith in the dominant socioeconomic order, another iteration of the train-hopping vagabond offers a model of direct opposition in the form of the itinerant insurrectionist. The figure of the Revolutionary Hobo shares many traits with Black Flynn, the villain of Lee O. Harris’s *The Man Who Tramps*—but his narrative frames him from a celebratory perspective. Rather than inspiring fear and disgust, the radical vagabond presents an example to follow. Like Flynn, he employs his mobility on behalf of an active effort to topple bourgeois liberal capitalism, but the texts in which he appears represent these endeavors as part of a noble cause, and his adventures assume an advocacy function. At the same time, much like the Americana Hobo, the agency he demonstrates through his free-spirited theft of transportation on freight trains delivers him to the fields, mines, and logging camps where he works hard for his pay, contributing to the development of the nation’s economy. Both representational traditions emphasize their protagonists’ worker identity. The Revolutionary Hobo, however, deviates from his individualist cousin in his advocacy of collectivism—he understands that by virtue of his status as a worker, he has a shared interest with other members of the working class. In reference to this
figure, the word “hobo” signifies neither apolitical rugged individualism nor idle transience. He is a Savage Tramp in possession of a work ethic, an Americana Hobo imbued with a collectivist mentality.

This radical and celebratory iteration of the railroad tramp makes its most obvious and frequent appearance in the cultural production of the Industrial Workers of the World, the radical labor union founded in 1905 with the stated goals of overthrowing the employing class and abolishing the wage system. According to a sympathetic pamphlet history of the organization, the delegates at that founding convention “were the non-conformists, the stiff-necked irreconcilables, at war with capitalist society. Radicals, rebels and revolutionists started the IWW,” deliberately rejecting “the idea of the permanent ‘co-existence’ of labor unions and the private ownership of industry. … They saw the relations of capital and labor as a state of war” (Cannon 4). To this end, members of the IWW, who became known as Wobblies, adopted the strategy of organizing all workers regardless of industry, skill level, race, or gender into “one big union” and rejecting electoral politics in favor of direct action in the form of strikes, sabotage, and other means of protest. In this way, they imagined “America’s downtrodden masses, no longer satisfied with mere crumbs from their masters’ abundant tables” would rise “from the abyss of society to seize for themselves the world of industry” (Dubofsky 153).

Although the nation’s industrial production and working class were densely concentrated in the East, the IWW had only limited success in that region. Instead, it found a more receptive audience in the more sparsely populated western states among the floating casual labor force, which consisted of the politically disenfranchised who
“enjoyed few of the rights of political democracy accorded to settled citizens with a stake in their community. They were the dispossessed, the homeless outcasts, without roots or a stake any place in society” (Cannon 20). Propagandizing in agricultural fields, logging and mining camps, railroad yards, and hobo jungles, the organization drew heavily from these ranks. Todd DePastino argues that the union in turn “propagated a folklore of the hobo that would outlive both the IWW and the subculture from which it emerged” (Citizen 96). This folklore linked the transient worker to the image of the vigorously masculine Western pioneer, and so exploited broader cultural anxiety over the feminizing effect of the docile, domestic urban East. In the end, this sort of Wobbly rhetoric “made a veritable fetish out of the hobo” (Citizen 126).

There is an implicit threat connected to the IWW’s adoption of the hobo as a sort of mascot and the manifestation of the ideal worker: the hobo’s virtually unrestricted and often unobserved mobility makes him all the more effective as an anti-capitalist agitator. He can be anywhere and everywhere because he can successfully make appropriative use of railroad technology, and he has no ties to a specific place, no obligations. Plus, there is a sort of radical freedom in his material poverty, homelessness, and transience: he has nothing to lose. Such were the concerns expressed in “Menace of the I.W.W.,” an article appearing in the September 2, 1917 issue of the New York Times and consisting primarily of a lengthy diatribe by William H. King, a U.S. Senator from Utah. (According to the Times, King achieved his authority on the issue by virtue of the fact that Wobbly activist Joe Hill had been executed by that state two years prior.) King alternately characterizes the IWW as “diabolical,” “treasonable,” “hideous,” and “malevolent,” a “malignant growth” analogous in its potential to cause harm to “a mad
dog” or “a murderous maniac,” whose members recognize “no emblem except that which stands for murder and the most savage depravity.” He declares the organization’s membership “vagabonds and tramps,” “nomadic, houseless, and homeless” people with “no family ties,” “the flotsam and jetsam of on the tumultuous sea of life.” Moreover, “the overwhelming majority … are aliens,” probably German agents (although King admits he has no proof of this claim) bent on debilitating the U.S. war effort. King proceeds to define the bounds of proper labor activism, insisting that the “honest” and “true” worker rightly has an investment in “orderly development and harmonious relation between employer and employee,” as well as “the maintenance of good government, and proper growth and development in all of the activities of trade and commerce.” At the same time, King suggests that labor activism is unnecessary, because high wages and “general prosperity” prevail, which lends support to his claim that “[i]t is not higher wages or improved conditions for the laboring man for which this organization is striving.” Rather, “The I.W.W. proclaims the abolition of the wage system and declares that capitalism must be destroyed.”

In fact, setting aside the hyperbolic adjectives and repeated assertions that the IWW advocated for murder rather than worker solidarity, King’s words contain an element of truth. After all, one of the IWW’s most famous pieces of (nonmusical) literature, the Preamble, first formulated at the 1905 Chicago convention and subsequently revised, pronounces, “The working class and the employing class have nothing in common” and that “the trade unions aid the employing class to mislead the workers into the belief that the workers have interest in common with their employers,” while a later revision explicitly calls for “[a]bolition of the wage system” (qtd. in
Furthermore, few Wobblies would deny that they sought members from among the transients and immigrants, the disenfranchised (or “flotsam and jetsam”) excluded from the trade union movement. In this sense, the paranoid fantasy of texts such as Harris’s *The Man Who Tramps* is not totally without basis in reality. The difference between the Savage Tramp and the Revolutionary Hobo, then, becomes one of emphasis. The facts of the story matter less than the perspective of the storyteller.

Music became the primary means of creating and delivering the stories and folklore of the revolutionary hobo-laborer. Wobbly songwriters often wrote lyrics and set them to the tunes of pre-existing songs and hymns, and from the beginning they received enthusiastic response at membership meetings and rallies. Printed on flyers, in the union newspaper *Solidarity*, and eventually compiled in *The Little Red Songbook* (the more common name for a volume officially titled *Songs of the Workers: On the Road, in the Jungles, and in the Shops—I.W.W. Songs to Fan the Flames of Discontent*), first published in 1909 and going through dozens of editions over the course of the twentieth century), these songs were intended to “stir the workers into action, to awaken them from an apathy and complacency that has made them adept their servitude as though it had been divinely ordained,” in the words of a member of the songbook committee (qtd. in D. Carter 368). They addressed a wide range of issues in a variety of tonal registers, usually focusing the oppressive conditions of wage labor, with many of the lyrics addressing the life of the itinerant worker specifically. One of the most well-known of the hobo-specific songs is “Hallelujah, I’m a Bum,” a blasphemous parody of the hymn “Revive Us Again.” It became the theme song for organizer John T.
Walsh and his boxcar-riding “Overalls Brigade” as the group traveled from the Pacific Northwest to Chicago in 1908 for the IWW’s fourth annual convention, funding their travels by playing music and selling copies of the songbook and other literature (Alder 130).

O, why don’t you work
As other men do?
How the hell can I work
When there’s no work to do?

Hallelujah, I’m a bum,
Hallelujah, bum again!
Hallelujah, give us a handout—
To revive us again!

O, why don’t you save
All the money you earn?
If I did not eat,
I’d have money to burn!

O, I like my boss
He’s a good friend of mine.
That’s why I am starving
Out in the bread-line.

I can’t buy a job
For I ain’t got the dough.
So I ride in a boxcar
For I am a hobo.

Whenever I get
All the money I earn,
The boss will be broke,
And to work he must turn.

Hallelujah, I’m a bum,
Hallelujah, bum again!
Hallelujah, give us a handout—
To revive us again! (qtd. in Adler 130-131)

This song encapsulates the tensions attending to the construction of the Revolutionary Hobo in popular culture generated by the IWW. The lyrics appropriate the derisive
appellation and category of *bum*, repositioning the identity as worth of celebration. At the same time, the verses insist that an inherently unfair and artificial socioeconomic structure necessarily produces the impoverished transient, so the transient has little choice but to remain a bum, and injunctions proposing thrift and a strong work ethic reflect a misapprehension of reality. The Revolutionary Hobo acts as a truth-teller, exposing the lie that a capitalist system offers opportunity for all who would take it. As long as capitalism exists—as it inevitably will until, in the words of the Preamble, “the workers of the world organize as a class, take possession of the earth and the machinery of production and abolish the wage system” (qtd. in Brissenden 351)—so too will bums, who will happily impose themselves on the society that maintains such inequality. Yet, as heroic as he is, the bum would rather live in a world where he need not be a bum.

While the songs collected in the I.W.W.’s *Little Red Songbook* served to rally laborers to the cause, relatively few surviving Wobbly texts, according to Salvatore Salerno, actually “provide a sense of the social space, context, and texture of the lived experience of the rebel tramp who created and carried much of the culture that animated the movement” (29). Charles Ashleigh’s autobiographical novel *The Rambling Kid* is one such work. It presents a narrative account of the social life of the radical transient worker transported by illegal rides on trains from the flophouses located along the “main stem” of any Midwestern and Western city to the farms where they worked during the harvest season, and to the hobo jungles in between. Whereas Kromer’s novel offers only a description of the capitalism’s myriad failures of the present society to support its members, leaving it up to the reader to move beyond the narrator’s
preoccupation with “three hots and a flop” and develop a more rigorously political
critique, Ashleigh’s protagonist Joe Crane models the trajectory from uncommitted
discouraged worker to revolutionary activist.

Published in 1930 in London and available in an American edition only since
2003, the novel takes place during the 1910s, fictionalizing the author’s experiences as
a Wobbly agitator and propagandist between 1912 and 1917. Joe, like Ashleigh, serves
as a rare example of an immigrant itinerant laborer who becomes fully absorbed into the
hobo narrative tradition, for although hoboes were accompanied on the road by men
and women from a variety of ethnic and national backgrounds, the appellation “hobo”
has largely been reserved for the “vast numbers of native-born white workers who
quickly distinguished themselves by their individual restlessness, irregular work habits,
and alienation from settled communities” (DePastino, Citizen 65). In its depictions of
Joe’s impoverished childhood in the East End of London, the novel establishes its
protagonist’s two compelling and interrelated urges that will motivate much of the plot:
the desire for an authentic education and the desire for adventure. On his way home
from school, Joe would linger at the sailors’ lodging houses, “listening unobtrusively,
and gaining knowledge which was more enthralling—and, probably, far more
profitable—then that wisdom gleaned at school from harried teachers” (2). Stimulated
by the chaotic energy of his surroundings, Joe “would vision a multitude of rich
adventures, in all of which he played the principle role” (2-3). Following his father’s
dream, Joe’s family later immigrates to South Dakota to pursue farming, but this
endeavor soon fails, the family splinters, and Joe ends up living with his mother in
Minneapolis, unable to find work despite the stenography skills he had learned from a
neighbor. As he did while still a child in London, he begins to drift toward “the tough quarter of town,” in this case the hobo district known as the “The Slave Market” (73). There, getting acquainted with a raucous group of Wobblies, he continues the education that his precarious economic state has always provided. From his new friends, he learns that throughout the western states hoboes “roamed from job to job,” working in the railroad, construction, timber, and farming industries, but “often becoming dependent between employments upon begging or even stealing, and never paying for a railway journey” (76). These men, Joe comes to understand, differ in some essential way from the farmers and city workers he has known, even if they too “worked on ranches during the harvest” and “were dependent on wages” (76).

Immediately, this characterization of the radical transient laborer deviates from that of the Americana Hobo tradition’s ideal, which instead posits a pure, wholly independent traveler whose existence reveals no essential flaws in the system—at most, only a periodically recurring gap that needs closing—and who freely chooses his life of liberty. In The Man Who Tramps, Billy Moon never once lies, steals, or accepts a handout, and in the end he stays on the road as the result of individual disposition, even when offered a chance to settle down. While later examples of the type would allow for greater flexibility, any transgression they committed was still minor and forgivable, well within the bounds of acceptable bourgeois morality. Modernity has long insisted on a strict delineation between the worthy and the unworthy poor—manifesting in the United States as the difference between the Savage Tramp and the Americana Hobo—but The Rambling Kid frequently acknowledges that transients may alternately work, beg, and steal as either circumstances or sometimes mere whim dictates, effectively blurring the
categories. The hoboes Joe meets certainly do engage in strenuous labor, but they have not been purged of all threat, sanitized to conform to the dominant ideology. Many of them move in and out of mendicancy and criminality with varying degrees of justification. The novel’s occasionally obtrusive third-person narration explains that a “wandering semi-criminal element … merges almost imperceptibly into the working population of the road,” and that sometimes a transient who has engaged in criminal activity “still remained outside the definitely criminal class by working for several months in the year” (109). While a political economy contingent on the internalization of the work ethic by a workforce invested in free labor relations necessarily obsesses over the essential moral distinction between the impoverished people who wish to work from those who do not—no matter how similar their actual material circumstances might be—Ashleigh’s novel presents a world in which such distinctions are both impossible and irrelevant.

Although proudly working class, Joe and his Wobbly companions do not simply adhere to a productivist work ethic that shows little fundamental difference from that espoused by proponents of capitalist ideology. Even with the relative freedom of hobo labor, which affords a worker the option of moving in and out of the ranks of the gainfully employed more or less at will, work as it exists entails exploitation and oppression. As Joe muses to himself, “whether you were on the road or working in the city it was all the same grind—the job all the time or looking for a job. And to what purpose? Just to make money for fat specimens” (153). These characters do not seek reforms that would ameliorate the conditions of wage labor, but to revolutionize labor relations by abolishing the wage system entirely. Even as they do submit periodically to the
indignities of a job, Ashleigh’s Wobblies reject work to the extent that they reject the premises on which it is currently predicated. The Revolutionary Hobo’s status as a member of the working class informs his identity, but it does not wholly define him, in that he does not valorize work for its own sake. The members of the IWW refer to each other as “Fellow Workers,” they see that they have common interests with other members of an exploited class, and they insist that the national and global economy functions due to the labor of people like them, but unlike the Americana Hobo they see no inherent virtue in continuing to labor within a relational structure that leaves them without power, for wages that reflect only a tiny fraction of the value they produce. It is this refusal that so alarms commentators like Harris and King.

All of this is not to say a code analogous to the work ethic does not exist among these radicals, or that they do not see their life on the road as a part of a vital, future-oriented project. The text treats going on the road and joining the IWW as near equivalents. Before they will agree to mentor him, Joe’s Wobbly friend Blackie insists the he get his Red Card, telling him, “It’ll help you get a job. Besides, I wouldn’t travel with a partner that hadn’t got one” (89). After he has made the decision to join his new friends in their travels but before he has even left the city, Joe begins to take pride in his recently acquired identity as a working-class transient, which he feels sets him apart, revealing his greater inner strength and resources. Walking down the street, Joe “eyed impudently the respectable citizens passing by. He was a hobo and a Wobbly, one of the reckless rambling boys who despised the soft security and comfort of a dull-spaced city existence” (93). This attitudinal shift reflects the hobo mythology DePastino describes. In contrast to Exhausted Tramps like Tom in Waiting for Nothing,
Revolutionary Hoboes do achieve a kind of nobility through the deprivation they experience in the course of their travels, precisely because of their particular mode of travel. While paying customers on a passenger train sit inside, “warm and soft, on the upholstered seats, or lay sleeping in their berths,” outside “on the prow of the giant landship stood muffled figures, shivering but dauntless,” who “carried on—through bitter cold and smoke and turmoil, danger of arrest or of beating—towards the harvest jobs that would earn them sustenance for a short space, and help provide the world with bread” (99). This description of Joe and his companions fulfills the promises of those Wobblies who sought to entice Joe to join them in “the life on the road,” when they “implied that he was a fool to stay all the time in the city when travel and fun, and hard work, awaited him” (79). These men do not go on the road to evade hard work, but to pursue it. Yet, such work remains only one of several objectives. In becoming hoboes, they seek to take control of their lives in the one way they can. Mobility allows them to organize and build community, and to get to the jobs that pay the highest wages as a result of those organizational efforts. It also grants access to the variety and adventure—the possibility of self-actualization—that Joe so craves.

Even more significant for Joe, as a budding Revolutionary Hobo, than the road’s capacity to provide income and adventure is its function as a site of education. The Wobblies treat knowledge as another resource to be shared with those of their class, and so Joe undergoes a period of apprenticeship, learning what his fellow workers have to teach him about rewards and dangers of hobo life. Revolutionary Hobo narratives do not romantically celebrate all travelers, so among his many lessons, Joe soon “learn[s] that all hearty good fellows, dressed like stiffs, and talking the language of the road,
were not his friends.” Rather, they may be “part of that criminal and semi-criminal fringe which has always existed around the floating population” (107). He also learns that the solidarity of Wobblies on the road helps to protect them not only from exploitative bosses but also from “high-jacks,” the sorts of traveling thieves who prey on itinerant laborers and other drifters, and who so repelled Tom in Waiting for Nothing for their abandonment of class solidarity in favor of individual advancement. The editorializing narrator of Ashleigh’s novel explains that such men if caught by members of the IWW would likely become the object of “the harsh justice which the workers deal out to parasites. The hobos themselves are the victims of the law; it does not protect them. Who can condemn them, if they themselves administer the code of the road upon those who would deprive them of their earnings?” (107). The rigid and uncomplicated moral dictates of the dominant social order—in this case, prohibition against violence—begin to lose their shape for those who occupy this social stratum, not because those occupants fail to see the utility of any moral codes in greater numbers than other demographics, but because society decrees them to be outside its bounds, and so beyond the protection it offers.

Consequently, once taking to the road, Joe finds that his relationship to the dominant social order has been instantaneously transformed. On the one hand, this transformation carries with it a distinct liberatory quality. Having made the decision to leave town, he feels “an immense well-being within him, and a sense of ease and unburdening. No more bother about getting jobs in those rotten offices! He was a hobo! He was going on the road!” (84). On the other hand, it also means isolation and fear. Waiting in the shadows to make his first illegal ride on a freight train, he is “abandoned
to danger and dread, cut off from the easy safe ways of his life; alone and outcast, here in the dark, a hunted enemy of the law” (95). Because it necessarily entails such criminalization of the subject, life on the road as a hobo facilitates the shedding of bourgeois mentality and its attendant moral proscriptions. A critical moment in the evolution of Joe’s subjectivity occurs when circumstances force him to overcome the internalized self-loathing and repugnance he feels about begging for food. Separated from his hobo mentors and alone on the road for the first time, Joe finds himself “ditched” from a train in a small town and completely broke. Not having eaten in fourteen hours and having no prospects of acquiring food in any other way in the immediate future, Joe resolves to beg. His thoughts rendered on the page as free indirect discourse, Joe thinks, “How does one start? Well, one just starts, and that’s all there is to it,” yet he finds himself unable to act when the first “citizen” he espies simply walks past him (157). Despite the obvious material necessity of panhandling in this situation—he will starve if he does not eat, and he does not have money to buy food—Joe remains in the grips of an ethic that ascribes disgraces to the person who would ask to be fed. He has had enough of a radical education to recognize this conditioning for what it is.

He was horribly ashamed. Yes, he was. He, the rambling kid, London Slim, was ashamed of being a street-beggar; and also he was ashamed of being ashamed. ... He was scared; he couldn’t do it. Christ, what a fool he was! Every stiff bummed when he was broke. What else could one do—one had to eat. ... God damn it, he was getting hungrier and in more of a fury—at hunger, at the world, at himself. (158)

In stark contrast to conventional moral standards, the novel treats Joe’s success in overcoming this self-imposed obstacle as a major triumph, a crucial turning point. He finally approaches a maternal-looking “fat Jewish woman,” the proprietor of a furniture
store, and she rewards him with fifty cents, largely because she has decided that Joe does not “look like a real beggar” (158-159). The handout leaves him feeling not humiliated, but elated, “[o]utside on the side-walk with a half-dollar! Enough to buy a real meal.” The satisfaction of his hunger prompts a cataloging of his spoils, a recounting of “the glory of steak smothered in onions, and hot strong coffee, plenty of fresh bread and butter, fried potatoes.” From a strictly material standpoint, the meal leads to the same ends regardless of how Joe obtained it: “Whether the price were honestly earned, or secured by touching motherly hearts—did it alter the sweet taste of it all?” (159). As a result of his experiences on the road, Joe has undergone a significant ideological shift, now able to explicitly reject platitudes, meant to enforce an ethos of labor and consumerism, that decree a person should savor most that which has been earned by hard work.

Meanwhile, on the road, the inability to overcome bourgeois moral conditioning in similar circumstances leads to tragedy. Joe’s friend Elsie had a middle-class upbringing among the liberal intelligentsia (such that “[h]is somewhat languid unhurried air, and his refined pronunciation, had earned him the feminine nickname”) before abandoning a promising college career to join the revolution, yet he struggles with developing a revolutionary subjectivity (113). Blackie explains to Joe, who had become temporarily separated from his friends during their travels, that he and Elsie had arrived in Salt Lake City destitute, only to find the town overrun with hundreds of hungry transients, so that there were no jobs to be had. Although Blackie insisted that he “could bum enough for two,” Elsie refused to allow it, because of what Blackie calls that “god-damn fool pride of his—bourgeois morality I used to call it.” Tension was mounting between the vagrants
and the city authorities, and because he recklessly initiated a confrontation, “[t]he bulls shot Elsie. He wouldn’t beg, you know” (166). Conversely, Blackie’s own rejection of conventional moral standards leads him not only to beg, but to engage in “class-conscious” theft, as well. He maintains that “he would never rob or cheat a working-man. His victims were the well-to-do people of the cities.” After all, Blackie reasons, “They rob our class, don’t they? … Well, then, I’m only getting a little of our own back from the thief!” (109). Joe declines to join Blackie in these endeavors “[n]ot because he had any special objections on moral grounds to crooks, but because … it didn’t pay” (172). In other words, the criminal invariably got caught, and so when one accounts for the time spent incarcerated, the rate of pay does not represent a significant improvement over a worker’s wages. More than that, Joe felt to become a criminal was to undergo an ontological shift—to leave the working class. A crook “wasn’t a wage-earner,” but an individualist (173). When Blackie drifts away from the IWW and pursues crime on a more dramatic scale, Joe remains loyal to his friend, yet feels hesitant only because criminal activity potentially “interfered with his own way of life.” The narrator makes clear that Joe is right to have “no sympathy for the victims. They were not workers. He had no ethical compunction about taking the money” (209). If the novel’s rhetoric has been effective, the reader has shadowed Joe’s development and arrives with him at this point of view.

In its representation of the Revolutionary Hobo’s world, The Rambling Kid contains several examples of what DePastino calls “hobo folklore’s preoccupation with the hobo’s body” (Citizen 120). The narration lingers over descriptions of Joe and his comrades, emphasizing the positive impact of transient labor on their physical health.
Joe has “worked like hell” during the harvest, and “[h]is muscles became as steel and his chest girth increased. His face tanned deeply beneath the stubble of whisker” (103-104). On the road and at work sites, the hobo occupies a homosocial space, and IWW cultural production tends to imbue the ideal radicalized worker with such physical manifestations of innate masculinity. Largely cut off from women for much of the novel, Ashleigh’s hoboes bond deeply with each other. The narration comments on Joe’s love for his companions more than once. DePastino further argues the Ashleigh’s novel reveals the typical “uneasiness with female companionship and a reluctance to settle down,” even while noting that the author, “like most hoboes, was heterosexual, and the ‘love’ he expressed for his fellow ‘stiffs’ was brotherly, not erotic” (Citizen 91). In fact, Ashleigh did not conceal his homosexuality and was for a time romantically involved with novelist Claude McKay (Kellerman xiii). More importantly, this reading ignores a significant plot development. As evidence, DePastino cites the line, “He loved her. But not so much as he loved the stiffs” (191). Only a few pages later, however, Joe sneaks away from a rally to join her—“her” being Millie, a young politically radical woman Joe has met recently. The two become intimate emotionally and physically, and Millie’s Jewish radical parents welcome Joe into their home. The two even contemplate “permanency,” although they both understand that commitment to radical change may separate them at some point (200). Circumstances, not a refusal to settle down, ultimately drive them apart, when nationwide mass indictments of IWW members force Joe to flee the country. Even as he travels to Russia to work as a propagandist for the revolution at the novel’s conclusion, Joe laments that he had to leave Millie behind.
Joe’s attraction to a possible domestic scenario with Millie serves to illustrate what are ultimately the limitations of the Revolutionary Hobo’s mobility. While a sense of adventure does play a part in motivating Joe and his fellow workers to embrace that mobility, politically it serves only as a temporary and reactive tactic, not a sustainable strategy. These men travel in order to bring about the end of an economic system that compels them to travel in order to survive. While Joe does not disagree when a hobo he meets argues that “it’s easier to travel than to stay in one place,” he also understands that mobility as such fails to offer true liberation (154). In fact, the road begins to lose its romance relatively early on, when Joe becomes separated from his traveling companions after tripping over a switch while trying to catch a moving train. Sitting in damp clothes on a cold night, he sarcastically says to himself, “It’s a fine life, on the road. Who wouldn’t be a hobo—care-free, reckless? Hell!” (151). He comes to view mobility as a temporary measure in his own life, saying, “I don’t mind the life on the road, but wouldn’t want it to last too long. There’s not much fun for an old man on the road” (129). The long-term effects of a life on the road are demonstrable in the older men, like Gold-Tooth, who “had made these journeys so often during the years” that “he had no more the joyful wander-fever of youth” (136).

Joe is not alone in having such thoughts. At times, his companions also openly express their desires for stability and domesticity. One of them ponders whether “maybe it’s better to settle down. Get a regular job in a city, and have a girl. Eat regular, and no ‘bulls’ or ‘dicks’ to be afraid of” (115). Such a comment represents neither a moment of weakness on the part of the speaker nor a minority opinion. Joe thinks that he and his companions share a basic “need” for sustainable romantic companionship, but “it was
beyond the reach of these homeless nomads” and will remain so until “after the
revolution,” as another Wobbly “half-seriously” remarks (115). When he first sought the
mobility available to the Revolutionary Hobo, Joe paid his dues to the IWW, but “was
really not interested in anything very much, except the small daily drama of living” (111).
In addition to the adventure he desired, however, he also received an education in
radical subjectivity while on the road. Once his initial self-interest dissipated, Joe found
he still “wanted something, some obscure thing which was now hidden from him—a
meaning, a purpose.” His interests expanded, and he came to understand that there
would “always [be] something lacking, whether you stayed at home or went on the
road,” until society underwent a revolutionary transformation (152). To create the
meaning he desired, he finally eschews mobility and becomes a committed autodidact,
reading constantly, embarking on “the adventure of the mind” (187). In charting Joe’s
growth, illustrating the transition through which he comes to view the railroad’s mobility
as a means rather than an end in itself, this Revolutionary Hobo narrative deflates the
individualist romanticism of the Americana Hobo representative tradition.

Still, the Revolutionary Hobo’s capacity for self-criticism encounters a limitation
when he fails to recognize the ways in which his narrative replicates certain other
exclusionary measures of the dominant society. In effect, the tradition’s rigid masculinity
serves to undercut its full subversive potential, as it omits oppositional figures that
nonetheless do not embody this particular ideal. Additionally, rhetoric extolling a
national tolerance of dissent will always threaten to fold the Revolutionary Hobo into the
Americana Hobo tradition, co-opting the image and attenuating its critical import, unless
the particular figure exhibits some trait utterly incompatible with that tradition. So, the
Outlier Tramp—the third of the three Critical Tramps I treat here—enacts a radical commentary not only by virtue of living outside mainstream society as a tramp, by also by occupying a space outside of the tramp narrative’s rapidly ossifying conventions.

In its representation of a female railroad tramp, so often discursively associated with prostitution, *Sister of the Road: The Autobiography of Boxcar Bertha* presents a significant, yet complicated, example the Outlier Tramp. First published in 1937, it has been approached until quite recently by many historians and critics as the genuine memoir of a particular female hobo. Marketing materials aggressively and sensationally sold the book in those terms, with Dr. Ben L. Reitman receiving merely “as told to” credit. Archival and textual scholarship, however, has demonstrated that Reitman did not merely mediate the story on behalf of a female vagabond, but actually invented the character and composed the narrative. Joanne Hall notes that an examination of Reitman’s papers yields several “overt references to writing *Sister*,” as well as marked similarities between *Sister* and both his own unpublished memoirs and his earlier published writings, including *The World’s Second-Oldest Profession* (225). Reitman’s biographer Roger Bruns characterizes the book as a variation on the author’s own life story (*Damnedest* 262), while Marylyle McCue argues that Bertha’s voice “provided a safe means to both question and justify his own beliefs and life decisions” (29). Indeed, Reitman’s colorful history does coincide in many ways with certain events described in the book. Like Bertha, Reitman grew up in poverty after his father abandoned the family, played in freight yards as a child, ran errands for pimps and prostitutes, and by ten years old had quit school to travel the country as a tramp. Eventually, both Ben and
Bertha would assume the role of sociologist, serving for a time as “laboratory assistants, researchers, [and] statisticians … [who] worked with, and for, hoboes” (Hall 225n6).

The author, like the character he would create, moved through the world of radical politics and agitation. An anarchist and advocate of free love, he maintained a long-time and tempestuous affair with Emma Goldman while also managing her speaking tours. Eventually earning a medical degree following his first youthful stint on the road, Reitman would emerge as something of a radical gadfly, practicing as a physician among society’s lowest tiers, treating prostitutes and hoboes for sexually transmitted diseases, and spending time in jail for distributing literature on birth control. His affinity for the dispossessed manifested as well in his direction of educational programs at Chicago’s Hobo College, an institution with which he had been associated since its founding. Writing *Sister of the Road* after his own autobiography was rejected by publishers, he injected his own experiences and observations drawn from the women he had treated—along with a healthy dose of salacious details—into the narrative. Marketing materials highlighted the last of these elements, even while framing the book as a contribution to the field of sociology. A press release announced it as “[t]he first book on one of the most fascinating problems of modern society—the female vagabond,” and warned potential readers that “[y]our own daughter or sister, given certain stimuli, may become a ‘sister of the road’” (qtd. in Cresswell 98). Meanwhile, many contemporary reviewers “positioned the text in a sociological discourse” even while treating the work as an autobiography (Hall 227). Reitman’s book consequently appears to straddle multiple genres, making use of autobiography, fiction, and the social sciences in its “sympathetic account of the hobo world” (McCue 1).
While all of these factors indicate that *Sister of the Road* invites a variety of critical approaches, reading it as a novel deemphasizes the particulars of Reitman’s life history, the text’s function as a vehicle for Reitman’s political views, and the disciplinary concerns of sociology, and instead focuses on the cultural work performed by representations of the fictional narrator-protagonist and the other female vagabonds she encounters. Hall makes the case that even if its narrator has since been revealed as a male author’s invention, the work nonetheless “occupies a position of primary importance in the lexicon of female hobo representations” (225-226). This assessment has much to do with the relative dearth of female hobo narratives, a circumstance that renders any such narrative significant merely by virtue of its existence. In cultural discourse and (to some degree at least) historical fact, the road and its narrative traditions have long been deemed the domain of men, so that in hopping a freight train, sitting down beside the fire of a hobo jungle, or telling tales of either, a person enters a thoroughly masculinized space. Consequently, it seems that for decades following the emergence of the tramp phenomenon and the accompanying scare, society literally could not conceive of a female wandering vagrant. “The assumption that tramps were men was codified in the legal definitions of tramps instituted by nineteen states” during the 1870s and 1880s, notes human geographer Tim Cresswell (92). Cresswell goes on to argue that this legislative trend reflects the dualist approach to knowledge acquisition and organization, which hinges on such binary analogs as male/female, public/private, outside/inside (93). According to this cultural logic, the male tramp is a problem to the extent that he is at risk of becoming *too* masculine, in that by becoming a member of a wholly male subculture he has cut himself off from the civilizing influence of women.
More specifically, by willfully embracing homelessness, he has cut himself off from the balancing effect of the domestic space. Only through this balance was the production of responsible citizens and a functioning society possible. Both Cressell and DePastino point out that in the discourse of the late nineteenth century, the social anxiety surrounding the (necessarily male) tramp typically found expression in portrayals of the tramp’s supposedly unbounded sexual impulses (94; Citizen 27). Set apart from feminine influence, the tramp would inevitably return to violate the individual female. If the essence of the discursively constructed tramp resided in the threat he posed to women, it seems impossible that women could simultaneously be tramps.

Because she verges on the unthinkable, the female vagabond fosters taxonomical confusion. This pertains not only to legal definitions, but to the classification efforts of sociological studies, as well. According to Lynn Weiner, during the late 1800s and early 1900s, “women self-identified as tramps and hoboes who took to the road for adventure or work” defied existing categorical schema so thoroughly that the data compiled during that time simply refused to acknowledge their existence (171-172). For example, in the revealingly titled 1916 investigation Why There Are Vagrants: A Study Based upon an Examination of One Hundred Men, Frank Laubach writes:

It is often asked why women do not become vagrants in as great numbers as men. There are perhaps three answers to the question. The first is that they do become the female kind of vagrant, namely, prostitutes, in many instances. The second answer is that society will not tolerate in females the same kind of vagrancy that it will tolerate in men. The third is that perhaps most women do not have the same roving disposition as men. It has been men who have done most of the exploring in history, who have manifested most of the spirit of adventure and love of taking chances, and who have constituted the radical wing of society, while women have been domestic and conservative. It may be that wanderlust is allurement to which the male sex is most susceptible. (71)
While society certainly did express an intolerance of female tramps, Laubach opts to exclude them from his study by denying their existence with a simple essentializing gesture that fails to acknowledge the possibility that such social intolerance could artificially restrict women’s expression of the urge to travel. This gesture in turn allows for further denial: because only men experience wanderlust, women who fall victim to its pull necessarily must lack that which constitutes womanhood. In other words, a woman on the road by definition ceases to be a true woman. Of course, economic factors did in fact create a floating female labor force, but in response to employment opportunities and social pressures that labor force tended to follow an intra-urban circulation pattern, which both obscured its nature and excited less moral panic than the segment of the population that pursued employment across greater geographical distances. Female laborers of this type had not yet strayed so far as to forfeit all claims to social respectability. With the onset of the Depression, however, conditions induced more and more transient working women to leave the city and take to the road—just like men. As a result, a greatly expanded population of female tramps became more visible and thus motivated increased “local and federal government efforts to stem the tide of homelessness” (Weiner 184). With so many of them on the road, these new “lady hoboes” roaming about the country could not simply be dismissed as gender-deviant aberrations who barely merited acknowledgment.

What could it mean, then, when a woman did leave behind the domestic sphere and unambiguously enter the uncivilized masculine space of the boxcar and the hobo jungle? If, as DePastino observes, “the prospect of a ‘homeless’ man threatened the delicate balance between workplace and home, public and private, men and women,
that the middle class had long considered crucial to a healthy social order” (Citizen 25), then the appearance of a transient woman signaled the arrival of outright anarchy—the potential end of family, home, and (ultimately) society. Thus, when legal and academic authorities did finally acknowledge her existence, they reacted to the female vagabond as the embodiment of a “radical rejection of dominant cultural values” (Weiner 184). Yet, the threat entailed by that particular mode of rejection does not lend itself to the easy quantification that often appears in the characterizations of the threat posed by male tramps. Hordes of unsocialized men, after all, present an immediate physical danger to society, its citizens, and the wives of its citizens. Again, the “delicate balance” necessary for civilization would be upset because of the tramp’s exercise of excessive masculinity, not by a fundamental challenge to masculinity’s discursive construction.

The gendered implications of the tramp phenomenon did not arise in a vacuum. In the decades before and after the turn of the twentieth century, anxiety regarding tramps both male and female overlapped historically with social and political shifts that weakened the rigidity of prescribed roles, seen most obviously in the drive for women’s suffrage that culminated in the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920. Here, in concrete legal terms, an exclusive male privilege had been lost, and the erosion of that sort of exclusivity—or even the threat of it—prompted extreme denunciations. For example, in 1913 immunologist Almoth E. Wright published The Unexpurgated Case Against Woman Suffrage, which builds upon arguments he had made in a letter to the New York Times. Positing that only unmarried (and thus necessarily unhappy) women demanded the right to vote, he argued that “[f]ailure to recognize that man is the master and why he is the master lies at the root of the suffrage movement.” The loss of
naturally endowed male mastery had geopolitical implications: “The woman voter would be pernicious to the State, not only because she could not back her vote by physical force, but also by reason of her intellectual defects” (“Declares”).

Increased geographical mobility by women undermined the ideological basis for power distribution in much the same way their increased political mobility did. When a woman became a tramp, she bypassed that civilized masculine public sphere tempered by its connection to the home and infiltrated a world located on the polar opposite end of the presumed gender continuum from her own. A female so utterly divorced from the domesticity to which it was assumed she was naturally most suited by virtue of her sex implied that the gendered separation of spheres might not, in fact, be natural. Yet, on entering that world, she met further opposition. Homeless men who self-identified as either tramps or hoboés often actively participated in the construction of the representational modes through which the vagabond figure is interpreted, using much the same basic material as observers who would condemn them, but approaching it with a divergent angle of vision. While the dominant society saw danger in the boundless masculinity of vagabond life, cultural production by male vagabonds tended to celebrate the exclusive and exclusionary brotherhood of the road. So, the female tramp violates not only the parameters imposed by the dominant society, she troubles the gender boundaries of the tramp and hobo narrative genre, as well. The telling of any female tramp’s story, then, potentially doubles as a critique of both the mainstream and the subculture, as the protagonist seeks to negotiate parallel barriers to her mobility.

It is for these reasons that the female vagabond similarly conforms to neither of the two prevailing representational traditions of the Savage Tramp and the Americana
Hobo. These cultural categories—less rigorous if not less ideological than those devised by legislation or the social sciences—served as the means by which the transient homeless phenomenon was interpreted, yet they made no space for this particular variation on the figure. While the former originated in the discourse of those who condemned the vagabond and the latter reflected the vagabond’s self-mythologizing gestures, both described a world of men. Significantly, a categorical space for the female wanderer eventually develops, if only by analogy, through the shifting deployment of the word “tramp.” As “hobo” settled into the general vernacular as the catch-all appellation for homeless men—whether mobile, worker, both, or neither—by the 1920s the word “tramp” came to designate a woman at least figuratively adrift from the domestic sphere by virtue of her perceived sexual promiscuity (Mills 239). “Contrary to the central tenets of both the work ethic and the family ethic,” notes Kathi Weeks, “the tramp is in each usage a figure of indulgence and indiscipline” (166). In both cases, the term identifies an individual who would embrace a deviant form of mobility. Yet, while the pejorative nature of either use holds fast for women, a patriarchal culture allows for heroic constructions of men who wander spatially or sexually.

In many ways, *Sister of the Road* seeks to rectify this disparity as it pertains in both acceptable society and the world of the tramp. Rather than portraying its title character as the exceptional woman who ultimately reinforces the notion that mobility (of any kind) should remain the exclusive domain of men, the story of Boxcar Bertha “situates its protagonist within a community of ‘sisters of the road,’ and in doing so challenges the gendered structure of canonical American road narratives,” as Christine Photinos puts it (659). More overtly didactic than the other texts discussed in this
chapter—even the deliberately propagandistic novel _The Rambling Kid—Sister_ announces its oppositional and critical stance vis-à-vis the dominant culture from the beginning. Aligning herself with an aberrant sociality, Bertha casually notes on the first page, “In my world somebody was always getting arrested” (7). In an unapologetic, assertive first-person narrative mode, she identifies herself as an alternative subject position, according to which the criminal, the lascivious, the deviant, and the crazy “all seemed natural to me, an attitude given me by my mother, to whom nothing was ever terrible, vulgar, or nasty” (7). This mandate to radically withhold moral judgment serves as the central tenet of an informal education that in turn facilitates Bertha’s movement through the world in search of experience. From her position as a neutral observer, she collects such experience almost systematically as a quasi-sociologist, for the most part eschewing sensationalist language when reporting on various submerged social strata.

The ideological import of education emerges as one of the book’s major themes. The novel functions in some ways as an idiosyncratic _Erziehungsroman_ in the emphasis it places on the protagonist’s early instruction, which assumes a form (or, rather, multiple forms) that encourages her curiosity and prefigures the later unstructured learning experiences she will undergo once she takes to the road in earnest. Bertha spent much of her childhood living in a communal colony in the hills outside of Little Rock, Arkansas, where a married couple acted as teachers, adapting the methods of Francisco Ferrer’s Modern School, providing instruction and guidance to the colony’s seventy-one children. Seemingly unsure of the concept, she tentatively admits that these teachers did not issue “much regular school work, probably” (15). The children, however, did learn “about inconsistencies of religion, and about government, labor, and
economics,” with a particular emphasis on how exploitation under capitalism is facilitated by the state (15). Rather than standard textbooks, Bertha read utopian, socialist, and literary work in order to better prepare “to live in a free co-operative society” (16). From a young poet, she learned the shorthand she would later use to record her observations about the world. Through the requirement that everyone, even children, do some sort of “useful work” in the colony, she came to understand “the dignity of labor” (17, 16). It is important to note that this version of the work ethic differs from that held by the Americana Hobo, whose view essentially coincides with the free labor ideal, in that the residents of the colony understand both study and work as oriented toward the “collective goal of finding a way to live without exploitation” (17).

The pedagogical methodology that Bertha describes seems to anticipate Paulo Freire’s theorization of a libertarian, dialogical, problem-posing model of education by which the educator and students “engage in critical thinking and a quest for mutual humanization” (62). Bertha comes to appreciate this method all the more when her family relocates to Seattle and she enrolls in high school, which she did not take seriously, given that “[i]t seemed ridiculous to study Latin grammar when the whole exciting world was waiting outside” (20). She much prefers the anarchist commune where she spends much of her time, and where study, work, and play all elide together.

Even while recounting the value of these loosely organized lessons, the narrator continues to highlight the ways in which her subjectivity derives directly from maternal instruction. In her lengthy recollections of her mother’s words and deeds, Bertha “presents her readers with a model for questioning dominant social attitudes” (Photinos 668). Operating according to this model, from an early age Bertha learns to question the
veracity of what official morality designated “good” and “bad,” noting that “many people, including the police, said [Mother] was a bad woman. But she never agreed with them, and she had a way of lifting her head when she talked back to them that made me know she was right” (7). Her resistance to official morality does not entail the wholesale rejection of moral judgment, however. In the most striking example, she confronts the father who had gone absent her entire life. Bertha’s generous approach to narration allows him ample space to make his case, in which the radical propagandist claims that “[t]here are fathers, and there are educators. I am an educator” (92). Her mother’s example exposes this claim as a false dichotomy, and Bertha makes clear that she “could not accept” her father’s justification of “his complete lack … of responsibility … or his complete impersonality” (94). True education, Bertha understands, does not happen in vacuum, somehow independent of a commitment to a larger community. This ethic informs her own pedagogical gesture—the telling of her story. In grounding the narrative’s development in the lessons delivered by Bertha’s mother and structuring the remainder of the story around the educational experiences those early lessons enable, *Sister of the Road* fosters an explicitly pedagogical relationship between the text and the reader.

In dramatizing Bertha’s education, *Sister* reveals one of its primary didactic agendas: to problematize prescribed gender roles, even if the case may be made that it ultimately reinscribes at least some of the values it initially appears to reject. A strong presence that will resonate throughout the text, Bertha’s mother enacts a complex and at times seemingly contradictory amalgamation of traditional and radical gender performances. Providing Bertha with her first model of femininity, she instructs her
daughter to “never let [men] make a slave of you” while simultaneously embracing the identity of universal caretaker so completely that “everybody called her ‘Mother Thompson,’” and indeed Bertha will at no point supply any other name for her (9). Yet, even the nature of this caretaking resists easy characterization. On the one hand, Mother Thompson teaches Bertha “and the other girls how to cook and clean and to wash men’s clothes,” those apparently gender-normative domestic skills appropriate to a traditional nuclear family (9). “By watching her,” Bertha further explains, “I learned the urge I now know so well, for serving men who work and drink and talk” (11). On the other hand, Mother Thompson also extends such care-giving outward into the social realm by insuring that Bertha knows her family history, focusing particularly on her grandfather, “who spent his whole life trying to right the wrong of the oppressed,” first moving in abolitionist circles with the likes of John Brown and later (but still ahead of his time) advocating for women’s liberation, birth control, and free love, while deviating from social dictate in advising his daughter, Bertha’s mother, not to marry the father of her child (11). In perhaps the most profound divergence between the socially constructed parameters for maternal domesticities and the practice Bertha sees as a direct model, Mother Thompson leaves her children at the colony for almost a year while she goes “crusading through the country” with her lover in support of anti-militarist and free-speech campaigns during the First World War. Bertha simply notes, “I didn’t have a doubt in my mind about the need of her going or the rightness of her cause” (17). Bertha herself would later oscillate between mobility and domesticity, alternately expressing her attraction to each.
Leaving these tensions regarding gender roles unresolved, the novel demonstrates the potential to disrupt a fundamental cultural organizing principle: as Freud observes, “When you meet a human being, the first distinction you make is ‘male or female?’ and you are accustomed to make the distinction with unhesitating certainty” (343). Throughout the story, gender differentiation exhibits a fluidity that undermines the strictly mandated roles of the dominant culture. Sometimes the challenge to convention arrives through obvious visual cues, as in Bertha’s childhood when the “girls dressed just like the boys” (9). Bertha would have grown up in an era when fashion helped enforce gender delineation by restricting women’s range of bodily motion, well before women adopted more comfortable clothing during the Jazz Age, so Bertha’s off-hand comment reveals a meaningful transgression that her narration continues to explore. Similar in their cross-dressing were the various female train tramps who would occasionally stop briefly at the railroad camps where Bertha spent her earliest years or visit the Little Rock cooperative colony where she later lived. The freer movement afforded by men’s clothing allowed them to more easily take advantage of the mobility of the railroad. The apparent rejection of femininity’s trappings by women such as these prompted outrage among commentators representing conventional wisdom. Writing in *Scribner’s* magazine in 1929, for example, Cliff Maxwell scoffed, “Show me a lady hobo and I’ll show you an angular-bodied, flint-eye, masculine-minded travesty upon her sex” (292). By contrast, these women remind Bertha of her “own mother’s way of raising up her head proudly with an idea of telling a funny story or in talking without embarrassment about hustling and living with men and leaving them” (11).
For these women, the blurring of gender lines coincides precisely with their embrace of mobility in its various forms. On leaving the camp, one of the women hoboes demonstrates her physical agility when she “flip[s] a freight … and ride[s] the rods right out of out camp” to the astonishment of the railroad construction gang (11). By riding the rods—an extremely dangerous method of train hopping by which the tramp lies across the metal struts underneath the floor of the freight car, only inches above the ground—she figuratively and physically asserts her autonomy, as she remains inaccessible to anyone else on the train. It turns out that this exercise in geographic mobility was preceded by acts of sexual freedom, in that this particular tramp “had spent a couple of nights over in the men’s shacks," but neither Bertha nor her mother finds this remarkable. Far more important to Bertha was “the look on [the tramp’s] face as she talked about going west, and the sureness with which she swung under the freight car,” which “set my childish mind in a fever.” From these observations, Bertha concludes, “The world was easy, like that. Even to women. It had never occurred to me before” (12). These violations of gendered sartorial and sexual practices signal the profound disruptions embedded in Bertha’s own embrace of mobility. When first taking to the road as a tramp herself, she adopts the habit of wearing men’s clothing, and the women she encounters on the rails often “had their hair cut short like men’s and at first glance they didn’t look much like women” (28). Yet, she does not maintain that she is somehow different from other women, that she lacks femininity and possesses masculine traits disproportionately. Rather, in embracing mobility between overdetermined spheres, she troubles gender’s culturally constructed definition, obliquely positing that certain behaviors are not the exclusive prerogative of masculinity.
As it was for the female vagabonds she met during her childhood, Bertha’s relationship to sex comprises a form of mobility in its transgression of gender prohibitions. Without self-reproach, or even little more than the cursory acknowledgment that her audience might condemn her behavior, she refuses to deny herself the education that comes with experience merely because convention would forbid it for women. Again, her attitudes and actions reveal her mother’s influence. Mother Thompson makes clear that a woman’s sexuality is her own, and has demonstrated that she is at liberty to choose when a sexual companionship will end. Part of Bertha’s educational program includes direct instruction regarding sex intended to ensure that she has a greater level of individual bodily autonomy, which Mother Thompson demonstrates in part through her refusal of monogamy. On this matter, in almost Nietzschean terms, she advises Bertha,

Babe, if a man wants you and you want him, just take him. There isn’t much to it. I have had all kinds of lovers, and it never did me any harm. Don’t be afraid of life and love and nature. Anything you do is all right with me. Nobody can hurt you but yourself. Every experience you have makes you all the more fit for life. Men are wonderful. When you get tired of them, or they of you, leave them without bitterness or regret. No matter what happens to you, I’ll stand by you. (21-22)

Mother Thompson here prescribes for her daughter a form of relational and sexual transience essentially analogous to the other interrelated forms of mobility that Bertha embraces over the course of the narrative. In these endeavors, Bertha does not behave passively. Reunited with two different former lovers at an anarchist’s meeting in the Bronx, she asks herself, “Whom did I love best, Mallettini or Jordan? Whom would I ask to take me home?” (105). Although she forms emotional bonds with at least some of her lovers, she does not forget her mother’s equation of “men” and “experience,” a formula that allows Bertha to reverse the direction of the objectification process that informs
heteronormative sexual relations under the prevailing conditions of power disparity. Rather than an object of conquest (in a society that denies unmarried sexually active women access to cultural capital) or ownership (in a society that denies married women access to economic capital), she constructs herself through her narration of these encounters as a subject who decides both the terms and the meaning of the encounter. Bertha’s desires when entering a sexual relationship take precedence: “What did I want from him? What did I want from all the men to whom I was drawn?” In her answer to these questions—“They had experience for me”—she asserts her subjective mobility (108). Like the Spanish *picaro* whose narrative details the traversing of various social strata, Bertha moves between romantic and sexual partners who will grant her access to different modes of living as a temporary participant-observer.

Seeking to experience and understand various modes of sexual transience, Bertha eventually turns to an investigation of sex work, even if she never uses this specific terminology. Like that female hobo who laughingly and unapologetically told stories of “hustling” while on the road, other transient women Bertha meets characterize the market exchange of sex for money or goods as a pragmatic, economic transaction. For instance, life-long hobo Maggie is “completely frank about her sexual promiscuity. … She accepted the fact that it was easier for a woman to get along on the road if she was not too particular and she frankly considered her body as her working capital” (28-29). Consistent with her capacity to withhold judgment and her pursuit of educational experiences, Bertha later describes her brief tenure as a prostitute at a brothel with a similar frankness and lack of contrition, although she is less motivated by material need than Maggie. While living in a seedy hotel in Chicago, she discovers that several
prostitutes and their pimp, Bill, are among her fellow residents. Bertha soon enters her sociological mode, collecting these women’s stories. Before long, however, she decides that only direct experience will provide answers to her questions regarding the persistence of the sex trade: “Why do these men go to such women? What have these women to give them? I wanted to know. For a long time I had wanted to know.” Even so, Bertha cannot help but suffer from a bout of cognitive dissonance when considering the ways in which her decision to “be a whore and give my money to a pimp” directly conflicts with her previous education, those lessons of her “grandfather[,] who had worked for women’s emancipation” and her “mother[,] who was free and honest and who had taken her lovers with a clean heart” (119). In a rare example of pre-judgment, Bertha has concluded in advance that sex workers necessarily are un-free and of unclean heart. So, in order to reconcile herself to this endeavor she must foreground her identity as a participant-observer, to envision herself as “a chameleon taking on the conditions of every new environment” (119). In this way, Bertha is able to maintain distance from her experiences and assert to herself and her audience that she has actively chosen “to become Bill’s slave” so that she can, as she tells another prostitute, “learn why women let their feelings make slaves of them” (119, 120).

At this point, the text subtly destabilizes Bertha’s status as a self-aware narrator. In her explanation of her actions, she seems to rationalize uncritically her submission to a charismatic and manipulative pimp who, in his attempts to seduce her, goes so far as to claim the he “used to be a union man” and remains invested in “radical movements” that will one day bring about “a system in which there’ll be no more whores, no more wage slaves” (118). As Photinos observes, Bertha initially “appears utterly passive and
powerless before” Bill (676), unable to follow her mother’s directive never to allow a man “to make a slave” of her. Furthermore, her claim of special motivation seems to constitute a form of special pleading whereby she separates herself from her fellow workers and violates her mother’s instruction to view nothing as “terrible, vulgar, or nasty.” Yet, Bertha eventually regains her reliability when she flatly tells Bill, “You’re just an experience with me. I needed an excuse to be a whore” in order to continue her ongoing education and conduct fieldwork as amateur ethnographer (132). Even as she avows anew her autonomy in her quest for experience, she likewise abandons the pretense that some unique quality inherently distinguishes her from the other women around her: “Only one day, and I was a full-fledged prostitute. That’s the way it happened to women” (128). In the end, she also manages to disentangle her perceptions from the moralizing that had informed her apparent need to justify so thoroughly her actions in the first place. She does so by redefining the problematic of sex work, in essence removing the emphasis from the sex and placing it on the work. As she explains, “I didn’t feel that anything had changed in me because I have become a prostitute. I just felt completely worn-out, as thought I’d finished an unusually hard day’s work” (128). Unlike the work she had done on the commune as a child or the work she would go on to do “among women, for women,” compiling data on female transients for “a social research bureau,” her work as a prostitute progresses toward no common goal (178). Perhaps of equal importance, she makes clear how she and her coworkers are exploited as laborers, dissecting the wage relations that prevail in the industry. Bertha recounts that on her first day of work, she saw forty clients, who paid a total $133. However, she took away only $40, after half went to the house and approximately
another 20 percent went to cover protection, teddy and stockings, the maid, the roper, the runner, and towels. Then, of course, of the remainder, her pimp took all but two dollars. The issue then becomes not the depletion of the prostitute’s virtue, but the appropriation by capital of the surplus value she has generated through her labors. Through this maneuver, she deflects the moral censure of the dominant society while reframing her experiences in terms consistent with the education she received from her mother, grandfather, and other radicalized sources. While *Waiting for Nothing* resists bourgeois morality by showing Tom and Yvonne making the one choice left to them, *Sister of the Road* offers a more aggressive critique. After briefly acknowledging it, the text dismisses as invalid the question of whether or not Bertha has become a “fallen woman” as a result of exchanging sex for money. In fact, although she ends her career as a prostitute bearing the traditional markers that accompany the disregard of feminine propriety—disease and pregnancy with a bastard child—both are soon robbed of their semiotic power. In a turn of events that strains credulity, she undergoes successful treatment for gonorrhea and syphilis, and she comes to regard childhood and motherhood as yet another educational experience worthy of celebration.

While many of the transactions she describes appear to entail some degree of exploitation motivated by economic necessity—for instance, women on the road “seldom get food free unless they repay the men who set it up for them with what every man wants from a woman” (30)—Bertha denies neither herself nor the other women she encounters all agency in these matters. If their bodies are to be commodified, they will play an active role in negotiating the terms of the exchange. In characterizing her own and other female tramps’ sexual acts as deliberate choices, she contrasts them with
other unambiguous violations of women’s bodily autonomy, “emphasiz[ing] the threat of rape for women on the road” (Photinos 674). For instance, she bluntly retells a particularly disturbing story of an assault on a young female hobo who is subsequently abandoned by her husband. She also recounts her own experiences with and resistance to sexual exploitation. On one occasion, a railroad detective nabs her outside a train yard in Cleveland, pulls her into “a little section hand’s shanty and shut[s] the door,” giving Bertha a choice:

“If I took you over to the police station they’d give you sixty days,” he said. “If you are nice to me I’ll let you go and give you a little change besides.”

His face was ugly. He was used to getting what he wanted. I had a vision of all the girls on the road running into him and being taken into the same shanty before they could get through Cleveland. I saw red, and I hauled off and slapped him across the face.

“Give me [sixty] days,” I said. (65)³

Even while working as a prostitute, Bertha refuses to forfeit her agency. When one aggressive customer simply hands her two dollars and roughly throws her on the bed before she has time to prepare, she protests and calls for help, and the man is violently ejected from the establishment. Although a client may pay for sexual relations, he has not purchased Bertha in any essential way.

While her mother, her lovers, and many of the various women and men she encounters serve as teachers, as sources of experience and information, the text purposefully develops the notion that the mobility granted by the road itself—in the specific form of railroad technology—provides a vital site for education. Well before she became an actual hobo, the railroad permeated Bertha’s childhood entirely. Spending her first years in railroad camps, she learned to spell “from the names on box cars” and she learned geography from stories told by the wandering men who moved through her
daily life (8). Like Mother Thompson, these transients offer a model for obtaining experience and thus the sort of education that Bertha has come to value. So, it is only natural when a seventeen-year-old Bertha and her younger sister decide to go traveling, that they take what they have learned from the various transients they have known and seek to add to it by following a proper course of study. At the Hobo College in Los Angeles, they gather information on the best routes to New Orleans (the Southern Pacific, they are told), and then accept the offer of a mentor, who declares himself an expert. “I’m your guide and I’ll show you the ropes,” he promises. “Before we get to New Orleans I’ll make first-class hoboes out of you” (25). It is at this point that Bertha’s figurative mobility elides into literal mobility, and these two modes of transience will reinforce each other for the bulk of the novel’s remainder.

Highlighting this interrelationship, Bertha frequently interrupts her own travel narrative with digressions about transients more common to the literature of the social sciences, so that her educational mobility takes on a more specific disciplinary shape when her narration adopts the language of sociology and Bertha assumes the role of participant-observer. The faux-autobiographical structure of the novel becomes increasingly more malleable, creating a space for myriad stories, many of them told by underrepresented voices. Bertha recounts these personal narratives much in the manner of case histories, summarizing what she has heard from anarchists, labor organizers, career criminals, college girls, social workers, prostitutes, and vagabonds. She frequently privileges the last category, devoting several pages to hobo history and sociology. Unsurprisingly, the hobo-tramp-bum taxonomy often attributed to Reitman finds its way into these passages, at which point Bertha clearly counts herself among
the tramps, “the unattached penniless [men and women] tramping around for excitement and adventure,” although she will frequently default to the use of “hobo” (35). In her telling of it, transience entails a series of opportunities for knowledge acquisition of varying degrees of formality; she rather defensively counters preconceptions by insisting that “hoboes are not a bunch of dumb ignoramuses” (53). At the Hobo College in Chicago, Bertha enters a vibrant intellectual environment, and recites for the reader the wide range of speakers whose lectures she attends. While many of the speakers had impressive credentials, she insists that “[b]y far the most brilliant teachers and most interesting speakers who taught at the College belonged to us”—the community of hoboes and tramps—“and came from the life we knew” (53).

In her exploration of hobo subculture, Bertha places especial emphasis on women, eventually formalizing her studies when she takes a job investigating the conditions and motives of her fellow “sisters of the road.” In presenting her findings, the text directly engages with conventional wisdom. Even more so than vagrant men, transient women were pathologized according the assumption that no normal, healthy woman would choose to take to the road. Female hoboes must possess some individual character flaw—a deviancy—that motivates their dislocation. Men might at least be perceived as adventurous, and in some cases even heroic, in hopping a freight train out of town, while most sociological studies from the 1920s and '30s tended to “insist upon a strong correlation between female delinquency and mobility,” thereby implicitly endorsing the notion that such “physical movement functions as a kind of metaphor for female transgressions of conventional gender roles” (Photinos 659). Bertha, however, sets aside moral judgment in order to consider the issue materially, and so arrives at the
conclusion “that the most frequent reason they leave is economic and that they usually come from broken or from poverty-stricken homes.” They do not necessarily become mobile in order to seek jobs, but “to escape from reality, to get away from misery” (13). Yet, as Photinos observes, Bertha does not relegate all female transients to passive victimhood (669). She acknowledges the agency exercised by those who seek self-expression or romance, or who flee “parental discipline” or boredom, while still “others are just seized with wanderlust” (13). Bertha theorizes the last of these can be traced to the technology of the railroad itself. Two of the women Bertha interviews in a hobo jungle “had lived in railroad division towns. Many of the men had also. And that I have always found on the road. The trains going in and out to places as they grew up gave them the wanderlust” (167). Modernity has provided a means for radical mobility—why should women be any less inclined than men to exploit its full potential?

The road also affords Bertha the opportunity to challenge and expand on her understanding of morality. Like Joe Crane in The Rambling Kid, Bertha eventually ceases to view both begging and theft in terms of moral imperatives while on the road. In contrast to those lessons the narrator delivers directly, the reader accompanies her through the dramatized educational process. May, one of Bertha’s many traveling companions, offers instruction in both skills. After a brief demonstration in successful mendicancy, May steals an entire basket of groceries, to which Bertha protests and then decides she will use what little money she has to pay for them.

“Why don’t you go over and pay for all the rides you’ve stolen from the railroad company?” [May] asked angrily. “Is it any worse to steal groceries than to steal rides from the railroad?”

I had never thought of it that way. It had never occurred to me that riding freights was stealing from the railroad. May made her point. (60)
Like Joe, Bertha never does become a thief, but she associates herself with a criminal gang for an extended period of time after getting romantically involved with one of its members. Once again, among her motives is a desire for experience and knowledge: “I didn’t want to steal myself, but I was glad to see how it was done” (76). Without judgment, Bertha describes the gang’s organizational structure and methods, as well as the dispositions and activities of its members. She discovers that conventional wisdom entails a good deal of inaccurate information about the lives of professional criminals, much as it does regarding hoboes, so Bertha takes the opportunity to gather data directly. In the end, she chooses not to participate actively in this form of criminality because “[s]omething in [her] heart rebelled against it,” but much like Joe, she refuses the role of “moral arbiter” (75).

For all its overt preoccupation with a mobility-enabled experiential education, the text’s most radical pedagogical maneuver is simultaneously its least conspicuous. In short, *Sister of the Road* essentially proposes its protagonist as a complement or even an alternative to the heroes of national folklore and mythology. Given the generally disinterested quality of her narration, Bertha herself never deliberately highlights the mythological aspects of her life story, but they start to accumulate from the beginning of the text. The details surrounding her birth read like a Western tall tale: somewhat unbelievable, gently and humorously exaggerated. The cheerfully matter-of-fact tone Bertha employs while recounting the series of events leading up to and immediately following her birth serves to mute the provocative quality of the individual elements.

Bertha’s mother, having taken a much older “free-thought and eugenist propagandist” as a lover, chose not to get married after becoming pregnant. Once she began to show,
“the neighbors began to talk, and five days after I was born, the village parson, the sheriff, and three good citizens came and asked bluntly whether mother was married or intended to marry” (10). After her grandfather defiantly asserted that no such formality was necessary, the new mother and father were arrested, as was Bertha’s grandfather when he refused to pay the fine levied against him. This particular family unit, however, acclimates quite quickly to its incarceration, using the time to read and write. Ever maternal, “Mother did the jail cooking and sewing, nursed me, and studied Esperanto and socialism” (10). Perhaps not as outrageous as the origin tales of Paul Bunyan or John Henry, an unorthodox conception and jailhouse infancy would certainly not be out of place in a mythologizing folk song or yarn.

Her mythology gains new components when Bertha earns her nickname in early childhood after her penchant for exploring the boxcars located in the railroad camps where she spent the first several years of her life. Much as the historical John Chapman would evolve into the legendary Johnny Appleseed and so provide enduring pioneer lore and attendant agricultural symbolism for a young country, Bertha Thompson’s rechristening as Boxcar Bertha provides a symbolism appropriate to an industrial America. Bringing together the potent iconography—the railroad, a log cabin—of emphatically American historical or legendary figures, such as John Henry and Abraham Lincoln, Bertha recalls that she and her childhood friends “took for playthings all the grand miscellany to be found in a railroad yard. We built houses of railroad ties so big that it took four of us to lift one of them in place” (9). As the technology of industry expands through what is no longer the nation’s frontier, it scatters detritus (“miscellany”) in its wake in much the same way the Johnny scattered his apple seeds, which Bertha
cannot help but exalt (she finds it “grand”) as she giddily constructs her playground amidst such progress. A true child of the twentieth century, she harbors no pastoral nostalgia, instead embracing and making her own a life seemingly determined by biological and national genetic inheritances. “I am truly married to the boxcars,” she tells a friend toward the end of her narration in one her rare self-mythologizing rhetorical flourishes. “There’s something constantly itching in my soul that only the box cars satisfy” (196). (Her friend ups the mythological ante, calling Bertha a "mystic, a Christian anarchist riding in a boxcar to find God" [197].)

Bertha goes so far as to suggest directly that the vagabond life in general (if not her own life specifically) constitutes the basis of a new American folklore.

I don’t ever remember anyone telling me a real fairy story in my whole childhood, but the tales of the gandy dancers, and of the bindle stiffs, of their jobs in the wheatfields of Minnesota and the rides on the blinds to and from them, and the breath-taking yarns of mushing in Alaska, or getting pinched in San Francisco, or of drunken brawls in New Orleans’ dives were thrillers I remember to this day. (8)

This rhetorical gesture, like so much of what Bertha has to say about her early childhood, performs a sophisticated dual function, bringing together the conventional and the radical. Seen from one perspective, she participates in the on-going nationalist project of developing a distinctly American narrative tradition. From the early nineteenth century, with the young nation’s infrastructure solidifying and expanding, and external threats successfully kept at bay, citizens of the United States could focus more of their energy on the production of a native culture. In terms of literature, this effort would culminate in what F.O. Matthiessen calls the American Renaissance, encompassing the works of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman. Less self-consciously, it also produced enduring folktale...
Johnny Appleseed. Still, remnants of the Old World culture lingered, as fairy tales “[b]orrowed from European lore” continued to “permeate American culture” (Watts 134). So, in proposing a set of new fairy tales that replace characters derived from European sources, Bertha contributes to her country’s cultural independence. At the same time, her new fairy tales subvert the crucial pedantic socializing function the stories of Hans Christian Anderson, Charles Perrault, and the Grimm brothers have played in lives of American youth. As vehicles for the transmittal of ideology, these stories tend to normalize strictly delineated gender roles; the tales the Grimm brothers collected “placed a great emphasis on passivity, industry, and self-sacrifice for girls and on activity, competition, and accumulation of wealth for boys” (Zipes 60). In direct contrast to traditional fairy tales, the Bertha’s own life and the stories she retells undermine such gendered prescriptions. Alongside such heroically productive figures as Johnny Appleseed, John Henry, and Paul Bunyan, Bertha would have us venerate wild, independent, and occasionally criminal characters who prioritize mobility over a commitment to work. Crucial to this new national folklore, mobility—whether across sexual restrictions, gender roles, intellectual debates, or geographic space—nurtures critical thinking and facilitates experience, thus serving as the foundation of a true education.

By the end of the twentieth century, the number of women who chronicled their train-hopping experiences had increased dramatically with the burgeoning of the underground “zine” culture, rendering the character of Boxcar Bertha less of an anomaly while disseminating the ideals she embodied. Although a highly idiosyncratic textual genre, zines typically are intensely personal, individually produced, irregular,
nonprofessional, unprofitable, low-circulation publications. They vary in length from a single sheet of paper to well over a hundred pages, and their publishers address an array of sometimes obsessively specific topics, but as Stephen Duncombe explains in *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture*, they are united by their “fascination with the margins” (9). So, while Duncombe proposes that most of these zines fit into the broad categories of fanzines, political zines, personal zines, scene zines, network zines, fringe culture zines, religious zines, vocational zines, health zines, sex zines, travel zines, comix, literary zines, and art zines, he still acknowledges that the contents of many titles are poorly served by these headings, and still more fall under none of them. (For example, in my modest personal collection, I have zines devoted exclusively to sneaking into abandoned buildings, dishwashing, volunteering for medical experiments, and thrift-store shopping.) They often exhibit a handmade aesthetic in accordance with the do-it-yourself ethos that governs the genre, featuring an at times jarring aggregation of collage images and alternately handwritten and typed text, although some editors do make sophisticated use of desktop publishing software and a tiny minority even utilize a mechanical printing press. Most publishers assemble and reproduce copies of their zines via physical cut-and-paste techniques and a photocopier. They then distribute the finished artifact primarily through the mail, but also in person at shows, on consignment in stores, or through the odd distributor that specializes in underground publishing. Rarely charging more than a couple of dollars, zinesters are usually quite willing to operate on a barter system, and some even give their work away for free. These circulation methods suggest the intended audience: those sympathetic to the resistance of a passive, one-way cultural consumption model.
Especially before the ubiquity of the internet, zines allowed their publishers a means of expressing and delivering their art, ideas, and concerns in a manner unmediated by the dictates of professional publishing. While the early 1990s boom in zine production (which coincided with the mainstream appropriation and successful marketing of punk and “alternative” music and culture\(^4\)) has subsided somewhat with the prevalence of the personal weblog, “they are part of a continuing trend in late capitalist culture” in the twenty-first century (Piepmeier 2).

The zine phenomenon does not overlap precisely with the punk rock scene—plenty of zine publishers have no interest or affiliation with punk, and certainly not all punks read and/or produce zines—but in its insistence on unrestricted self-expression, it does demonstrate what might be called a punk attitude. Indeed, in his history of the medium, Duncombe identifies both the rise of science fiction fanzines in the 1930s and punk music fanzines in the 1970s as crucial touchstones in its development (6, 7).

Whether or not particular practitioners deliberately articulate it, the rejection of corporate modes of production and strident anti-authoritarianism that permeates both zine culture and punk culture owes a philosophical debt to anarchism (Duncombe 35). Moreover, in the 1980s and 1990s, a segment of the anarchist, anti-capitalist punk community engaged in a reimagining of tramp identity and took to train hopping, squatting, and dumpster diving in their efforts (sometimes more self-aware and deliberate than others) to evade what they perceive as the oppressive drudgery of life under consumer capitalism and to withhold their contribution to the processes of globalization. Inevitably, then, narratives of train hopping began appearing in zines produced by those traveling anarchist punks who could manage to pull a photocopying scam at Kinko’s. Perhaps the
best-known zine devoted exclusively to stories about illegal train riding is There’s Something about a Train, which started in the late 1980s as a small newsletter and has since grown into something that looks like a full-size magazine of well over a hundred pages per issue, published more-or-less biannually. (Coincidentally, Amtrak used that same phrase in an advertising campaign from the 1990s [“There’s Something”].) The zine’s editor and publisher, Lee, became a minor media personality in the late 1990s and early 2000s as both the mainstream and alternative press sought to cover the apparent renewal of train hopping as a mode of travel, which had been taken up not only by punks but also professionals who were eager for truly unpredictable adventure. Gentle, genial, and a bit older than the average train-riding anarchist punk—he was in his mid-forties at the turn of the twenty-first century—Lee celebrates contemporary tramp culture through his zine by publishing stories written by a new generation of riders, both men and women.\(^5\)

Like those participants in the historically parallel Riot Grrrl movement of the early 1990s who sought to call attention to and overcome the barriers that kept women from full participation in the supposedly anti-establishment punk scene, female punks who started train hopping confronted not only the sexism of the dominant culture but also that of the tramp subculture. In the preface to the sixth issue of There’s Something about a Train, Lee makes note of the proliferation of “hobas” and the particular circumstances they faced:

Starting in the late 80s & into the 90s many more wimmin than ever before started doing the steel on steel thang, primarily among the youngins. Could it be that these outlaw subcultures are tuning into & promoting the absurd idea that wimmin can do any adventure as well as any man? mmm…Gender unbalance & sexism have plagued hobo culture for a 140 years—things are changing. Exciting stuff! (2)
Appropriately, then, the zine featured several pieces written by women riders, and many of these authors draw a direct line between their experiences as rail riders and a specifically feminist liberatory agenda, as explicit at times as the narrator of *Sister of the Road*. In hopping trains, they not only separate themselves from the dominant patriarchal culture, but they problematize the prevailing male privilege of a subcultural space and practice deemed too dangerous or masculine for women.

In a contribution to the omnibus zine, Clare Corcoran recounts her first trip as a hobo, a “long and wonderful and just plain full” adventure that left her “glowing” when she finally returned home after weeks on the road (82). Interestingly, the bulk of the narrative focuses not on the details of that trip, but on her memories of riding the New York City subway as a nine-year-old child on her way to fifth grade class at the Convent of the Sacred Heart, that “training ground of upper-class femininity” (83). Unaccompanied by the adult supervision of either her parents or the nuns who “tried their best to teach us to be ladies,” she and her sister experienced the subway as a site of liberated mobility, “a Temporary Autonomous Zone” occupied while en route to the Ideological State Apparatuses of family and school (83). Here, Corcoran purposefully invokes anarchist writer Hakim Bey’s conceptualization of a transitory “uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, or time, or imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, before the State can crush it” (99). For the author in her childhood, this “uprising” consists of ebullient physical risk-taking—struggling to stay on her feet while “surfing” the subway train, passing between cars on the narrow open walkway, hanging from the hand loops, swinging from the poles, entering “the forbidden last car” of the train where
the “perverts and weirdos [sic]” lurked—all the while free from “repressive adult rules” (82, 83).

Without providing any details, Corcoran intimates that on entering puberty she soon lost the capacity to know such pleasure and freedom, as many adolescent girls do when they realize “that this world doesn’t want women to have much fun” and thus discourages them from “revel[ing] in being smart, creative, mischievous,” and from “feel[ing] joy in their athletic bodies” (83). She counts herself fortunate when the muscle memory of those childhood adventures on the subway is rekindled by a particular moment during her adult tramp travels, just after she has caught a freight train on the fly—i.e., boarded while the train is in motion, a difficult and dangerous feat—“for maybe the third time. I held onto the ladder, leaned out, watched the train snake muscley [sic] around along the curved track, felt my own arm muscles holding me to the train, felt as one with the train, like one big animal. I felt the train a half a mile ahead of me as part of my own body. Like riding a bike—you share your center of gravity with the train” (82). Again, she characterizes her sense of freedom as undeniably embodied, rather than theoretical; it is their palpability that links the two experiences. Much like Boxcar Bertha, Corcoran stresses the continuity between her childhood and adulthood, noting that her “train hopping trip was the most fun I’ve had since I was about 9 years old” (83). In this way, she suggests that those early experiences on the subway indirectly facilitated the liberation she finds on the rails, while the summer she spends train hopping allows her to formulate retroactively a more complex interpretation and appreciation of her childhood. “After almost 30 years of learning and unlearning how to be a woman,” she concludes, collapsing the time that separates the two experiences of temporary
autonomy, “I think I’ve finally slogged through to the other side of adolescence, and found that happiness looks a lot like the last joyful glory days of little girlhood, surfing the NYC subway” (83).

In both youth and adulthood, the unambiguously physical experience of freedom manifestly derives from the unsanctioned appropriation and use of the industrial technology of mobility. In the passage above, her relationship to that technology assumes a remarkably intimate character, and through such characterization Corcoran avails herself of a venerable trope. This sort of personification, by which the vagabond narrator figuratively imbues the train with an animating spirit and sometimes even sentient awareness, pervades tramp and hobo lore. Jack London, in his tramp memoir *The Road*, offers a variation on this theme when he walks the reader through the process of “decking her”—“her” being the train—and then “holding her down,” markedly observing that “only a young and vigorous tramp is able to deck” a distinctly feminized train (43). Yet, whereas London speaks of the interaction between tramp and train as a unidirectional and quasi-sexual conquest of subject over object, Corcoran uses the language of affinity and collaborative union. In contrast to London, she foregrounds the train’s constitutive impact on the rider. Indeed, her narrative explicitly positions her union with the freight train (which may have been a mile and a half or longer, weighing tens of thousands of tons) as the crux of her rediscovery of her physicality, and thus crucial to the development of an alternative subjectivity that allows for the occupation of a temporary autonomous zone.

Each of the major texts discussed here grants access to a critical subjectivity through which to challenge conventional morality and expose naturalized imperatives as
materially contingent constructions with profound ideological implications. Even when not deployed within the context of an explicitly revolutionary agenda, iterations of the Critical Tramp such as that offered by Corcoran conceptualize the figure in terms of apparent and active resistance to disciplinary control. This resistance may not correspond to a consistent or coherent program, but it informs all of the figure’s actions. Put another way, according to these conceptualizations, the impulse toward unrestricted movement defines the character. Of course, a similarly basic sense of liberty informs constructions of the Americana Hobo figure as well, so that the difference between the two becomes mainly one of degree. In either case, the vagabond obtains and asserts this freedom through the adoption of the radical mobility afforded by riding the rails, but for the Americana Hobo this act serves to further a freedom to be left alone, a freedom from the irritations of modern life. The Americana Hobo does not seek to enact structural change, or even necessarily inspire others to engage in a thoroughgoing critique of political and social institutions. In short, the Americana Hobo adopts a form of passive resistance motivated only by individual disposition, thus becoming essentially another tolerable and even celebrated nonconformist, like the figure of the Western pioneer. Conversely, the various permutations of the Critical Tramp enact a freedom to disrupt, to actively undermine discipline’s role in the production of the ideal subject, to evade panopticism’s sight. In his analysis of Bentham’s original panoptic schema, Foucault theorizes an “apparatus of power” that “spread[s] throughout the social body” to perform “a generalized function,” reproducing self-disciplining subjects who have internalized the implications of their visibility (207). The disciplinary society operates in the service of production, fixing and accumulating bodies whose labor produces surplus
value and facilitates the further accumulation of capital. By virtue of their radical
mobility, Critical Tramps subvert discipline’s “anti-nomadic technique” and threaten the
smooth functioning of the modern liberal-democratic state (Foucault 218). They provide
a negative example, an alternative subjectivity that challenges the naturalization of
capitalism. In this resistive mode, the tramp adopts an active position, often motivated
by anger or disgust and intended to prompt an engaged critique from the audience,
rather than distanced admiration.

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1 For biographical information on Kromer, I drew from Casciato and West.

2 For example, human geographer Tim Cresswell, in *The Tramp in America* (2001), historian Kenneth L. Kusmer, in *Down and Out, on the Road* (2002), and critic Christine Photinos, in “Transiency and Transgression in the Autobiographies of Barbara Starke and ‘Boxcar’ Bertha Thompson,” all accept and discuss Bertha Thompson as a historical individual, using the book as source material in their respective discussions of the female tramp’s experience.

3 All my references are to a 2002 reprinting of *Sister of the Road*. This edition erroneously print Bertha’s reply as “Give me thirty days,” whereas she says “sixty” in the original text.

4 Like producers of alternative music, some zinesters were actively courted by major publishing houses, which hoped to capitalize on a thriving underground print culture.

5 Full disclosure: in 1999, I rode freight trains from California to the Hobo Convention in Britt, Iowa with Lee and a couple of other friends, and we stayed in touch by mail for a few years, trading letters and zines. (I have since fallen out of touch with him, and have been unable to determine whether he still publishes his zine.) Several articles and small documentary films about train hopping appeared around that time, and Lee popped up in many of them, speaking of his love of trains and the place of new riders in hobo history. Rather than hiding from view, Lee served as a public relations manager for riders, wishing to demystify the hobo subculture and happily encouraging people who were dissatisfied with their lives to give tramping a try. He similarly endorsed squatting, and lived in a Santa Cruz, California forest in an illegal shelter he built from scavenged materials. For more on Lee specifically and new riders generally, see *Catching Out: A Film about Trainhopping and Living Free*, directed by Sarah George.
CHAPTER 5
THE UTOPIAN TRAMP

In the Big Rock Candy Mountains
There’s a land that’s fair and bright,
Where the handouts grow on bushes
And you sleep out every night.
Where the boxcars all are empty
And the sun shines ev’ry day—
Oh, the birds and the bees and the cigarette trees,
The rock and rye springs where the whangdoodle sings,
In the Big Rock Candy Mountains.

—“The Big Rock Candy Mountains”¹

It is not particularly controversial to note that Ray Bradbury’s 1953 novel
Fahrenheit 451 serves as an example of dystopian narrative. It follows a trajectory
familiar to readers of the genre: “Montag, the protagonist ... is a man coming to
consciousness and attempting the overthrow or reformation of the closed, totalitarian,
futuristic world he valued at the start” (Huntington 136). As in Brave New World or 1984,
a site of resistance to this totalitarianism is found, even if perhaps only briefly, once the
individual protagonist works his way out of the obsessively and oppressively ordered
society and into a space apart, where he can engage in practice the State would label
deviant. At these moments and in these spaces, he gives expression to a basic utopian
impulse. In Bradbury’s novel, to escape dystopia is to enter the wilderness of nature,
although it does not involve a total rejection of human society. In fact, the hero
encounters the representatives of a particular, and decidedly non-science-fictional,
subculture once he leaves the confines of the city. Wise old Faber advises Montag, a
rogue fireman fleeing a massive police manhunt, to “hit the old railroad lines going out
into the country, follow them. ... I’ve heard there are still hobo camps all across the
country, here and there; walking camps they call them, and if you keep walking far
enough and keep an eye peeled, they say there’s lots of old Harvard degrees on the tracks between here and Los Angeles. Most of them are wanted and hunted in the cities” (132). Even if the railroad tracks no longer carry trains, these remnants of a nineteenth-century technology remain as vital to the transients of this future world as it did to the tramps of the 1870s. Tramps populate the land outside the city, and Montag is eventually welcomed at a hobo jungle. There, Granger, one of these tramps, delineates the habits, workings, and ethos of the group: “[W]e walk the old tracks. ...The organization is flexible, very loose, and fragmentary. ... [W]e’re the odd minority crying in the wilderness” (152). In fact, there are “Thousands [of tramps] on the roads, the abandoned railtracks, tonight, bums on the outside, libraries inside,” transients who have committed themselves to memorizing works of literature in order to preserve them for a world in which books have been banned (153).

Aside from the precise details of their mission, this characterization is not specific to the tramps of this particular story; the speaker could be describing the rail-riding, transient membership of the Industrial Workers of the World at the height of its influence in the early twentieth century. Or, at least, he could be describing the members of the I.W.W. as the organization’s own propaganda would have characterized them: rather than portraying themselves as “honest workingmen,” this contingent “celebrated their identities as ‘sons of rest’ who preferred the ‘simple life in the jungles’ to the workaday world of” traditional, “homeguard” labor activists, and so “propagated a folklore of the hobo that would outlive both the IWW and the subculture from which it emerged”; “this new folklore also advanced the contentious proposition that hoboes, by virtue of their footloose detachment from the bonds of settled community, were by nature the ‘real
proletarians’ and more revolutionary than other groups of stationary workers” (DePastino, Citizen 96, 97). These liminal characters at the end of Bradbury’s tale occupy the interstices of civilization; one of the tramps Montag encounters explains that “the city has never cared so much about us to bother with an elaborate chase like this to find us. A few crackpots with verses in their heads can’t touch them, and they know it and we know it; everyone knows it” (154). Admittedly, these tramps have no hopes of directly overthrowing society, in part because “you can’t make people listen. They have to come ‘round in their own time” (153). Still, in this pastoral setting, the tramps escape not only detection by the municipal authorities, but also the bombs being dropped on the metropolises around the country as war begins in earnest, placing them in the position to rebuild a society according to their own cultural (and, implicitly, social and political) desires. This science fiction novel becomes explicitly romantic in the end, when Montag joins this group of intellectual tramps who serve as the repository of literary knowledge. And it is along the railroad tracks, in the hobo jungle, that the potential for a utopian alternative emerges.

On first consideration, the tramp might not seem an appropriate vessel to embody utopian potential. Bradbury is probably one of the few speculative writers to attempt to integrate this clearly dated figure into a vision of a future world. Still, despite the apparent incongruity—the railroad tramp would seem radically out of place in a heavily technologized futuristic setting—the author’s decision makes some kind of fundamental sense. The world of the railroad tramp, that specifically American subcultural space formed in the years following the Civil War and comprised of the practices of the tramps and hoboes who lived their lives along the nation’s spider-
webbed network of railroad lines, has since its inception in the last decades of the nineteenth century served as an alternative to the regimented, rationalized life of toil and oppression under industrial capitalism. This alternative finds utopian expression in various forms of cultural representation, particularly in fictional literary narratives. Considered from this perspective, many narratives about tramps may be said to form a subset of a broader genre that employs such a “dystopian-utopian structure” as that seen in *Fahrenheit 451* (Huntington 137).

So, while scholars have thoroughly compiled and examined a vast catalogue of American narrative utopias, concentrating especially on those produced during the strikingly fruitful last decades of the nineteenth century (during which over a hundred such works were published [Pfaelzer 3]), another textual tradition serves as an interesting appendix to the existing bibliographies of American utopia: the narrative of the railroad tramp. Just as the kind of story traditionally designated as “utopian” underwent a production boom in the 1880s and 1890s (a golden age for the genre), authors of stories and books describing the life practices of railroad tramps and hoboës were likewise especially prolific from the 1890s and into the first decades of the twentieth century. The historical proximity of these two trends warrants comment: just as pervasive anxiety regarding the conditions of the Gilded Age stimulated the composition and reception of programmatic narrative utopias, frustration with the limited practical impact of those noble—yet often esoteric—solutions arguably generated an interest in narratives still exhibiting a genuine utopian impulse while also offering more immediate responses to (and rebellions against) those conditions. Structurally, tramp texts bear a distinct family resemblance to those narratives already absorbed by the
expanding canon of utopian literature, although this resemblance has remained mostly undeveloped by scholars of utopia and tramp literature alike. Indeed, tramp narratives may be read as present-tense utopias. If they do not engage in speculative visions of some distant future or alien society, they clearly reveal many of the primary utopian impulses of their historical moment in their critique of social, economic, and political conditions, and in this sense they fulfill a purpose similar to that of canonical narrative utopias that have as their settings some imagined future world that has resolved (or, in the case of dystopias, completely fallen prey to) contemporary social ills.

Efforts to theorize representations of utopia typically commence with at least an acknowledgement of the difficulty of establishing generic boundaries, and it is not my primary intention here to enter the fray by rehearsing some novel definitional formulation. For the purposes of this analysis, I will adopt the broad yet modest definition provided by Kenneth M. Roemer: “A literary utopia is a fairly detailed description of an imaginary community, society, or world—a ‘fiction’ that encourages readers to experience vicariously a culture that represents a prescriptive, normative alternative to their own culture. This alternative, according to the author, is much better than his own culture” (3, italics in original). Essentially, expressions of utopian impulses act to articulate desire, so that narrative utopias constitute a form of wish fulfillment. To this definition I would add Phillip Wegner’s particularly germane characterization of the functionality of narrative utopias: “they have material, pedagogical, and ultimately political effects, shaping the ways people understand and, as a consequence, act in their worlds. In short, narrative utopias serve as a way both of telling and making modern history” (xvi). Meanwhile, within this broader category of the genre of narrative
utopia, the anti-utopian narrative operates primarily as a reactive gesture that, as Lyman Tower Sargent explains, “use[s] the utopian form to attack either utopias in general or a specific utopia” (“The Three Faces” 8, italics added). While not offering fully cohesive programs for sustained utopian alternatives to extant material conditions, tramp narratives produced in the first decades of the twentieth century do adhere to many of the formal conventions established by this anti-utopian iteration, placing the protagonist in a totalizing scenario in which the logical end of a specific utopian project—that proposed by the rhetoric of free-market capitalist ideology, in this case—has been reached, yielding disastrous results for the vast majority of people living in America. Within these anti-utopian settings, an alternative utopian impulse, either explicitly or implicitly anti-capitalist, finds expression by way of the protagonist’s entry into a utopian enclave—the world of the railroad tramp. Unlike the future scenarios proposed by formal utopias, access to this enclave is immediately available, and that access is granted by the rejection of labor and the work ethic and an embrace of the radical mobility available through stolen rides on trains.

The tramp anti-utopians find much existing utopian material on which to draw and against which to react. America’s history and identity are imbued on a structural level with utopian thinking, as demonstrated in texts ranging from the travelogues generated by Europeans (e.g., John Smith’s *Description of New England*), to the sermons of colonists (Jonathan Winthrop’s *Model of Christian Charity*), and the foundational national documents such as The Declaration of Independence. America was (and remains, at least rhetorically) the New World. The official narrative continues to characterize this country as an absolute meritocracy, the land of opportunity where
anyone, by industriousness and thrift, can rise from the lowest ranks of society, even
(as we tell our children) to become president. This mode of thought infiltrates social and
political discourse throughout the nation’s history, so much so that at times it might
seem easier to identify instances of thinking that deviate from it. Importantly, however,
the utopian rhetoric does not imply stasis; America-as-utopia is perpetually in a state of
becoming, of advancing toward perfection. In the middle of the nineteenth century,
Ralph Waldo Emerson articulated this idea when he observed that the combination of
land, commerce, and government had produced a distinctly American character, such
that, “It seems so easy for America to inspire and express the most expansive and
humane spirit; new-born, free, healthful, strong, the land of the laborer, of the democrat,
of the philanthropist, of the believer, of the saint, she could speak for the human race. It
is the country of the Future” (“The Young American” 371). Emerson goes on to provide
a crucial element of this view when he deliberately conflates freedom with trade, in that
trade represents a “beneficent tendency, omnipotent without violence, [that] exists and
works.” The necessary foundation is securely in place and progress is inevitable, thus
“[o]ur part is plainly not ... to block improvement” (379).

The idea of America-as-utopia suffered greatly during the Civil War. In the last
two decades of the nineteenth century, however, the country witnessed a surge in the
production of literary utopias, most of them envisioning some scheme for progressive
social reform. During this time, for example, Edward Bellamy published perhaps the
most famous and influential American example of the genre, Looking Backward (1888),
which describes a future socialist society. Concurrently, however, another utopian
project was taking shape, and this version of “the good place” also produced several
formal literary utopias with conservative agendas. As Sargent demonstrates in his bibliographic survey of capitalist narrative utopias, the idea of a “completely unregulated” economy also found expression through “a significant number” of imaginative literary titles (194, 192). For example, David Hilton Wheeler’s *Our Industrial Utopia and Its Unhappy Citizens* went so far as to claim “that utopia already exists in 1895,” the year of its publication (194). In the novel *From Earth’s Center, A Polar Gateway Message* (1894), S. Byron Welcome writes, “It may seem incredible to you … but it is true, nevertheless, that governmental operation of any public service ever tried here has proved inefficient, and been superseded by private enterprises. Not that we have arbitrarily displaced the one with the other, but by the natural law of competition, private individuals have taken the place of public officials” (qtd. in Sargent 194). These fictional texts have faded into obscurity, however, and are less immediately significant than other works produced as part of the more general endeavor on the part of proponents of laissez-faire capitalism to construct, in aggregate, a cohesive, positivist, and specifically American system and program of utopian thinking, employing a variety of genres and forums.

Obviously, the virtue of an unregulated economy was not a new component of American thought, but, as David Riesman argues, previous to the Civil War capitalism “was singularly unconcerned about propagandizing itself as an ideological system. Perhaps this is because it was so much taken for granted that it did not need verbal defense” (175). This new “verbal defense” was heavily influenced by the work of British sociologist and philosopher Herbert Spencer, who coined the phrase “survival of the fittest” and applied Darwin’s ideas concerning biological evolution to the evolution of
social bodies. Arguing that through adaption “evolution can end only in the establishment of the greatest perfection and the most complete happiness,” Spencer provided supporters of economic laissez faire with a scientific rationale for their position (qtd. in Hofstadter 37). The articulation of this ideological trend was tied to the material conditions of the historical moment: the country was experiencing a period of unprecedented economic and industrial expansion. At the same time, the country bore witness to increasing class differentiation and miserable living and working conditions, yet this program promises its audience that a utopia predicated on freedom, material comfort, rationality, and inclusion is readily achievable, in the near future, not some distant year (as was imagined in many of the narrative utopias produced at this time). Better yet, it postulates that America is already on the proper course; those who propose social reform via legislative measures will only serve (as Emerson had argued) to impede this progress. While simultaneously employing language that suggests a vision for the future while advocating for the maintenance of the status quo, this discourse describes what it claims to be the best of all possible worlds.

One of the most important documents of this ideology, from which derives a useful appellation for the intellectual movement as a whole—the “gospel of wealth”—is steel magnate Andrew Carnegie’s essay “Wealth” (1892). Carnegie proposes, in effect, what he sees as an achievable utopia, a scheme for social organization for which America already possesses the tools. His somewhat defensive rhetorical position lends further credence to Riseman’s argument that capitalism, while previously uncontested in any serious way, was now being challenged by alternate arrangements to govern production, and so must clearly assert itself as the most justifiable of all options. The
material conditions created by the rapid expansion of industrial production fostered skepticism among many Americans regarding the promise of capitalism: corporations continued to expand unabated, consolidating into monopolies; government officials appeared to be available for purchase by magnates of industry and commerce; tensions between capital and labor turned violent more and more frequently; and the population appeared to be increasingly bifurcated, in the words of the Populist Party Platform of 1892, “into two great classes—tramps and millionaires” (qtd. in Heffner 236). It is unsurprising, then, that “Wealth” (published in 1889) appeared in the midst of the most intense period of utopian textual production in U.S. history, a production that to a large extent promoted alternatives to the logic on which capitalism is predicated, typically emphasizing an equalization of wealth and cooperative relations. Carnegie makes it plain that he seeks to distinguish his ideal society specifically from any brand of radical socialism or communism or even reformist measures that might draw inspirations from either of these political philosophies, which (he insists) would require a fundamental change in human nature. His central thesis is worth quoting at length:

There remains, then, only one mode of using great fortunes; but in this we have the true antidote for the temporary unequal distribution of wealth, the reconciliation of the rich and the poor—a reign of harmony—another ideal, differing, indeed, from that of the Communist in requiring only the further evolution of existing conditions, not the total overthrow of our civilization. It is founded upon the present most intense individualism, and the race is projected to put it in practice by degree whenever it pleases. Under its sway we shall have an ideal state, in which the surplus wealth of the few will become, in the best sense the property of the many, because administered for the common good, and this wealth, passing through the hands of the few, can be made a much more potent force for the elevation of our race than if it had been distributed in small sums to the people themselves. Even the poorest can be made to see this, and to agree that great sums gathered by some of their fellow-citizens and spent for public purposes, from which the masses reap the principal benefit, are more
valuable to them than if scattered among them through the course of many years in trifling amounts. (660, italics added)

This vision of a pragmatic, near-future utopia found expression not only among industrial capitalists, but within the academy, as well. William Graham Sumner, a highly influential professor of the social sciences at Yale, served as an avid and articulate partisan for free enterprise, providing both practical and moral rationales, arguing that any "society based on contract is a society of free and independent men, who form ties without favor or obligation, and cooperate without cringing or intrigue. A society based on contract, therefore, gives the utmost room and chance for individual development, and for all the self-reliance and dignity of a free man" (What Social Classes 26). Appealing to a faith in historical inevitability, he admonished those who would reform the economy that "our farther gains lie in going forward, not in going backward" (What Social Classes 26). Rhetorically, he was careful to link the economic with the political, making it clear that laissez-faire industrial capitalism and democracy were, if not synonymous, at the very least inextricably interdependent: the "democratic principle which means that each man should be esteemed for his merit and worth for just what he is, without regard to birth, wealth, rank, or other adventitious circumstances ... is a principle of industrialism. It proceeds from and is intelligible only in a society built on the industrial virtues, free endeavor, security of property, and repression of the baser vices" (War 208).

Members of the clergy likewise echoed Carnegie’s gospel of wealth. Baptist minister Russell Conwell delivered his “Acres of Diamonds” lecture over 6,000 times (earning eight million dollars in the process). In it, he extols the virtues of both democracy and the free enterprise system, insisting that in America, “the opportunity to
get rich, to attain unto great wealth, is here ... now, within the reach of almost every man and woman who hears me speak tonight” (17). Other religious leaders agreed. Henry Ward Beecher, the famous and influential minister of Plymouth Church, Brooklyn, yoked the accumulation of wealth to godliness, and godliness to Christianity, and Christianity to democracy, which (adopting an end-of-history rhetoric) he saw as the “the final form of government” (May 69). He either denied the existence of poverty or attributed it to personal failing, claiming that “[e]ven in the most compact and closely-populated portions of the East, he that will be frugal, and save continuously, living every day within the bounds of his means, can scarcely help accumulating” wealth under the present political and economic conditions (qtd. in May 69). Similarly, Phillip Brooks, bishop of Massachusetts, argued that “[e]xcessive poverty, ... actual suffering for the necessities of life, terrible as it is, is comparatively rare” in America, a place where, “[w]hen society shall be complete, it shall perfectly develop the freedom of the individual” (qtd. in May 65, 66). Catholic Archbishop John Ireland held the respect for capital in high esteem and advocated on behalf of the exercise of individual enterprise available to the American citizen: “It is energy and enterprise that win everywhere. ... [T]hey win in the Church, they win in the State, and they win in Business” (Cross 110; qtd. in Cross 164).

All of these figures opposed social and economic reform, and even private alms-giving. We see, then, the articulation by industry, the academy, and clergy of a consistent, optimistic, quasi-religious worldview that holds, in essence, that adherence to the system of industrial free enterprise will inevitably lead to a perfected society that allows for the free development of both industry and the individual. More simply put, it is the “American Dream” as utopia. The logic of the ideology informing this discourse had
its critics, of course, and many of them presented their criticisms by way of formally
generic narrative utopias. Indeed, as previously intimated, any discussion of the
nineteenth-century American utopian narrative must include (and most likely begin with)
Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, which Wegner, in his study *Imaginary Communities*,
refers to as “the single most influential narrative utopia of the nineteenth century” (62),
on par in terms of popularity and impact on national discourse with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*
(63). Employing a technique common to narrative utopias, representatives from the year
2000, at which time the majority of the novel takes place, express shock and wonder at
the conditions accepted with little comment in the late-nineteenth century, making the
point that, when seen from another perspective, those conditions seem both absurd and
intolerable. Julian West, the narrator-protagonist, goes to bed one night in 1887 and
awakes the next morning to discover that he has been in state of mesmeric sleep for
113 years. He discovers that, in the intervening years, America has now fulfilled its long-
standing utopian potential: West encounters a world in which total economic equality
has been achieved; currency, the banking industry, advertising, and even the need for
legislation have been eliminated; and consolidation of all industry is total, with the nation
acting as the sole manufacturer and employer. Furthermore, Dr. Leete, West’s
twentieth-century guide, repeatedly emphasizes that this social reorganization has
occurred as a result of gradual evolution rather than via radical insurrection.

Like Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, written in part to promote Italian national unity,
Bellamy’s fable appears to have been motivated by a desire to impose some sense of
order on the “chaos” of the Gilded Age, which threatened to topple society (43). West
himself personifies the anxiety of the age: “The nervous tension of the public mind”
caused by social and economic unrest (an anxiety keenly felt by those at the top who have no guarantee of retaining their privilege) finds a reflection in West’s own “nervous disorder,” which prevents him from sleeping and thus sets into play the conceit that allows him to slumber for more than a century so that he may encounter the wonders of the future (44). (He not only requires the aid of a mesmerist, he also sleeps in a hidden, underground chamber where he may remain undiscovered and undisturbed for such a length of time.) Although West and Leete discuss at length the deplorable conditions of all classes of society in the 19th century, and West goes so far as to offer an implicit criticism of those who encourage people at the bottom of the social ladder to hold “out hopes of possible compensation in another world for the hardness of their lot” (39-40), both characters attribute this particular feeling of anxiety to reformers and radicals. In fact, Bellamy appears to come close to endorsing absolute inaction, in that his characters repeatedly observe that all disorder was resolved and the “labor question” (rather than, say, the “capitalist question” or the “corruption question”) answered “as a result of a process of industrial evolution which could not have terminated otherwise. All that society had to do was recognize and cooperate with that evolution, when its tendency had become unmistakable” (61). This shift occurred “inevitably” (168). In other words, the narrative suggests despite itself, the proponents of laissez-faire capitalism are right, in that their promises that rejection of regulation and reform would ultimately bring about a better life for all have been fulfilled; the seeds of future utopia have already been planted by the time of Bellamy’s writing. Additionally, West carefully avoids any suggestion of class struggle (beyond acknowledging that different classes
do, in fact, exist) and asserts that he would never accuse “the rich in general” of being “responsible for the misery of the world” (228).

Consequently, captains of industry are reassured and progressive activists and reformers rebuffed by this iteration of the narrative utopia. West even retroactively criticizes the actions of radicals and labor organizers as being useless at best and harmful at worst, speaking specifically of “the alarm resulting from the talk of a small band of men who called themselves anarchists, and proposed to terrify the American people into adopting their ideas by threats of violence,” while completely ignoring the growth and achievements of labor unions (44). Likewise, Leete explains that “The movement toward the conduct of business by larger and larger aggregations of capital, the tendency toward monopolies, which had been so desperately and vainly resisted, was recognized at last, in its true significance, as a process which only needed to complete its logical evolution to open a golden future to humanity” (65). This evolutionary process explains why “[t]he labor parties, as such, never could have accomplished anything on a large or permanent scale” (183). He then goes even further, suggesting that agitators did so much damage to social progress that they actually must have operated in the employ of industrialists, observing that “[n]o historical authority nowadays doubts that they were paid by the great monopolies to wave the red flag and talk about burning, sacking, and blowing people up, in order, by alarming the timid, to head off any real reforms” (182).

Bellamy was far from alone in proposing in the form of a narrative utopia a programmatic solution to the problems of the age. As the bibliographies and surveys compiled and conducted by scholars of utopia demonstrate, the Gilded Age represented
the zenith of such textual production. Several of these novels, like *Looking Backward*, contained narrative descriptions of future worlds which had achieved a kind of stasis by establishing harmonious alternatives to laissez-faire capitalism. The ideology of commentators like Carnegie also soon directly inspired formal anti-utopias, such as Ignatius Donnelly’s novel *Caesar’s Column* (1890) and Jack London’s *The Iron Heel* (1907), which seek “to reveal to the public the agency controlling capitalist society” by projecting a nightmare future vision of the free market’s logical conclusion: a society llorded over by capitalist oligarchies (Wegner 122). Relatively unexplored, however—at least from the vantage point of utopian studies—are the anti-utopian visions of the contemporary historical moment, set in the time during which they were composed, visions far removed from the speculative or science fiction tradition. While American literature had previously produced fiction offering what arguably could be considered proto-anti-utopian critiques of capitalism—such as Rebecca Harding Davis’ novella *Life in the Iron Mills* (1861), in which Hugh Wolfe’s fate belies the utopian laissez-faire dictum, “Make yourself what you will. It is your right” (56)—the group of texts I will analyze have added a secondary narrative strategy, suggesting an escape, at least on a temporary basis, from the hellish conditions they described: in all of them, characters find in the tramp underworld a utopian alternative to the world created by adherence to the capitalist mode of production.

Fredric Jameson’s theorization of the utopian enclave in *Archaeologies of the Future* offers a useful prism through which to view this alternative. He conceives of this enclave as a temporary, imaginary, cognitive space separate or even hidden from the material and social conditions created by the hegemonic ideology, into which a person
or small community may withdraw in order to perform the intellectual labor involved in the production of utopian thinking and narrative. In other words, it is precisely this enclave that allows the potential utopianist to think the otherwise unthinkable. "Such enclaves," he explains, "are something like a foreign body within the social: in them, the differentiation process has momentarily been arrested, so that they remain as it were momentarily beyond the reach of the social and testify to its political powerlessness, at the same time that they offer a space in which new wish images of the social can be elaborated and experimented on" (16). According to this notion, these spaces provide the conditions necessary to the production of utopian fantasy, but the tramp narrative literalizes these enclaves, demonstrating through the physical actions of the characters what Jameson describes as an intellectual process. The tramp utopics illustrated in such works necessarily entails a modal praxis: in the tramp underworld, the generation of utopian thinking cannot be divorced from utopian action. Because of their grounding in present-tense, real-world conditions, more so than any science fiction narrative or any other text that situates achievement of utopia in the future or imaginary world, tramp texts provide a model of immediately accessible—if temporary—utopian space and practice.

Jack London’s short story “The Apostate,” first published in Woman’s Home Companion in September of 1906 (a year before the appearance of the author’s formal dystopia, The Iron Heel, as well as his tramp memoir, The Road), provides an anti-utopian response to the idea of America-as-utopia. The story centers on the daily life of Johnny, a twelve-year-old boy who has been rendered an automaton by his labor winding bobbins in a jute mill. Employing a trope that would become common in
dystopian fiction, London makes the most of his metaphor of human-as-machine, returning to it throughout the story. Johnny, we learn, began work at age seven to help support his single mother and his younger siblings. Five years of continuous labor have turned him into “the perfect worker,” and “[f]rom the perfect worker he had evolved into the perfect machine” (226), working “mechanically” according to a “machine consciousness” (225, 234). In fact, “Machinery has almost been bred into him,” in that he was born on the factory floor, amidst the “crashing roar of the looms,” inhaling heavy lint with his first breath (226). His life of labor has not only had a crippling affect on his mind and spirit, but on his body, as well: “He did not look like a man. He was a travesty of the human. It was a twisted and stunted and nameless piece of life that shambled like a sickly ape, arms loose-hanging, stoop-shouldered, narrow-chested, grotesque and terrible” (238-239). London so offers a fictional rendering of Paul Lafargue’s polemical claim in “The Right to Be Lazy” (1883) that “[i]n capitalist society work is the cause of all intellectual degeneracy, of all organic deformity” (10). Each day, Johnny drags himself to work before sunlight; he will leave for home after sunset. London dedicates several paragraphs to descriptions of the mind-numbing labor, capturing the repetitive movements demanded of the mill’s employees. Johnny’s is an existence of severe deprivation, utterly devoid of pleasure or joy. Over the course of his life, he has acquired only a handful of cherished memories: the time his mother bought prunes, the two occasions she made custard, and when he found a quarter.

This is the system of industrial labor that, according to the utopian promises of laissez faire’s partisans, is supposed to ensure both the freedom and the material comfort of the individual. Johnny has never known other than this dystopia and has
consequently absorbed the dominant ideology. The narrator bluntly informs the reader
that Johnny “had a way of accepting things” (226). Toil is inevitable, and Johnny even
imagines that it imbues him dignity, so embracing what Lafargue terms the “delusion” of
the “love of work” (9). He once entertained fantasies of upward mobility through hard
work. After all, he has become finely tuned, wasting no motions, so that his employers
recognize his value: “promotion was waiting for him. ... He would next go on the
starcher, and later he would go into the loom room. There was nothing after that except
increased efficiency” (231). (Even as he makes these advances, however, his wages
fail to keep pace with expenses, and his family’s living conditions grow worse.) He
imagines himself achieving career success (as embodied by a managerial—rather than
manual labor—position) and marrying the boss’s daughter. This specific fantasy
recreates a trope often employed by Horatio Alger in his rags-to-riches stories for young
boys, in which the main character exemplifies the social mobility presumably available
to anyone in America, provided he is honest and hard working. These traits, combined
with a little good fortune, help the main character in these tales to advance socially,
landing a job in which he will have the opportunity to impress both the boss and the
boss’s daughter. The engagement or marriage ceremonially confirms the character’s
ascendancy up the social ladder, resulting in the achievement of two interrelated
elements of the American Dream: financial stability and heteronormative, domesticated
romantic love. The implicitly utopian Horatio Alger Myth posits this social mobility as a
meritocracy, an attractive notion. Hildegard Hoeller suggests that “there was something
about *Ragged Dick* that sounded particularly right to a lot of readers at the time,” such
that the novel “would become a central American text that for many would remain a
shorthand for America itself and the opportunities it offered to all” (Preface x). His characters typically attain (or stand poised to attain at the conclusion of the story) middle class stability and respectability, rather than the great wealth of a Carnegie or Rockefeller. In deliberately evoking this trope, London positions it as mere unrealistic fantasy, demonstrating its flaws and its inapplicability in the real world. London’s character, as young and industrious as Ragged Dick or Mark the Match Boy, works hard—he is, in fact, acknowledged by all as a model worker, and takes pride in that status—but will never advance. This is the naturalist counterpoint to the ideology of laissez-faire utopianism promulgated by Alger from the 1860s onward (he published over a hundred such morally didactic dime novels for young people), during the decades of some of the greatest social and economic upheavals in US history.

Comparison with Alger’s novel continues to generate useful insight when we consider Hoeller’s observation that Ragged Dick allows for access by the middle class readership (in the role akin to that of a tourist) to the poverty of New York City, as a Barnumesque, freakish curiosity, rather than an outrage: “By offering his [Dick’s] rags-to-riches story, the novel allowed its middle class readers to indulge their curiosity and to face and appease fears about pressing social issues such as extreme urban poverty, immigration, the rise and threat of finance capitalism and concomitant social mobility and fluidity” (“Freaks” 255). In this sense, Alger’s representational strategies function in opposition to London’s. Ragged Dick places the blame on the individual character: “Dick was careless of his earnings” and he indulges in minor vice, which is apparently all that prevents him from living a comfortable existence (6). When he rejects vice for virtue, he achieves his goals. “The Apostate,” conversely, clearly presents the problem and cause
of poverty as structural, and consequently does aim to inspire outrage among the presumably middle class readers of *Woman’s Home Companion*. Furthermore, it is a problem that cannot possibly be overcome by personal, individual initiative (i.e., by adopting the habits of hard work and thrift)—at least, not as long as one attempts to overcome those circumstances while still participating in the established system of production.

When, toward the end of the story, Johnny does gradually come to question his faith in the inherent value of hard work, he enacts the typical character arc of the dystopian protagonist: whereas in the beginning of the narrative the thought of questioning the legitimacy of the system under which he lives and labors never occurs to him, by the end he rebels, seeking to escape the systemic totality that has engulfed his existence. Johnny finally announces, “I ain’t never goin’ to work again” (237). Work (and so life) for Johnny has been nothing but repetitive movement. He calculates, with the help of his younger brother (who has been attending school, unlike Johnny), that he makes twenty-five million individual moves a year working on the looms. This emphasis on repetitive movement and its dehumanizing effects, of a piece with London’s description of Johnny in machinic terms, reflects a particular contemporary conversation about the nature of factory labor. The publication of “The Apostate” coincided with the general emergence of the practice of scientific management, which found its greatest theorist and proponent in Frederick Taylor, who had been developing and refining his system during the final decades of the nineteenth century and articulating it in publications such as “A Piece Rate System” (1895), “Shop Management” (1903), and, most famously, *Principles of Scientific Management* (1911). (Indeed, “Taylorism” is
often used as a synonym for scientific management.) In his promotion of this system, Taylor was savvy enough to emphasize its potential to address the “labor problem” of the era, which occupied headlines as well as the concerns of industrialists, although (as scholars have observed) the issue of human labor is only one of many addressed by this new approach to management. According to Taylor, his measures would not only help to eliminate strikes and other obvious conflicts, but it would also serve to eliminate less obvious forms of worker resistance, such as production slowdowns. The innovative implementation of time study as a means of achieving this optimal efficiency in output remains his most notorious legacy. These studies divided each productive process into discreet units of movement, measured the duration of each with a stopwatch, and then combined these times to determine a per-unit production rate, thereby eliminating from calculations any wasted time between each individual movement (Nelson 41). He then employed a wage system—a variable per-unit piece rate—that rewarded high production and punished low production (Nelson 42). This management methodology further contributed to the anxiety prompted by the sense that the human worker faced increasing mechanization and dehumanization. In an article published in the *Federationist* in February of 1911, American Federation of Labor founder and president Samuel Gompers addresses this concern in his sarcastic characterization of motion study:

> So, there you are, wage-workers in general, mere machines—considered industrially, of course. Hence, why should you not be standardized and your motion-power brought up to the highest possible perfection in all respects, including speed? Not only your length, breadth, and thickness as a machine, but your grade of hardness, malleability, tractability, and general serviceability, can be ascertained, registered, and then employed as desirable. Science would thus get the most out of you before you are sent to the junkpile. (Qtd. in Nadworny 51)
Of course, Marx had raised these concerns previously in the first volume of *Capital*, in which he details the relationship between the introduction of machinery into the system of production and the dehumanization and objectification of the laborer. In a factory operating within a capitalist economy, “[m]achinery is put to a wrong use, with the object of transforming the workman, from his very childhood, into part of a detail machine. … At the same time that factory work exhausts the nervous system to the uttermost, it does away with the many-sided play of his muscles, and confiscates every atom of freedom, both in bodily and intellectual activity” (408, 409). Given the passages addressing Johnny’s mechanization and physical and mental exhaustion, Marx’s words might be used, without alteration, to describe concisely many of the thematic concerns of London’s short story.

So, it is precisely significant that when Johnny rejects work, he explicitly and deliberately rejects rationalized movement, as well: “‘I’ve ben moving’ ever since I was born. I’m tired of movin’, an’ I ain’t goin’ to move any more’” (237). Instead, he’s “‘jes’ goin’ to set, an’ set, an’ rest, an’ rest, and then rest some more’” (238). Still, despite her son’s resolve, Johnny’s mother sees no possible alternative to a life of labor. Voicing the socially dominant view, she sees this rejection of work as “insanity” and, suggesting the quasi-religious character of the work ethic embedded in the ideology of laissez-faire capitalism, “blasphemy” (236, 237). Her son’s actions are literally beyond her powers of comprehension. (Her disbelief is further explicable in light of the fact that Johnny also necessarily rejects all domestic obligations, observing that his brother Will, whose formal education Johnny has funded, now must get a job.) Nevertheless, in the last two paragraphs of the story, Johnny finds a specific alternative to work: he enters a rail yard
and sneaks into an empty boxcar. At this moment, by virtue of this act, Johnny adopts the central principles of a tramp utopics. Here, stepping out of the realm of oppressive, dead end, dehumanizing labor and into the world of the tramp, Johnny finds that he is finally afforded that coveted opportunity to rest, and (in the story's final sentence) a smile crosses his face. The odds created by existing conditions and relations of labor render success impossible, so that Johnny's only option is to quit, to opt out, to refuse absolutely to participate in what he is beginning to grasp as coherent system of oppression and exploitation. This act of refusal grants the individual access to the tramp's utopian enclave. The title, then, is apt: the hero does indeed ultimately commit apostasy, overcoming and rejecting a faith in an economic system that dictates that he has no choice but to be an exploited laborer. It is only as a tramp that Johnny is finally able to fulfill his desire for what the British socialist and utopianist William Morris identifies the “hope of rest” embedded in all useful human endeavor (288).

In his essay “The Tramp” (1901), London had already delineated explicitly the reasons a person might choose a life on the road over a life of labor. Explaining the psychological motivation behind the decision to enter the world of the tramp, London claims that on some people “the effect of the social pit will be to discourage [a person] from work. In his blood a rebellion will quicken, and he will elect to become either a felon or a tramp.” This person will discover that, as a tramp,

He has loafed, seen the country and green things, laughed in joy, lain on his back and listened to the birds signing overhead, unannoyed by factory whistles and bosses' harsh commands; and, most significantly, he has lived. That is the point! He has not starved to death. Not only has he been care-free and happy, but he has lived! And from the knowledge that he has idled and is still alive, he achieves a new outlook on life; and the more he experiences the unenviable lot of the poor worker, the more the blandishments of the ‘road’ take hold of him. And finally he flings his
challenge in the face of society, imposes a valorous boycott on all work, and joins the far-wanderers of Hobo-land, the gypsy folk of this latter day. (485-486)

London’s essay, with its emphasis on the ludic nature of tramp space and practice, provides us with a notion of the fate awaiting Johnny after the closing of “The Apostate.”

In his reading of this story, Wegner expands on Mark Seltzer’s characterization of Johnny’s final actions as “the neurasthenic inversion of the work ethic” by pointing to T.J. Jackson Lears’s observation that the nervous condition “was explicitly coded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as the ‘disease of choice’ of the new urban middle class.” (Notably, it is this disease from which Julian West suffers in Looking Backward.) Consequently, Wegner argues, “the decision” on Johnny’s part to become neurasthenic and quit work “should be understood as nothing less than an expression of the desire to ascend into this nascent middle class,” as a rejection of the movement of labor in favor of movement up the social ladder (143-144). I agree that Johnny certainly does reject the regimented movement of manual labor and opt for movement of another kind, but we have seen that he has also already rejected social mobility within the plot of the story, when he abandons his Alger-esque vision. While his illness may have aspirational connotations, if Johnny has made any social movement at all, it is downward, from proletarian to lumpenproletarian. In fact, he has rejected the logic and movement of both labor and social mobility, instead embracing the radical mobility of the tramp’s utopian enclave, which entails an appropriation of the crowning achievement of nineteenth-century American industrial capitalism, that technology of mass movement: the railroad. Johnny, climbing aboard a boxcar, joins the ranks of tramps who have decided that rather than offering their labor—their movement—in the
service of capital, they would now let the technology of capitalists provide the movement for them.

Central to the rhetoric of industrial capitalism is the notion that technological advancement, which is best perpetuated by the competition of a free market, will lead to ever-greater relief from toil for the laborer, yet in practice, as Marx observes, “machinery, while augmenting the human material that forms the principle object of capital’s exploiting power, at the same time raises the degree of exploitation” (Capital 404). The tramp, in stealing a ride on a freight train, insists on reaping this benefit long denied, fulfilling the utopian impulse not by passively waiting for the inevitable elevation of all that supposedly accompanies development of the capitalist economy (as envisioned by both the proponents of the gospel of wealth such as Carnegie and critics such as Bellamy), but by actively inverting the purpose of this material and symbolic pinnacle of capitalist technology. Trains are intended to move raw materials, finished goods, and paying customers, not those who would refuse to procure those raw materials, convert them into products, or consume the finished goods in the marketplace. Thus, a certain irony exists in the fact that the modern tramp utopia is made possible by the very existence of the railroad, in that the potential for mobility becomes critical to survival for a person who has rejected labor; it is in the wide-ranging motion the railroad affords that the tramp finds refuge, in that it brings him in contact with resources and a nationwide community of peers while delivering him from the oppressiveness (in the form of law enforcement, lack of resources, weather conditions, etc.) of any particular locality. London’s short story functions as a tramp origin tale, and his essay implies that the adoption of the tramp life is a rational response to conditions
as they exist, that life on the road potentially provides escape in the form of a temporary and mobile utopian enclave.

The protagonist of Upton Sinclair’s novel *The Jungle* (also published in 1906), Lithuanian immigrant Jurgis Rudkus, is deeply invested in the promise of the American Dream at the beginning of the narrative, far more so than Johnny ever was. Having imbibed the Dream’s narrative before arriving in the United States—the Dream having prompted his and his family’s journey in the first place—he has infinite faith in his ability to find and keep a job, and strongly believes that any obstacle can be overcome by hard work. Those who fail to find work in America, he asserts, are “[b]roken-down tramps and good-for-nothings, fellows who have spent all their money drinking, and want to get more for it. Do you want me to believe that with these arms ... people will let me starve?” (23). Jurgis takes as gospel the notion that in America, “rich or poor, a man was free ... he did not have to go into the army, he did not have to pay out his money to rascally officials—he might do as he pleased, and count himself as good as any other man. So America was a place of which lovers and young people dreamed” (24). When Jurgis and his family first come to Chicago, the city “seem[s] a dream of wonder, with its tale of human energy, of things being done, of employment for thousands upon thousands of men, of opportunity and freedom, of life and love and joy” (32). On their arrival in their adopted city, they initially ignore the problems of Packingtown, their backs literally and figuratively turned to one of the many hellish images scattered throughout the novel, so that they do not see the symbolically “blood-red” western sky under which “the tops of houses shone like fire” (32).
The process by which Jurgis loses his faith—by which he becomes a “man coming to consciousness”—is accompanied by dystopic imagery, such that Antulio Joseph Echevarria argues that while other authors offered “futurist visions,” Sinclair’s novel, “which exposed the inhuman conditions of the working class, might be considered a dystopia of the times,” although he does not further develop this notion (20). Like London, Sinclair emphasizes the ways in which the “deadly brutalizing monotony” of toil has a mechanizing effect on the laborer (90). Initially, Jurgis celebrates his employment, his chance to become “a cog in this marvelous machine,” and first saw his co-workers as “wonderful machines” (35, 62). He is shocked to discover that most of his co-workers in fact hate the job, the bosses, the owners, and the entire industry. Only gradually do Jurgis and his family become disabused of their faith in the American Dream as the narrator heightens the dystopic rhetoric. Here, the characters, like Johnny, find they occupy a world devoid of beauty: the men, women, and children who make up “the great packing machine ... never saw any green thing, not even a flower” (115). The workplace is alternately described as an “inferno” (109), a “purgatory” (114), a “hell” (143), a “witch’s cauldron” (119), with certain jobs tantamount to “a torture like being burned alive” (114) or “like the thumbscrew of the medieval torture chamber” (123). In a letter to his editor, Sinclair explains that he sought in this novel to communicate to even “the dullest reader that this tragedy is, in its every detail, the inevitable and demonstrable consequence of an economic system. If that is to be done, the reader must first have the system in his mind” (qtd. in Gottesman xviii). These words might be used to describe exactly the rhetorical and representational strategies of the dystopian author. This system, as Sinclair portrays it, functions as a totality that impacts
every aspect of these characters lives. The meat packing industry in Chicago represents “the greatest aggregation of labour and capital ever gathered in one place ... it was a thing as tremendous as the universe—the laws and ways of its working no more than the universe to be questioned or understood” (44). And there is no escape; the workers are “tied to the great packing machine, tied to it for life” (115).⁷

Although Jurgis begins as a true believer in the totalizing system of industrial capitalism in which he lives, the gradual accumulation of evidence becomes too much for him to ignore. His wife and child have died. His family has been turned out of their house. He has seen coworkers lose their limbs and sometimes their lives. He first experiences disillusionment, then a feeling of rebellion. This rebellion results in a radical break; like Johnny, Jurgis becomes an apostate. He enters the tramp’s world on a “wild impulse,” the result of “a thought that had been lurking within him, unspoken, unrecognized” (239). He catches a freight car on a passing train at a railroad crossing, and the effect is immediately liberating. Whereas London’s story only hinted at the liberation inherent in the protagonist’s entry into the world of the transient non-worker, The Jungle dwells on the point. Jurgis realizes that “[n]ow he was going to be free, to tear off his shackles, to rise up and fight” (239). His health returning to him, Jurgis enters a community, a fellowship of tramps, from whom he receives an education on how to obtain what he needs with neither work nor money. Sinclair dramatizes Jurgis’s subsequent refusal of work and highlights the myriad virtues of life on the road. Jurgis experiences, perhaps for the first time since his arrival in America,

the joy of the unbound life, the joy of seeking, of hoping without limit. There were mishaps and discomforts—but at least there was always something new; and only think what it meant to a man who for years had been penned up in one place, seeing nothing but one dreary prospect of
shanties and factories, to be suddenly set loose beneath the open sky, to behold new landscapes, new places, and new people every hour! To a man whose life had consisted of doing one certain thing all day, until he was so exhausted that he could only lie down and sleep until the next day—and to be now his own master, working as he pleased and when he pleased, and facing a new adventure every hour! (244)

As is implicit at the end of “The Apostate,” the tramp passages in *The Jungle* make clear that mobility is essential to this version of utopia, which makes perfect generic sense if one grants Kumar’s assertion that “[u]topia retains throughout its long history the basic form of the narrative of a journey. The traveller in space or time is an explorer who happens upon utopia. He (or, more recently, she) meets its people, usually at first its ordinary people, observes them at work and play, sees their dwellings and their cities” (*Utopianism* 89). The novel renders in fiction London’s claim in “The Tramp” that the transient life occupies a ludic space and comprises a ludic practice. Still, if Sinclair makes clear all the positive attributes of tramping, he also allows that it is at best a temporary solution and ultimately unsustainable. For Jurgis, it is one step on the way to his ultimate conversion to socialism, an obviously more pragmatic and systematic mode of utopian thought.

London concludes his story such that entry into trampdom serves an end in itself; Johnny’s final act within the narrative is to board a freight train. Sinclair locates his character’s experience as a tramp two-thirds of the way through the novel, so that it functions as a turning point in the narrative, a definitive break from Jurgis’s previous mentality, a utopic respite, and an essential first step toward liberation and eventual socialist consciousness. John Dos Passos, however, in *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), the first volume of his *U.S.A. Trilogy*, guides a main character toward the tramp life early in the narrative. The social and economic contexts had changed since the early 1900s. His
novel was published a quarter of a century after *The Jungle*, in the first year of the Great Depression, when the tramp had reemerged as a far more common figure, with well over a million people eventually taking to the rails. Also, during the Progressive Era, government and the public had become increasingly skeptical of laissez-faire rhetoric. Thus, Dos Passos need not devote as much of the narrative to establishing dystopic conditions and detailing his tramp protagonists’ losses of faith. Whereas London’s Johnny, as an uneducated and isolated boy, at no point expresses a coherent political position, and Sinclair’s Jurgis comes to radical politics only after passing through the temporary utopia of tramp life, the tramp characters drawn by Dos Passos treat radicalism and tramping as interrelated. Frederick Feied, in his survey of literary representations of the hobo as “cultural hero,” makes this point clear: “The hobo Dos Passos describes is intensely political. Economic considerations or the desire to see the country may enter into his taking to the road, but more often it is some political motivation that is the cause, the need to get somewhere to participate in a strike or demonstration or revolution” (43). Thus, far more explicitly than either prior author, Dos Passos draws a line connecting tramping and revolutionary potential. Mac, one of the five point-of-view characters in *The 42nd Parallel*, will spend much of his narrative immersed in the life practices and radical politics of tramping. The reader encounters his story exclusively over the first third of the novel (aside from the brief biographical sketches or historical figures and the Newsreel and Camera Eye fragments that weave through the entire trilogy), and he appears again in another chapter toward the end. In this way, his life, experience, and worldview receive a privileged treatment structurally, so that they inform the other characters’ narratives, at least implicitly. As Michael
Denning observes, the “masculine romance of the migratory workers who made up the Wobblies always hovers on the edges of U.S.A.” (186). The trilogy thereby suggests that the tramp experience is crucial to any attempt to articulate artistically the national experience in the first decades of the twentieth century—indeed, to articulate “U.S.A.” In fact, the entire series begin with a preamble of that title (which Dos Passos added after completing all the individual components of the cycle), which describes an unnamed and apparently homeless young man pounding the city pavement in search of work. The description and narrative perspective moves from his individual experiences toward a universalizing rhetoric, so that the tramp becomes a sort of everyman.

Even from childhood—even of the novel’s five protagonists is afforded his or her own origin story—Mac seems destined to reject wage labor and take to the road. Early on in life, well before adulthood, he learns multiple, interdependent lessons that will inform the remainder of his narrative, particularly his time as a tramp. He learns by experience that it is both rational and possible to evade authority by flight: caught illegally distributing leaflets, Mac “gave the cop one look over his shoulder, dropped the handbills and ran,” just as he will later escape authority via hopping freight trains (14). As well, his Uncle Tim (with whom Mac lives in Chicago after the death of his parents) provides him with a series of didactic maxims. After losing his business, Tim is the first to introduce Mac to the concept of political economy. He admonishes his nephew to “read Marx … study all you can, remember that you’re a rebel by birth and blood … Don’t blame people for things … No, I blame the system. And don’t ever sell out to the sons of bitches, son” (28). In fact, the remainder of Mac’s narrative concerns his at times wavering commitment to his uncle’s imperative that he avoid selling out. To this
end, he also learns that he should eschew domesticity (which he periodically embraces and rejects), because, as Uncle Tim puts it, “it’s women’ll make you sell out every time” (28).

Both before and after receiving the foundation of a critical framework from his uncle, Mac has repeated exposure to the dystopic nature of capitalism, having seen the impact of “the system” on both his father and Tim, even if Mac’s experiences are less brutal than those described in either “The Apostate” or *The Jungle*. He has seen his apolitical father, a watchman, reject organized labor in an expression of loyalty to his employer only to discover later that his employer has given him “the sack to take on a bunch of thugs from a detective agency” (6). Her earning burden consequently increased, Mac’s mother essentially works herself to death in an effort to provide for the family. Later, after his father has died, Mac bears witness to the politically motivated bankruptcy of Tim’s printing business. (Although the exact causal relationship remains ambiguous, because the novel in these sections only reports the events from Mac’s naïve childhood perspective, it appears that the bank has foreclosed on the business in response to Tim’s affiliation with organized labor.) Mac has had his own negative experiences as a laborer, as well, working for Dr. Bingham, a huckster who peddles cheaply printed books and pamphlets ranging in content from the sacred to the literary to the pornographic. Ultimately, Mac receives no pay and is abandoned (as was his father before him), penniless and far from home, by his employer.

Even if Mac’s experiences under capitalism do not culminate in the abject dehumanization suffered by Johnny and Jurgis, the novel situates those experiences within a generally pervasive oppressiveness and exploitation encountered by multiple
characters. Rather than narrowly focus on a particular workplace or industry over a relatively brief span of time (like London and Sinclair), Dos Passos employs a sweeping historical and geographical approach, such that the trilogy in general charts in an elegiac tone the “the struggle between the Party and the Bosses for control of America, in which the public relations counsel [J. Ward Moorehouse, the only character to appear in all three volumes] steps in—quite sincerely believing himself to be without ideology—and hands Labor over to Capital” (Goldman 476). The anti-capitalist critique is embedded throughout the three novels of the trilogy not just in the experiences of the fictional characters, but also in the tone of the more than two dozen miniature biographies scattered throughout the text. The author clearly sympathizes and admires with the radicals (Eugene V. Debs, Big Bill Haywood, John Reed, and Randolph Bourne, among many others) while he savages the capitalists and their friends, many of whom have otherwise achieved the status of American heroes (including Andrew Carnegie, Thomas Edison, and Henry Ford). So, when Mac initially goes tramping, it comes as no surprise that he and his first mentor of the road, Ike, almost immediately reveal to each other their sympathetic socialist orientations, discussing The Appeal to Reason, Looking Backward, and Marx (the latter of whom neither Mac nor Ike have yet read) (48, 49). From there, Mac has little political distance to cover before he becomes a Wobbly and travels to Goldfield, Nevada, to join a strike campaign, although in the meantime he does fail to heed his uncle and temporarily becomes mired in a domestic scenario. In Mac’s ambivalence about this diversion, the radical rejection of the nuclear family entailed in the tramp revolutionary program receives extended treatment. When Mac tells his girlfriend Maisie that he has quit an oppressive job in order to aid in the
strike, Maisie’s response (“But I thought you loved me” [72]) typifies the conflation of love and labor, of domesticity and capitalism that the tramp program opposes: according to the prevailing logic of the work ethic, to pursue heteronormative relations is necessarily to have steady employment, which is counterrevolutionary. As Fred Boff, an idealized and idealistic I.W.W. member and organizer of the Nevada strike, asserts, “A man’s first duty’s to the working class,” so “[a] wobbly oughtn’t to have any wife or children, not till after the revolution” (81, 82). As if to prove Boff’s point regarding the distractions and obligations wrought by romantic relationships, Maisie becomes pregnant the first time she and Mac have sex. Mac, on making the decision to leave Maisie for good and beat it to Mexico, makes the incompatibility and transient radicalism apparent: “I’m free to see the country now, to work for the movement, to go on the bum again” (98). (Significantly, in this formulation, going “on the bum” and abandoning traditional employment does not entail a refusal of revolutionary “work.”)

For Ben Compton, more intellectual and disciplined and better educated (he attends college and actually reads *Capital*) than Mac, the road also necessarily entails a radical political education. His story occupies only one chapter of the trilogy’s second volume, *Nineteen Nineteen* (1932), but in his relatively brief appearance he fully embraces the utopian promise of the tramp’s enclave. As a young man who has tramped a bit, he takes a temporary job where he meets Nick Gigli, a young immigrant anarchist who counsels that “Benny ought to be ashamed of himself for wanting to be a rich businessman; sure he ought to study and learn, maybe he ought to get to be a lawyer, but he ought to work for the revolution and the workingclass; to be a businessman was to be a shark and a robber” (425). Nick also offers Ben a lesson
regarding domesticity similar to that provided by Hoff to Mac, warning that “women took a classconscious workingman’s mind off his aims, they were the main seduction of capitalist society” (425). (Ben appears to obviate this potential snare when he becomes involved with Helen Mauer, herself a radical.) Ben joins Nick and the other Italians in walking off the job after they are shorted in their pay, and the two of them take to the road, with Nick again offering Ben mentorship. Ben’s tramp apprenticeship, both in terms of politics and road survival skills, continues later under the tutelage of Bram Hicks, a Wobbly who encourages Ben to get “a red card and go out to the Coast” (433). The two of them steal rides from the New York City area to Duluth, Saskatchewan, and Seattle, following I.W.W. campaigns. This process of radicalization informs Ben’s later commitment to pacifist agitation (for which he sacrifices his freedom) once America enters the war in Europe. For Ben, as for Jurgis, immersion in the temporary utopian space of the tramp’s existence serves to give strengthen and focus to his revolutionary stance, his desire for broader utopian change.

For Dos Passos (in contrast to London and Sinclair), tramping’s utopian potential, even on a temporary basis, exists only during a particular historical moment. While the trilogy begins with Mac and his tramping experiences, it concludes in The Big Money (1936) with the otherwise unnamed tramp Vag, to whom the final miniature biography is dedicated. Significantly, all of the other biographies save one have concerned famous historical figures; the only other exception, along with Vag, is that of the unidentified body of fallen soldier. In both cases, these figures actually exist, but as a type representative of a larger group, rather than as particular historical personages. Vag is an individualized representation of the “forgotten man,” given a voice by Dos Passos—
indeed, given the final word in a narrative explicitly conceived of as a magnum opus, a grand statement on America. While Mac and Ben each, in different ways, embody the radical utopian potential of the tramp, Vag is strikingly impotent, in no way obviously engaged in political thought or action. His lack of employment is not the result of a conscious, radical agenda, but of the material conditions of the era. Vag is one of the “discouraged carcasses crowded into a transient camp,” one who exudes “the carbolic stench of the jail,” whose “taut cheeks” betray “the shamed flush from the boring eyes of cops and deputies, railroadbulls” (554). As the title of the novel suggests with deliberate lack of artfulness, at this moment capital has consolidated into absolutely irresistible force, a faceless, omnipresent authority dictating every aspect of social, political, and economic life. The revolutionary moment of the transient (most fully realized in collective actions of the I.W.W.), Dos Passos seems to be saying, has passed. Now is no longer the tramp’s time. Instead, the present belongs to the “transcontinental passenger” aboard the silver plane in the sky above Vag’s head, a passenger now free to “think contracts, profits, vacationtrips, mighty continent between Atlantic and Pacific, power wires humming dollars, cities jammed, hills empty, the indiantrail leading into the wagontrail, the macadam pike, the concrete skyway; trains, planes: history the billiondollar speedup” (555). As Feied observes, when Ben reappears in the final volume of the trilogy, he is no longer a tramp, and the tactics of the transient, train-riding Wobblies, “repudiated by the new crop of radicals,” no longer appear to have any real relevance. Even while “Ben’s story seems intended to suggest the courage and dedication of the large number of politically conscious hoboes enrolled in the I.W.W. at that time … there is little to relieve the sense of futility with which one is overwhelmed”
(52, 53). Central to the trilogy “is the theme of the gradual dissolution of hobo strength and the transformation of the onetime militant wobbly of its inception to the homeless and dispossessed vag of the conclusion” (55).

Denning notes in *The Cultural Front* that despite the trilogy’s privileging of the tramp, *U.S.A.* repeatedly breaks away from the conventions of the road novel. He writes that “*U.S.A.* became neither a novel of the road nor of the home, but of the cocktail party” (189); alternately, “the story of *U.S.A.* is no longer the story of tramps on the road, but of the roller coasters of the American amusement parks”; and finally, “the proletarian road novel in *U.S.A.* is displaced by a Hollywood novel” (190). For all the revolutionary potential embedded in the figure in turn-of-the-century Wobbly rhetoric and extended in the fiction of London and Sinclair, the tramp at best serves as a vehicle for mere critique, rather than active resistance. In fact, he ultimately cannot even provide a sustainable structure for the Trilogy’s panorama. In giving Vag the concluding section, Dos Passos deflates the romantic utopian mythology of the tramp that nostalgically informs his depictions of both Mac and Ben Compton. Ultimately, in this rendering of the U.S.A., the world has changed too much, and the tramp’s romantic utopianism has lost its relevance.

Moving more quickly than even Dos Passos along this trajectory, Chicago writer Nelson Algren plunges the reader into the tramp’s world in the first chapter of his first novel, *Somebody in Boots* (1935). Over the course of the book, Algren’s portrayal of the tramp’s life reveals itself as ultimately far more ambivalent than that of London, Sinclair, or Dos Passos. While Mac learned to reject capitalism relatively early in his life (and in the novel he occupies), Algren’s anti-hero Cass McKay seems to have inherited his
disillusionment; the book opens by describing his father, Stub McKay, as “embittered” by the feeling of “daily loss and daily defeat,” a feeling of having “been tricked” or “been cheated” by “Somebody stronger than anyone else” (12). The novel later identifies that “somebody else” as the titular “somebody in boots,” a figure that appears in many guises and personifies hegemonic authority. Along with images of abject, hellish poverty, it is largely from this idea that the novel constructs its dystopian vision. Authority seems as inescapable—as representative of Foucault’s reimagining of Bentham’s Panopticon—as the mechanical hound that relentlessly pursues Montag. Cass, who teeters on the brink of the kind of political awakening seen in the work of Dos Passos without ever going over, strives to resist this authority by periodically embracing the tramp’s mobility.

Unlike London and Sinclair, Algren is relatively unconcerned with presenting the tramp underworld as an actual utopia. Instead, his narrator addresses the reasons for the persistent appeal of the tramp mythology, specifically focusing on its utopian implications of that mythology. Cass spends a good deal of his young life hanging around the hobo jungle “[o]n the edge of town” (16). The novel likewise spends more time in this emblematic tramp space than either “The Apostate” or The Jungle. In the hobo jungle, Cass finds companionship, education, information, and mutual aid—everything missing from the world he occupies most of the time. And in the jungle Cass temporarily fulfills his desire for community based on shared material conditions and interests: “Most of the boys felt that they belonged. They were, definitely, underdogs. Between themselves and those above they drew a line for all to see. It was always ‘We’ and ‘Them.’ ... In judging a man, Cass learned, the larger question was not whether the
man was black, white, or brown—it was whether he was a transient of ‘One of them “inside” folks’” (18). It is in the jungle that Cass can escape his tyrannical father and immerse himself in an idyllic scene where “[b]oys little older than himself lay idling about in long sun-shadows there, talking, jesting, eating, sleeping, waiting for one train or another. They boiled black coffee in open tins or ate beans with a stick; they rolled cigarettes single-handed and sang songs about far-away places. Cass never listened without wonder, he never watched without admiration” (16). The tramps to whom Cass listens consciously construct a utopian narrative, eliding over details that fail to conform to this model, such that the narrator observes that “[t]hese men seldom spoke of the terrible hardships they endured” (19). Yet, even if the narrator undermines the tramp myth later in the book, these early scenes acknowledge that myth’s power to serve as a catalyst for utopian desires. At this point in the story, “Cass ... retains sufficient romanticism to be attracted by the open road’s promise of freedom and adventure” (Giles 39). In a novel largely devoid of joy or pleasure, the road suggests a possibility for hope.

Each of these tramp-centered texts locates the source of this utopian hope in the interrelated tactics of mobility and the rejection of work, the two primary concerns common to all tramp utopias. In adopting work as a central concern, these texts do not deviate from the concerns of the utopian genre as a whole. As Kumar observes, “The centrality of work in modern utopia reflects the wider phenomenon of the discovery of labour as a, perhaps the, significant factor of production, and widespread attempts at this time to make the poor ‘a productive resource’” (Utopia 70). This trend only makes sense in the decades immediately following a bloody, protracted Civil War that
concluded with the triumph of wage labor, “the legal doctrine of ‘freedom of contract.’” Blatantly visible styles of domination and exploitation yielded to new forms, which were disguised as commodity exchange and justified by the ascendant discourse of equal rights and freely contracted arrangements” (Montgomery 4). The radical nature of the treatment of work in tramp utopias comes into greater relief when contrasted with the way the subject is treated in *Looking Backward*. As Wegner observes, although Julian West cites the “labor question” as the dominant concern of his time, the reader encounters very few examples of actual labor being performed within the action of the novel (74). Still, the subject of work, at least in the abstract, occupies a primary position in the narrative; it dominates the conversations between West and Leete, which make up the bulk of the text. Work, we learn, is intimately related to the concept of citizenship: “When the nation became the sole employer, all the citizens, by virtue of their citizenship, became employees” (69). No one finds exception to the imperative to work. Rather, “[a] man able to duty, and persistently refusing, is sentenced to solitary imprisonment on bread and water till he consents” (107). The punishment for shirking takes on an even more profound implication when we discover that it is in fact the only remaining transgression even designated as crime in this perfected future society. Leete explains to West that jails and prisons have been eliminated, because the condition of economic equality necessarily removes the motive for the vast majority of criminal acts. Those who do engage in what was once considered anti-social or criminal activity (or “atavism,” as Leete calls it) are now “treated in hospitals,” receiving health care rather than jail time (150). In this utopia, the single act still designated as a crime warranting a punitive response, rather than as a mental illness to be treated by doctors, is the
rejection of work. As a result, Leete may confidently claim that “there are no idlers now” (167). Obviously, the premium placed on “personal liberty” (100, 188) in this new order has its limits.

Interestingly, Leete even develops a genealogy of that prototypical shirker, the tramp—economic and social conditions obliged social thinkers of the Gilded Age to address the “tramp question” in some capacity, and Bellamy was no exception—echoing that offered by London’s essay on the subject, except with a divergent rhetoric. The previous fluctuations of the economy under competition, he explains, threw “multitudes of men out of employment for periods of weeks or months, or even years. A great number of these seekers after employment were constantly traversing the country, becoming in time professional vagabonds, and then criminals.” During the economic downturns of the nineteenth century, “this army swelled to a host so vast and desperate as to threaten the stability of the government” (175). Again, the social chaos that so worries Bellamy apparently stems not from the actions of the capitalist class, but from the behavior of those who are forced out or choose to opt out of an oppressive system of industrial wage labor. This view of the tramp, which for Bellamy is a source of anxiety, finds positive expression in the tramp utopias of London, Sinclair, Dos Passos, and Algren: these untethered transients, in their rejection of work, suggest in aggregate a revolutionary potential. The railroad tramp, by virtue of his utter rejection of the free labor ideal in its entirety, at least temporarily subverts the conditions that, according to Marx—while allowing a laborer to quit any particular job, leaving the employ of any individual capitalist—determine “the worker, whose sole source of livelihood is the sale of his labour power, cannot leave the whole class of purchasers, that is, the capitalist
class, without renouncing his existence. He belongs not to this or that capitalist but to the capitalist class” (*Wage Labour* 205, italics in original).

Anarchist writer Hakim Bey provides a perspective from which to further develop the meaning of the tramp spaces and tramp practices as depicted in these narratives. Like London, Sinclair, Dos, Passos, and Algren, he is concerned with present-tense utopics. His concept of the “Temporary Autonomous Zone,” which he presents in his polemical, elliptical essay of the same name (first published in book form in 1991), serves as an attempt to theorize those impermanent moments in place and time that allow a person or group of people to evade the established structures and methods of social control. The concept may also be seen in part as an attempt to resolve the problem of the lumpenproletariat that so bothered Marx, who worried that this class would likely find itself appropriated for reactionary purposes. Bey does allow for the distinction between revolution and insurrection or uprising, but he sees the latter as potentially forming the basis of a coherent strategy with explicitly utopian implications.

Assuming “freedom” as the ultimate goal of any utopian project, Bey asserts that “[t]he concept of the TAZ arises first out of a critique of Revolution, and an appreciation of the Insurrection. The former labels the latter a failure; but for us uprising represents a far more interesting possibility, from the standard of a psychology of liberation, than all the ‘successful’ revolutions of bourgeoisie, communists, fascists, etc.” (100). According to this view, “[t]he TAZ is like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, before the State can crush it” (99). Rather than engaging in direct confrontation or opposition, participants in the TAZ
engage in the tactic of “disappearance,” or a refusal of participation (126).

Consequently, the TAZ does not serve as an end in itself, but rather one means of struggle by which to bring about an alternate reality. While inherently short lived, the TAZ operates along a horizontal rather than vertical structure. This temporary place/time thus affords its participants experience with non-hierarchical social relations, and as such suggests a possibility for replacing, rather than merely rejecting, oppressive institutions.

The ideology attending the “differential process” of which Jameson speaks and which is rejected by utopian tramp narratives—the economic laissez-faire of the Gilded Age—has, after a period of dormancy initiated by the Great Depression, resurfaced in a remarkably unreconstructed form in recent history. Capitalists like the Koch brothers have funded political movements with the expressed intentions of rolling back various New Deal initiatives, including social programs, industrial regulation, and particularly those governing labor relations, such as the Wagner Act (e.g., the legislative attacks on unions in Wisconsin, Michigan, and several other states). The gospel of wealth has found renewed support among the clergy, as well, particular those associated with certain megachurches: Joel Osteen and Kirbyjon Caldwell (the latter of whom offered the official benediction at both of George W. Bush’s presidential inaugurations), for instance, both promulgate what has been labeled Prosperity Theology, which posits a correlation between faith in God and material wealth. In these ways and others (such as the popularity of the Tea Party movement and elected officials such as Texas politician Ron Paul), America has witnessed a return to the rhetoric and a re-institutionalization of the conditions of the 1890s. At the same time, commentators
responding to the global financial crisis of 2008 were quick to draw parallels between contemporary scenarios and those created by the poverty of the 1930s. Perhaps it is no wonder, then, that the utopian impulse embedded in representations of tramp practice lingers—in fact, it undergoes a re-articulation and renaissance—in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, notwithstanding the notion put forth by both Dos Passos and Algren that the utopian potential of the tramp enclave has faded into history. Within underground punk-anarchist culture, many instances exist (with the occasional portrait surfacing in the mainstream in the form of a kind of hobo vogue\(^\text{10}\)). Central to this alternative discourse, in addition to an emphasis placed on individual freedom, is a privileging and celebration of adventure (often from a white male perspective that ignores specific circumstances of women and minorities), to the extent that liberty and adventure are treated as virtually synonymous. Perhaps paradoxically, given that the railroad is one of the greatest achievements of nineteenth-century industrial capitalism, the contemporary iteration of the tramp utopia often recalls a romantic pastoralism, especially within the anarcho-primitivist milieu associated with the Pacific Northwest—and Eugene, Oregon in particular—and the black bloc window smashers who first gained national attention at the end of 1999 at the World Trade Organization protests in Seattle. This breed of train-hopping punks finds inspiration in the writing of John Zeran (an academically unaffiliated philosopher and author of books with titles like \textit{Elements of Refusal} and \textit{Running on Emptiness: The Pathology of Civilization}), who in turn evokes at times (and excerpts for an edited anthology titled \textit{Against Civilization}) William Morris on the idea of meaningful work.
For instance, the anonymous author of the memoir *Evasion* (which originally appeared as a series of photocopied underground zines that were eventually gathered and published in book form by CrimethInc., a Situationist-inspired anarchist collective), while not necessarily “primitivist,” explicitly posits the tramp—and its attendant practices (e.g., hitchhiking, squatting, dumpster diving, scamming, shoplifting)—as utopian. Taken in aggregate, his non-chronological recollections function as a sort of tramp manifesto. From the first page, the author acknowledges his suburban-punk vantage point and declares his mode of poverty as “romantic” (although he does not follow the logic of this moment of intellectual honesty through to its conclusion: his is a voluntary poverty, whereas for the vast majority of the impoverished, it is not a choice). Rejection of both work and consumerism serves as the dominant motif, with the author almost obsessively recounting what he has obtained for free and explicitly arguing that the freedom from labor has granted him “a small shortcut to utopia” (104). He has received previously produced tramp texts didactically—he endeavors “to recreate every hobo book [he’s] read” (157)—and places himself within that particular and peculiar literary tradition. For him, the tramp perspective actually coheres into a particular worldview, such that as a tramp he sees the same object or conditions differently (or even in a direct inversion) from a person steeped in the dominant ideology. He writes that with a tramp’s sense of humor, “kids begin confusing precious towns of limitless possibility with boring voids” (59). Likewise, what others view as “‘Squalor’ … when properly contextualized” may be seen as “glory and grandeur” (61). It is in these realizations and others during which hegemonic ideology—comprised of “internalized capitalistic values” (166)—is pierced that one achieves utopia: “They never tell you hopping trains is, like,
the most inspiring activity ever. That tramp life opens up a world of infinite possibility and adventure” (224). The author not only describes his own experiences in this utopia, but advocates that his readers join him there, arguing (however naively and/or arrogantly) that he has undergone a personalized cultural revolution, a sort of deprogramming, and is now living a post-revolutionary life under pre-revolutionary conditions. In the end, his thesis consists of the proposition that capitalist, consumerist America actually is utopia—so long as one rejects wage labor and lives a tramp life of “subversive leisure”:

American retail, I don’t know … it’s all just so much fun! And all very post-apocalyptic—they had taken our communities, paved them over, put up nicely trimmed hedges, threw up huge stores, played nice soothing jazz music in the background … Clearly the only option was to laugh at the absurdity of such a mess—capitalist monuments to slavery and unregulated homogenization—view it as an amusement park, and play! (250)

This point, of course, simultaneously demonstrates the ultimate lack of sustainability of a tramp utopia: the rejection of work and adoption of radical mobility is, in the end, contingent on the continued existence of capitalism.

This paradox lies at the heart of the one utopian tramp text to have received extended treatment by scholars of utopia: “The Big Rock Candy Mountain,” a song (a version of which is quoted in the epigraph) first composed by Harry “Haywire Mac” McClintock in the 1890s, recorded by him in 1928, and subsequently performed by a wide variety of musicians. Scholars typically place the song within the utopian tradition including the Land of Cockaigne, that medieval folk utopia that describes “a land of abundance, idleness and instant and unrestrained gratification” representing “the dream of the labouring classes of all ages, to be free from toil and drudgery” (Kumar Utopia 7).

Hal Rammel, in Nowhere in America, has provided an engaging (if idiosyncratic)
treatment of the song, observing that in the fictional world it creates places a premium on not only abundance without toil, but also “the absence of authoritarian restraint” (31). The song, then, expresses and provides representation of two basic desires common to all tramp utopias: to have access to material necessities and sensual pleasures in a manner unbounded by poverty, and to be free of the authoritarian oppression that enforces the doctrine of work. Cigarettes and alcohol spring from natural sources and food is endlessly and effortlessly available. In this place, where “they boiled in oil the inventor of toil,” work remains anathema. Curiously, this imagining of the perfect world does not jettison all representatives of law enforcement, but instead describes a place where they have been rendered impotent: “All the cops have wooden legs,” “the bulldogs all rubber teeth,” “the railroad bulls are blind,” and “[t]he jails are made of tin” (qtd. in Milburn 88). Similarly, freight trains are plentiful and easily accessible, which raises an obvious question: if the tramp has located paradise, why would he worry about trains at all? Perhaps this scenario suggests that tramps require the presence of both authority figures (even powerless ones) and trains (even if they don’t go anywhere) in order for paradise to retain its value. It is impossible to imagine a wholly original world, one that leaves behind those elements that so defined the tramp’s existence. Here, utopian fantasy confronts its limits. Or, perhaps we should read this element of “Big Rock Candy Mountain” as indicative of the ephemeral nature of the utopian space comprising by the tramp’s place in the world as it actually exists: though perhaps few and far between, every generous handout, every unguarded chicken coop, every evasion of the yard bull, every train ridden provides transport to this temporary tramp paradise.
All the authors previously discussed situate themselves on the political left, as is made clear in their lives as well as these particular works, so that we may reasonably conclude they were interested in more than temporary escape from the conditions of capitalism. London, a well-known speaker and writer on behalf of (a peculiar understanding of) socialism, constructs a scathing portrait of life under capitalism; Sinclair ends his novel with a didactic call for socialist revolution through the ballot-box; Dos Passos (although he eventually converted to his own particular brand of political conservatism) incorporates celebratory miniature biographies of real-life socialist and anarchist figures into his trilogy; Algren quotes the *Communist Manifesto* and favorably portrays political agitators in *Boots*. So, we may reasonably conclude that these writers at one point or another saw utopian potential in reform and/or revolution. Still, they all offer a space for temporary utopian practice in a tramp enclave, and their tramp narratives invert expectations: rather than demonstrating how liberation will be achieved through progress, they offer romantic regression as a solution (in a strategy not dissimilar to pastoralists like Morris). The characters, when they become tramps, reject what the dominant ideology holds as unquestioned and unquestionable goods: work, stability, employment, income, home, family, social status. In these texts, to become a tramp is to refuse both work and consumption, to refuse to participate in the dystopian socioeconomic system described so vividly by the authors of these texts. The reader encounters a mode of existence that operates according to a logic wholly other than that of industrial capitalism. The tramp is a self-directed figure; the tramp’s world is a self-regulating community. The tramp strives to evade the totalizing force that previously confronted him in his role as a laborer by resisting physical and organizational
architecture and instead operating within a horizontal web of informal networks (which
figuratively mirror the rails he rides). Rather than offering a sustainable utopian scheme
that rectifies economic and social disparities in the manner of Bellamy’s *Looking
Backward*, these fictions propose an intermediately achievable solution for their
characters: they may not realize a social and political revolution by becoming tramps,
but through their individual insurrections they do enter a liberatory (if temporary) utopian
enclave.

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1 This epigraph is drawn from “The Big Rock Candy Mountains II” (qtd. in Milburn, 87-88).
2 While generating an exhaustive list of all tramp-centered narratives in various genres has proven
difficult, one source notes that the fifty-year period from 1890 to 1940 saw the publication of around forty
tramp autobiographies. (See Allen, 95.) Because the “tramp problem” so pervaded discussion during that
period, it is not surprising that the figure often found representation in fictional narratives, as well.
3 For a more recent and far lengthier analysis of utopia’s formal characteristics, see Jameson,
*Archaeologies of the Future*, especially Part One.
4 On Spencer’s intellectual influence in the United States, see Hofstadter, 31-50.
5 Wegner treats *The Iron Heel* as an early example of what Tom Moylan calls a “critical utopia,” in that it
“relegate[s] the narrative elaboration of the utopian space, what Moylan calls the utopian ‘blueprint,’ to the
margins of the text”; instead, “the narrative focus … is then redirected toward the delineation of the
conflicts involved in ‘the process of social change,’” in order to highlight “the untenability of the
progressive faith at the heart of such earlier utopias as *Looking Backward*” (100). Wegner further notes
that *Caesar’s Column* anticipates elements of London’s novel, as it “similarly portrays the ominous
consequence of the exacerbation of the current social crisis: the collapse of democratic institutions, the
establishment of military authoritarianism, and the slide of the great masses of the populace into bestial
servitude” (122). I refer to London’s and Donnelly’s novels as “anti-utopias” not to dispute this convincing
reading, but only to emphasize that the texts reject the utopian claims embedded in laissez-faire rhetoric.
6 Of the texts discussed here, *The Jungle* is the only one even occasionally designed by critics as
dystopian, although the analysis rarely goes further than the perfunctory application of this adjective.
7 These images (as well as similar descriptions found in “The Apostate”) predict by two decades the
horrific imagery of Fritz Lang’s cinematic dystopia, *Metropolis* (1927), with its iconic scenes of fully
dehumanized, mechanized workers. In all three texts, the human and the machine are conflated. In the
film, workers toil in a great underground industrial factory, locked behind metal bars during their shifts.
During a shift change, rigid lines of dour workers move in lethargic unison, with awkward motions, heads
bowed in supplication. While at their tasks, the workers attend to massive machines (the product of which
is never made clear, offering a perfect metaphor for the concept of alienated labor), their limbs jerking
repetitively and mechanically. In one the film’s most famous scenes, a worker operates a massive dial as
tall as he, the goal of his task obscure while he manipulates a pair of levers that resemble nothing so
much as the hands of an immense clock (wage labor having done so much to rationalize the experience
of time) on which the worker appears to have been crucified. Eventually, an inventor in employ of the
leader of Metropolis reveals that he has “created the man of the future, the Machine Man,” which he proposes to render indistinguishable from mortals. Although Lang’s imagery is stylized and allegorical rather than strictly realistic, in it visually replicates key concerns of Sinclair’s novel and London’s short story.

8 A 2006 article in *Time* magazine describes a sermon at Osteen’s Houston megachurch “before 14,000 attendees” as “a nonstop declaration of God’s love and his intent to show it in the here and now, sometimes verging on the language of an annual report. During prayer, Osteen thanks God for ‘your unprecedented favor. We believe that 2006 will be our best year so far. We declare it by faith.’ Today’s sermon is about how gratitude can ‘save a marriage, save your job [and] get you a promotion’” (Van Biema and Chu).

9 In addition to the spate of anti-union legislation that was either proposed or enacted in Wisconsin, Ohio, Michigan, Florida, and elsewhere in the early 2010s, Missouri State Senator Jane Cunningham introduced a bill (SB 222) in 2011 that “modifies the child labor laws” by “eliminate[ing] the prohibition on employment of children under age fourteen,” removing “[r]estrictions on the number of hours and restrictions on when a child may work during the day, … repeal[ing] the requirement that a child ages fourteen or fifteen obtain a work certificate or work permit in order to be employed,” allowing “[c]hildren under sixteen will also be allowed to work in any capacity in a motel, resort or hotel where sleeping accommodations are furnished, … remove[ing] the authority of the director of the Division of Labor Standards to inspect employers who employ children and to require them to keep certain records for children they employ,” and “repeal[ing] the presumption that the presence of a child in a workplace is evidence of employment” (Ruff).

10 I discuss this phenomenon in the chapter on the Americana Hobo.

11 This song reentered American popular consciousness at the end of the twentieth century with the release of the Coen brothers’ film *O Brother Where Art Thou?* (2006) and its bestselling soundtrack. The film itself ostensibly completes the project begun but finally abandoned by John L. Sullivan (Joel McCrea), a comedy director with a desire to make a serious “social problem” picture, in Preston Sturgis’ 1941 film *Sullivan’s Travels*. Albeit in different ways, both films slyly comment on the centrality of hobo mythology to the American narrative. The song, in its original, explicit version, is one of seduction, a promise of an older “jocker” to a young “punk” of all the rewards that await a person who takes to the road. Interestingly, in the obscure original version of the lyrics, each fantastical promise is revealed as a lie, undermining the later utopian incarnation.
CHAPTER 6
CODA: TOWARD A TRAMP PEDAGOGY

Things I learned in a hobo jungle
Were things they never taught me in a classroom,
Like where to get a handout
While bumming through Chicago in the afternoon.

—Merle Haggard, “I Take a Lot of Pride in What I Am”

The utopian impulse present in many tramp-centered texts begins to suggest the ways in which representations of such life practices might provide a model for an alternative subjectivity, yet more remains to be said about the didactic efficacy of those representations. Additionally, the mere existence of an alternative to the social subject formation accomplished by the forces of hegemony does not necessarily equate to a critical, oppositional subject position relative to those forces. In *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, Marx raises such a concern in cataloging members of the lumpenproletariat: “degenerate wastrels on the take, vagabonds, demobbed soldiers, discharged convicts, runaway galley slaves, swindlers and cheats, thugs, pickpockets, conjurers, card-sharps, pimps, brothel keepers, porters, day-labourers, organ grinders, scrap dealers, knife grinders, tinkers and beggars.” This “whole amorphous, jumbled mass of flotsam and jetsam” that has little sustained direct contact with the forces of production occupies a social stratum outside—or underneath—the formal economy (63). A survey of the appearances of the railroad tramp in popular culture would yield characters who engage in most, if not all, of the occupations Marx enumerates. By virtue of their transience and irregular work habits, tramps necessarily lack allegiance to any specific trade and so exist beyond the delineated confines of the productive classes; certainly, their position is distinct from both the stationary rural worker and the urban proletarian. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels make clear that the lumpenproletariat does not
comprise a source of prospective revolutionaries, arguing that this “‘dangerous class,’ the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society, may, here and there, be swept into the movement by a proletarian revolution,” as “its conditions of life … prepare it far more for the part of a bribed tool of reactionary intrigue” (482). It is true that the tramp, as a member of the lumpenproletariat, has little access to economic machinery and thus has limited ability to seize it directly. What little economic power he possesses becomes disconnected from the setting in which it is earned; like the modern-day undocumented (and criminalized) migrant worker, he does not invest in the community in which he earns his wage. Still, he does, in aggregate, derive power from his ability to cause social disruption, and the suggestion of that power permeates any text in which the tramp makes a significant appearance. In order to address the subversive potential embedded in the reproduction of tramp subjectivity, I want to conclude with a brief discussion of tramp pedagogy.

In Emperor of the North Pole, a 1973 film about railroad tramps set, according to an opening title card, during “the height of the Great Depression,” the experienced tramp “A-No. 1” (played by Lee Marvin) takes the neophyte “road kid” Cigaret (Keith Carradine) under his wing. Although the main plot revolves around the rebellious A-No. 1’s attempt to outsmart an authoritarian and sadistic “shack” (i.e., brakeman) and ride a line supposedly never ridden from origin to destination by any tramp while under the shack’s watch, much of the actual screen time is devoted to the mentor-apprentice relationship between A-No. 1 and Cigaret. Over and over again, A-No. 1 schools his naive protégé in the skills and tactics necessary for survival as a member of a socially ostracized and illegal subculture. The elder tramp demonstrates how to escape from a
sealed boxcar, ride the rods, evade a deadly effort by the shack to knock them from the train, and bring an entire train to a halt using salvaged buckets of grease. The vast majority of the audience necessarily assumes the position of the younger tramp: we are ignorant of the tricks of this particular trade and thus require a thorough education during which our instructor may assume very little (if any) prior knowledge as a foundation. Like Cigaret, we are unable to find our own solutions to the various problems a tramp faces; indeed, each problem initially appears insurmountable, and we are as inclined to abandon hope as Cigaret. Yet, in the face of each problem, A-No. 1 patiently employs the same pedagogical strategy: he never explains what he is doing, instead issuing only minimal instructions, so that both audiences (within and outside the film) must simply have faith that his at times inscrutable actions will produce the desired results. A-No. 1 requires his protégé to act before the latter grasps the reasons for acting; in other words, A-No. 1 explains or demonstrates a practice without first explaining the theory behind it. (At one point, the frustrated younger tramp exclaims, “What the hell are you doing?” “Teaching you,” A-No. 1 replies gruffly.) In each case, his seemingly improvised methods reveal themselves as sound, even ingenious, in that he achieves the desired effect, so that in each case Cigaret (and the film’s audience) has learned a new trick or tactic, and in fact has had a hands-on experience in implementing a new skill. Because the student learns by doing, the value of the newly acquired skill is immediately made self-evident by the execution of the action.

Granted, these examples appear in a fictional film, one that features at times overwrought performances (especially Ernest Borgnine’s portrayal of the evil shack) and a somewhat maudlin title song and score, but the filmmakers exhibit an almost
obsessive attention to detail when illustrating each of A-No. 1’s lessons, demonstrating
how these sorts of practices are—or, at least, were—done. In fact, this level of detail
seems to serve as the main reason to watch the film: the viewer learns the mundane yet
fascinating details and practices of an alien mode of living. In a broader sense, the site-
specific pedagogical methodology of the tramp subculture remains vital. It is important
to note that there was in fact an actual, historical tramp who traveled under the tramp
moniker A-No. 1—his real name was Leon Ray Livingston—and he wrote several florid
accounts of his adventures, publishing them as illustrated pamphlets in the first decades
of the twentieth century and selling them in train stations for twenty-five cents apiece.
With titles like *The Curse of Tramp Life* (1912), *The Ways of the Hobo* (1915), and
*Coast to Coast with Jack London* (1917), these writings serve an unstated didactic
function similar to the lessons of their filmic rendering, but to his readership the value
and applicability of those lessons were more immediately apparent. Indeed, many of the
habits and much of the culture of the railroad tramp revolve around the act of teaching,
albeit within a distinctly homosocial context. Older tramps ("jockers") often took
neophyte train-hoppers ("punks") under their wings, offering training and protection in
exchange for labor and companionship—and, sometimes, sexual favors. This
relationship is depicted not only in a cinematic reconstruction like *Emperor of the North
Pole*, but also in wide variety of texts produced by tramps themselves. Personal
narratives written by former or even current tramps typically contain explicitly didactic
and pedantic elements. Unlike more traditionally conceived pedagogical models,
however, these didactic elements function as part of a larger pedagogical project that
offers instruction in a mode of living that in terms of content and objectives runs counter
to the hegemonic Western liberal-humanist ideology that informs most social and economic organization and potentially limits progressive change. As such, tramp pedagogy serves as a potential alternative means of subject formation.

According to Louis Althusser, for a social formation to perpetuate itself, citizens must participate in the “reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology” (132). However, the seizure and possession of state power does not sufficiently explain the process by which an ideology achieves social and cultural hegemony. Instead, through established social practices and institutions “this ideology is realized and realizes itself” and so “becomes the ruling ideology” (185). Specifically, “the ideological State apparatus which has been installed in the dominant position in mature capitalist social formations … is the educational ideological apparatus” (152, emphasis in original). Terry Eagleton further observes that within “our particular kind of society”—a society operating according to the liberal humanist model that appraises the values of “individualism” and “freedom” above all else—the teaching of literature in particular serves as a “moral technology” to “map, measure, assess, and certify the emotive and experiential aspects of subjectivity.” The social order uses the technology of literature not to teach the student “specific moral values (though it surely does this too),” but rather “to teach one to be moral,” fostering a content-free “brand of moral formalism” as a result (98). This pedagogical method produces the radically depoliticized, “purely formal subjectivity which capitalism needs,” a subjectivity that rejects the “conflict, break, contradiction” that would attend radical social change in favor of “growth, gradualism, evolutionary continuity” (99, 103).
Susan Miller similarly argues that pedagogy as such should be understood as a cultural project that arose in the nineteenth century with a “precisely moral” agenda, “designed to colonize mass populations” and facilitate the construction of “a new class identity” (“In Loco Parentis” 156). Yet, the particular material conditions that gave rise to the specific pedagogical project Miller describes also contributed to the production of the railroad tramp, whose project may perhaps be described as precisely amoral. If the goal of cultural pedagogy (as embodied in literacy and philology) is to “train” (rather than educate) the public while replacing “the home as the primary civic unit of society” and assuming “monitorial duties,” then one could argue that reproductive pedagogical practices of the tramp similarly replace the home while pushing the student toward an alternative and potentially radical subject position. In myriad ways representations of the rail-riding tramp depict a subculture’s almost parodic appropriation of traditionally conceived pedagogical strategies in all their variety—including apprenticeships, classrooms, and textbooks—to facilitate subjectivity formation while simultaneously advocating behaviors and goals often sharply at odds with the objectives of the dominant order. Miller argues that the monitorial goals of cultural pedagogy are “socially regulatory” in nature and function, with the purpose of steering the student toward endeavors deemed social acceptable—i.e., toward alternatives to asylums, jails, and prostitution (“In Loco Parentis” 158). Conversely, even while broadly replicating certain formal elements of hegemonic cultural pedagogy, tramp pedagogy seeks to reproduce a specifically (and perhaps paradoxically) antisocial community member. Inherent to a membership in this subcultural group is participation in an intertwined set of activities that will potentially lead to the very institutions or institutionalizations from which the
dominant cultural pedagogy strives to shield its students. By training students to become a member of a (criminalized) subculture that embraces radical mobility and rejects the imposition of rationalized wage labor, tramp pedagogical practice actively resists the specific colonizing goals of traditional pedagogy.

Access to tramp pedagogy’s values and methods, its theory and practice, may be granted by the narrative literature generated by the subculture. Because didacticism plays such a key role in this subcultural discourse, a tramp text produced for a broader audience remains free to make overtly pedantic maneuvers without violating the implicit formal aesthetic contract between author and reader; these two positions will have already been constructed as analogues for mentor and student. Lee, a latter-day train rider, discusses this aspect of tramp narratives during an interview in the 2002 documentary Catching Out:

The stories by their nature are informational in a lot of ways. You know, if you read somebody’s story and they say, “Yeah, we were down in the bushes hiding from the bull waiting for our southbound hotshot heading out towards Tucson,” you know, it’s like, even someone who’s never hopped a train, never heard any of that lingo before, if they’re curious about that stuff they’re going to pick up a certain amount of information. It’s like, “Oh, ‘bulls’: those must be the railroad police. Oh, ‘southbound hotshot’: that must be a fast train.” So, the function of the stories, while probably primarily are literary and a form of entertainment, are also sort of informational. That’s a big part of the hobo-tramp community, how people can help each other with information to make the going a little easier.

Of course, it may be argued that any cultural artifact serves an instructional function. In Throwaways: Work Culture and Consumer Education, Evan Watkins explains how consumer culture itself acts as a generalized form of education, performing a socializing function, operating didactically to instill in its students a commitment to a particular set of values. “Like public education,” he writes, consumer culture’s
payoffs always involve the differentiations and distinctions of social position; like public education, it speaks to and with the languages of rising social expectations; like public education, it promises the positional rewards of mastering crucial lessons across elaborately structured ‘curriculum’ of subject areas; and thus, like public education, it involves continually contested zones and intricately negotiated individual itineraries. (6)

Such lessons as Watkins describes complement those of the dominant ideology, however, and herein lies a crucial difference. If the pedagogy of the tramp has achieved its objectives, the subject no longer feels compelled to follow what Dale Maharidge describes in his portrait of Blackie titled The Last Great American Hobo as “the basic rules and assumptions that forbid most of us from understanding or even accepting other realities” (Williamson and Maharidge 29). In terms of its content, the pedagogy of tramp narratives not only deviates from the lessons of formal mass education, it also deviates from the lessons of consumer culture. Indeed, tramp-produced texts may be read as instructional manuals for the construction of an alternative to the bourgeois subjectivity that is the goal of the Western educational project, a project that prepares citizens to be disciplined and domesticated as workers and consumers and thus ultimately to maintain current power relations.

Todd DePastino has argued that members of the tramp subculture in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries felt a “powerful sense of collective identity” and that participants in this subculture shared distinct “rules of membership, codes of behavior, and notions of the good life,” many of which were in conflict with those of the dominant culture (Citizen xx). The swelling ranks of this group during the series of economic crises in last decades of the nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth caused sufficient anxiety among “politicians, policy makers, businesspersons, and reformers” who sought to “demobilize” the “roving army of hobo labor” and thus
“created, in effect, the modern American home, redistributing its benefits as well as its burdens” (*Citizen* xxi). The practical threat posed to bourgeois liberal humanism by the historical tramp finds articulation in the culturally constructed version of the figure. For example, Livingston’s writings present in aggregate a potentially destabilizing lesson for readers. Livingston provides the reader with extended definitions of tramp terminology and practice, often by embedding these vocabulary lessons within accounts of his own period of apprenticeship, thereby accentuating the identification of the reader with Livingston; the reader plays the role of student along with “America’s most celebrated tramp” (self-proclaimed). In each chapter of his books, he uses terminology specific to the tramp subculture while simultaneously providing a definition by one of various means. For example, in *Life and Adventures of A-No. 1*, he receives a lesson in tramp vernacular from Frenchy, an older tramp he meets in Lathrop, CA, and with whom he travels by rail east to Florida.

“A Gay Cat,” said [Frenchy], “is a loafing laborer, who works maybe a week, gets his wages and vagabonds about, hunting for another ‘pick and shovel’ job. Do you want to know where they got their monica (nickname) ‘Gay Cat’? See, Kid, cats sneak about and scratch immediately after chumming with you and then get gay (fresh). That’s why we call them ‘Gay Cats.’” (*Life* 34)

In addition to the primary definition for Gay Cat, the author provides a series of auxiliary definitions parenthetically. After giving this sexually-tinged explanation, Frenchy takes on the author as a protégé, and gives him lessons in riding the rods, avoiding trouble from other tramps and the police, and making an easy dollar. Once the apprenticeship period has ended, Frenchy ceremonially certifies Livingston’s knowledge acquisition. “‘Listen, Kid,’ said he, ‘Every tramp gives his kid a nickname, a name that will distinguish him from all other members of the craft. You have been a good lad while you
have been with me, in fact been always ‘A-No. 1’ in everything you had to do, and, Kid, take my advice, if you have to be anything in life, even if a tramp, try to be ‘A-No. 1’ all the time and in everything you undertake. … I believe I have a good and proper nickname for you, one never borne by any other tramp, I am going to call you ‘A-No. 1’” (Life 44-46).

Not all the lessons contained in Livingston’s writing announce themselves quite so overtly. He inevitably signals the deployment of a term specific to the tramp’s vernacular by placing the word in quotation marks; the definition of that term might then arrive directly, parenthetically, or contextually. Despite these didactic moves, however, Livingston deliberately rejects a formalized and rationalized pedagogy in favor of alternate modes of learning. He recalls that he “was reproved by teachers for sitting with eyelids held widely open but with eyes entirely oblivious to surroundings … allowing daylight dreams to drag me away to far-off shores and on and ever onward seeking hair-raising adventures” (presumably an urge he shares with his reader-pupils), a habit which in turn led to “the willful neglect of [his] lessons” (Coast 14). At the same time, in order to buttress his position as an instructor in possession of a particular and rare expertise, Livingston takes pains to establish his ethos as a teacher by making frequent references to the authenticity of his experience.¹ He provides one of many examples of his command of privileged knowledge when he observes that to the “uninitiated” the railroad systems of the northeastern United States “looked as much alike as an equal number of beans in a pod. … But to the professional hobo there were no end of fine distinctions to be discerned” (Coast 18). The tramp instructor passes along more than mere training; he offers his pupils “exact knowledge,” which is of “an almost invaluable
importance to the devotee of vagabondage”—although A-No. 1 seems willing to sell such knowledge for a mere two bits (Coast 19). In case his reader has failed to grasp the full implications of claims such as these, Livingston even goes so far as to bluntly state that he is "regarded by newspaperdom as an authority concerning everything pertaining to the Road" (Coast 9).

Even if he makes it clear that he might identify with the motives of his readership and suggests that he would be just the man to serve as a mentor, Livingston also repeatedly claims that his own experiences are exceptional, that he alone among tramps "had gloriously made good" while the vast majority of other tramps end up as broken men (Coast 8). He also often adopts a moralizing tone; for instance, he insists that he abstained from tobacco, alcohol, and gambling, and daily repeated a vow not to associate with bad company. Perhaps in order to obviate any charges of moral corruption (such as those that were leveled at London on the publication of his memoir of trampdom), Livingston includes in his books a warning addressed “To Restless Young Men and Boys”:

DO NOT Jump on Moving Trains or Street Cars, even if only to ride to the next street crossing, because this might arouse the "Wanderlust," besides endangering needlessly your life and limbs. Wandering, once it becomes a habit, is almost incurable, so NEVER RUN AWAY, but STAY AT HOME, as a roving lad usually ends in becoming a confirmed tramp. There is a dark side to a tramp's life: for every mile stolen on trains, there is one escape from a horrible death; for each mile of beautiful scenery and food in plenty, there are many weary miles of hard walking with no food or even water through mountain gorges and over parched deserts; for each warm summer night, there are ten bitter-cold, long winter nights; for every kindness, there are a score of unfriendly acts. … To tell the truth, the "Road" is a pitiful existence all the way through, and what is the end? (Life 2)

Yet, even while Livingston makes the overt claim that he has rescued thousands of "waywards" from "an unnatural existence which was the straight path to mental, moral
and physical perdition” and that he intends his books as warnings rather than instructions to potential tramps, his adventure-filled descriptions (deliberately or not) constitute a narrative advocacy that runs counter to this claim (*Life* 8). Livingston struggles to argue that young men should not follow his lead, yet he cannot help but celebrate the adventures he has had as a result of an incurable “wanderlust” that has taken him across the U.S., as well as abroad to “Europe, … Japan, West Indies, New Zealand, etc.” (*Life* 136). In the end, he is able to turn “all the hardships and dangers I passed through since childhood to final advantage” (*Life* 135). In fact, all his ostensibly negative experiences ultimately lead to some cultural or material benefit, however much the author’s explicit caveats and narrative tone attempt to suggest otherwise.² In one passage, he describes being robbed by tramps, and claims that he subsequently “hardly ever spoke to and never again traveled with tramps” (*Life* 61). Three sentences later, however, he describes approaching a tramp at a hobo jungle. Significantly, although Livingston formally completed his apprenticeship under Frenchy, he may re-enter the role of the student at any moment, as the tramp practices a form of informal, lifelong learning. To illustrate this point, the tramp Livingston encounters in the jungle lets him in on a local scam, so that A-No. 1 is able to get new shoes, new clothes, and a warm meal at no cost (*Life* 66).

Perhaps the prototypical example of this specific iteration of memoir is Jack London’s *The Road* (1907), first serialized in *Cosmopolitan* magazine. Along with Livingston’s writings, this episodic and anecdotal book serves as source material for the *Emperor of the North Pole* (in fact, “Cigaret” was one of London’s tramp names), despite the fact that the book covered experiences Livingston and London underwent in
the 1890s, well before the chronological setting of the film. The book begins with a chapter titled “Confession,” in which London emphatically asserts regarding his former life as a tramp, “I do not apologize, for I am unashamed. It was youth, delight in life, zest for experience, that brought me” to this mode of living; furthermore, “It did me good” (29). Thus eschewing any warning or disclaimer akin to that Livingston offers in his books, London employs a boastful, digressive, and anecdotal strategy typical of the tramp narrative (whether written, spoken, or sung) while he assumes the position of mentor to an apprentice, carefully walking the reader through the steps involved in catching a train and “holding her down,” explaining the art of begging a meal, describing how to avoid detection and cope with the police, and defining sundry tramp slang. London, in his role as mentor, seeks to act as a model for (at least some of) his reader-pupils and thus reproduce his tramp identity through them.

London is both a far more artful storyteller and a more complex thinker than Livingston, thus his rhetorical strategy operates more subtly. Formally, however, the two authors take similar approaches: like Livingston, London peppers his narrative with terminology drawn from the tramp lexicon and provides embedded definitions (variously formal, operational, by example, or accompanied by visual illustrations), consequently positioning himself as an official interpreter of tramp lingo and guide to the tramp’s world. For example, he methodically translates the seven entries on a “hobo bill of fare” found engraved on “the water tank at San Marcial, New Mexico”: the phrase “Main drag fair” indicates “that begging for money on the main street is fair,” “Bulls not hostile” means “that the police will not bother hoboes,” and so on (102). More importantly, he establishes an operational definition of “a good hobo,” explaining that such a character
“can hold down a train despite all efforts of the train-crew to ‘ditch’ him” (32). Then, in order to define by example, London offers himself as the illustration of “a capable hobo” (33). To establish simultaneously his authenticity and his authority—to demonstrate how and why he is an expert and the reader a novice—he refers to his own experience and personal hardship. After providing a thorough example of how to catch an illegal ride on a train, London explicitly (if somewhat awkwardly) acknowledges his didactic and definitional agenda when he writes, “I have given the foregoing as a sample of what ‘holding her down’ means” (51).

London devotes an entire chapter to delineating the process of illegally catching a ride on a train, the single most important skill for the transient to possess. London situates this lesson within an anecdote chronicling an experience during which he was one of more than twenty tramps trying to steal transportation services on a train leaving the Ottawa depot. Not only do these tramps face the logistical challenges involved in boarding a moving train, they must outrun and outwit a railroad crew that actively seeks to prevent them from doing so. London explains that the ensuing events function as a sort of examination for tramps: “The weeding-out process had begun nobly, and it continued station by station. Now we were fourteen, now twelve, now eleven, now eight. It reminded me of the ten little niggers of nursery rhyme” (38). This last comparative aside functions in a multiplicity of complicated ways and warrants close attention. The reference reinforces the author’s didactic goals, in that it explicitly evokes a standardized pedagogical tool that London’s reader-pupil had likely encountered as a child. A story told through negative counting rhyme—which began life as that minstrel song “Ten Little Injuns” before being refigured with the racial epithet to apply to recently
emancipated and enfranchised African Americans and eventually codified as a trope found in educational counting books published during the late-nineteenth century “Golden Age” of children’s literature—the plot describes the mostly violent individual fates of each member of the original group of ten until “then there were none.” These types of books gave voice to “macabre fantasies of black mutilation with the durable hope that blacks left to their own devices will eventually destroy themselves” (Asim 103).

Like these “little niggers,” London and the other tramps face a potentially bloody fate should they run afoul of a hostile train crew or the railroad police. After recounting the dangers involved in traveling “bad roads” (bad because of the behavior of anti-tramp railroad employees) and describing one particularly sadistic and potentially fatal method a crew member might use to dislodge a tramp from a train, London describes the attitude of the media and the public at large in reaction to the news of a tramp’s demise: “The next day the remains of that tramp are gathered up along the right of way, and a line in the local paper mentions the unknown man, undoubtedly a tramp, presumably drunk, who had probably fallen asleep on the track” (33). Indeed, during the post-Civil War era (when the railroad tramp first emerged as a social category), the “tramp problem” engendered a social anxiety akin to that demonstrated by Southern whites following Emancipation. For instance, Francis Wayland, the dean of Yale law school, warned in 1877 of the railroad tramp as a “spectacle of a lazy, shiftless, sauntering or swaggering, ill-conditioned, irreclaimable, incorrigible, cowardly, utterly depraved savage” (10). The language used here recalls quite strikingly the sort of characterizations often applied to African Americans during the period of Reconstruction.
and Jim Crow. Both subjugated groups were perceived as threats to the privilege maintained by white, middle class, American society. Furthermore, both groups were subject to violent, extralegal reprisals as a means of containment and subjugation.

Significantly, London himself explicitly emphasizes this parallel when he writes that “I was resolved that I should be the last little nigger. ... If I weren't the last little nigger, I might as well quit the game and get a job on an alfalfa farm somewhere” (38). He crosses racial lines and emphasizing his connection with an oppressed stratum of society; although London certainly exhibits regressive views on race in other forums, here he deliberately privileges socioeconomic class over race as a unifying principle. In a version of the story published in an 1894 children’s book, the danger posed by the last “little nigger” in the rhyme is contained and neutralized once the character gets married: “One little nigger boy living all alone; / He got married, and then there were none.” Thus, the constraints of domesticity obviate the perceived threat a free black man (for, although the rhyme refers to its subjects as “little,” the images in the book’s illustrations are clearly those of adult men) might pose to white society. London, however, inverts this idea: to remain the last (tramp) man standing entails a resistance to domesticity, in that the tramp necessarily remains unmarried, untethered to any heteronormative conception of home and family. In fact, London quite blatantly offers the negative-fantasy scenario of a stationary, complacent life on an alfalfa farm (evoking Thomas Jefferson’s pre-industrial vision of America as a nation of yeoman farmers tied to the land) as his only alternative should he fail to prove himself as a tramp. Thus, his reference to the didactic children’s rhyme compresses multiple social and political lessons into a single sentence.
Like the writings of A-No. 1, *The Road* in many ways functions as a book about learning; London, acting as teacher for the reader-student, constructs in miniature his own tramp *Bildungsroman*. The conceptualization of the Road as a place of learning becomes most overt in the seventh chapter, titled “Road-Kids and Gay-Cats,” in which London recounts the specific process of his own education. When he first meets a group of “road-kids,” he concurrently makes the acquaintance of a “new vernacular” (124) and discovers a “new world” (he initially gains access to it via the kids' stories of life on the Road), which London now shares with the reader. Details about this world, his tone implies throughout the book, comprise privileged information. London adopts the role of an observer-learner: “I would lie silently … and listen” (124). Although he acknowledges these road kids' superior knowledge regarding this particular subject, his competitive, adventurous streak asserts itself: he compares his former experiences as an oyster pirate in San Francisco Bay Area to their railroading and finds the former lacking, and he sees this lack as a challenge he must face (124). London, throughout the book, has been attempting to replicate for the reader the simultaneously alienating and attractive effects this exotic vocabulary had on him the first time he heard it, although he deliberately constructs an image of himself in the position of ignorant student (like readers when they first open the book) only after he has established his pedantic authority over the last six chapters. As a new student, London must “go over the hill” (i.e. the Sierra Nevada mountain range) in order to prove himself to his mentors and thus “matriculate” (125).

In this way, the road is positioned as a school, an alternative but analogous site of learning, recalling Ishmael’s assertion in *Moby Dick* that “A whale-ship was my Yale
College and my Harvard” (Melville 120). The process is ritualized: like Livingston, London receives both the tutelage of a “mentor” and a road “monica,” or official certification, once he has met the necessary criteria (127, 125). When a fireman he has managed to evade on a train calls him a “son-of-a-gun,” London “thrill[s] as a schoolboy thrills on receiving a reward of merit” (47). In stealing a “Chinaman’s” hat on the streets of Sacramento, London passes a kind of final exam proctored by the road kids and obtains a “symbol” of his initiation, or graduation; the hat functions as a sort of diploma, albeit it a diploma self-conferred, as is appropriate to a de-centered mode of learning (129). Characteristically boastful, he insists that his own period of apprenticeship remained remarkably brief: he declares that he was never a “prushun” beholden to an older tramp, thereby asserting his heterosexual masculinity (133). In other words, he is such a masterful student that he bypasses a stage of tramp education, immediately becoming a road-kid, skipping his “gay-cat apprenticeship,” then “in a short time” earning the status of “profesh” (133). Both London and Livingston express frustration with the traditional classroom even as they replicate many of its forms during their apprenticeships. In doing so, they describe a gendered pedagogical mode of reproduction that proposes the masculine road as site of learning as a replacement for the feminine schoolroom and home (and all the practices required to maintain a home). The schoolmarm becomes a sort of unstated metonymy for everything against which these tramp writers define themselves. 

Not content merely to offer definitions of unfamiliar terminology to a bourgeois audience, London in his role as tramp mentor also insists on redefining common language. In DePastino words, London uses his picaresque narrative mode “to achieve
a critical distance from the mainstream culture” (Introduction xi). Specifically, he strives to induce in his readership what Wittgenstein calls an “aspect change” regarding the word and concept of labor. He insists on referring to his efforts to beg food and clothing as a form of “work,” making repeated use of the word while ironically describing his day as one might any other that operates according to the dictates of industrial capitalism’s clock-time: “At eight sharp in the morning I started out after clothes. I worked energetically all day. … I did not even knock off work for dinner. … At six I quit work” (34). He also situates his storytelling at a “set down” (i.e., a meal in someone’s home) with two sheltered women within the rhetoric of labor: “by toil performed” in detailing his adventures as a tramp, he proves “the claim [he] had upon their charity” (56). London, then, provides instructions and (re)definitions that aim to do more than more merely satisfy the prurient curiosity of a non-tramp reader about this subculture; he seeks to identify and challenge the unseen assumptions on which his middle-class audience’s subject position rests and thereby ultimately foster a change in social and economic organization.

In this way, along with lessons in the practical aspects of tramping, London offers lessons in the form of an implied critique of socioeconomic conditions in capitalist America. His writing has a political end—he seeks to illuminate the brutality of a society that gives rise to the tramp—which one cannot fully divorce from his purely pragmatic, instructional gestures. With this claim, I break from recent arguments made by two scholars of London’s tramp writings. Christine Photinos asserts that in The Road London jettisons the “economic analysis” that “ultimately replac[es] individual blame with an indictment of industrial capitalism” present in such earlier essays and stories as “The
Tramp,” “How I Became as Socialist,” and “The Apostate” (“Tracking” 176). According to Photinos, *The Road* instead replicates and celebrates the individualism London previously criticized, mocking the collectivist ethos that motivates other members of “General” Charles T. Kelly’s 1,500-member Industrial Army, with which London briefly traveled as it made its way toward Washington, D.C. in 1894. Photinos attributes this rhetorical shift to London’s marketing savvy in tailoring the essays that would make up *The Road* for their initial publication in *Cosmopolitan* magazine. Similarly, John Lennon finds that the London of *The Road* exhibits an “individualistic, competitive hobo identity” that allows for “no class solidarity in the boxcar” (“Can a Hobo” 11, 13). While Lennon reads this textual version of London’s tramping as “an act of resistance” against the exploitative nature of labor under industrial capitalism, he concludes that it is the resistance of the lone individual who relies on the “invisibility” enabled by the railroad, and that through his use of this invisibility, London constructs himself as an exceptional figure, deliberately isolating himself from collective political action (14).

No doubt, as Photinos argues, London tempers the critical rhetoric of his early tramp writings. Furthermore, Lennon convincingly argues that critics have too often overstated the transformative effect of London’s experience as a train-hopping tramp, merely taking the author at his word when he declares in his early essays that it was because he had once been a tramp that he became a socialist. Generally, despite his frequently stated commitment to and advocacy on behalf of socialism, London’s politics reveal what may be generously termed an unresolved tension between his critique of capitalism and his urge to venerate the exceptional individual, the latter of which he rationalized through his misreading of Nietzsche. Certainly, London’s actions at the time
of his tramping suggest a commitment to the individualist ethos at the time. Yet, to focus so narrowly on the content of those actions, as Photinos and Lennon do, passes over the critique manifested in London’s representation of his experiences.

Both Photinos and Lennon cite London’s blunt acknowledgement of the individualism that motivated him during his time as tramp as evidence that *The Road* and the mode of tramping it describes undercut any critical message they might otherwise carry. As evidence, they each refer to a passage in which London describes the ways he and nine other self-interested tramps, all members of Company M, break solidarity with Kelley’s Industrial Army in order to pilfer the best of the provisions that class-conscious sympathizers have set aside along the Army’s route. In the language of Social Darwinism, London explains, “We were independent” of the collective, “individualists” who possessed “initiative and enterprise,” and who “ardently believed that the grub was to the man who got there first” (138,139). In Photinos’s reading, *The Road* lacks such mitigating passages as those of his early tramp writings in which he “attributes his early faith in individualism to youthful arrogance, naïveté and self-delusion” (“Tracking” 177). Yet, *The Road* offers a direct apology for his acts of individualism: “[R]ight here I want to say to General Kelly and Colonel Speed that here’s my hand. You were heroes, both of you, and you were men. And I’m sorry for at least ten per cent of the trouble that was given to you by the head-boat of Company M” (144). Significantly, throughout the text, London has consistently refused to apologize for any of the other crimes he committed while tramping. Indeed, in the sentence of the book, he states quite bluntly, “I don’t want to apologize” (15).
Moreover, London imbues the descriptions of such self-interested behavior with a heavy dose of irony, consistently equating it with the individualistic motivating force underpinning laissez-faire capitalism. This irony functions didactically, denaturalizing ideological assumptions that designate certain activities as immoral or criminal and others as economically sound. Following his arrest for vagrancy, London finds that prison meals provide inadequate nourishment, so he and another convict collude to steal bread and sell it to their fellow inmates, once again favoring enriching personal initiative and violating solidarity with members of his class. “It would seem absurd, our retaining this bread,” London admits, but he insists, “We were economic masters inside our hall, turning the trick in ways quite similar to the economic masters of civilization” (85). He repeats this analogy several times, claiming that “we but patterned ourselves after our betters outside the walls” (85-86). He becomes even more specific, declaring that “[w]e were wolves … just like the fellows who do business in Wall Street” and their self-serving accumulation and control of resources “were modeled after capitalistic society” (87, 92). According to this logic, London’s reader-pupil must either accept London’s actions or condemn prevailing economic principles.

Rationalizing the digressive pedagogical gestures contained in the autobiographical narratives by authors such as Livingston and London, other tramp writers produced formal “how-to” manuals published by small presses or self-published as far back as the 1920s and as recently as the 1990s. Nels Anderson, the sociologist and former tramp, published *The Milk and Honey Route: A Handbook for Hoboes* in 1931 under the pseudonym Dean Stiff. (Anderson later called this book “a parody” of his own pioneering observer-participant sociological work on the hobo, as well as of the
reams of sometimes quasi-scholarly and even sensationalist literature that followed in its wake [Men on the Move 2].) Along with his subtitle, Anderson’s choice of an alias suggests the alternate discursive mode he has assumed for this project, compared to his other writings on the subject: he clearly wishes to distinguish this volume from those works he has written for a more specialized, academic audience. Yet, he still yokes together the academic authority figure (punning on the name “Dean,” thereby gently mocking his own position as a scholar) and the hands-on, real-world persona of the tramp (a figure also known as a “bindle stiff”). Like Livingston and London, Anderson stresses the importance of subculturally specific jargon, going so far as to include as an appendix “a comprehensive and unexpurgated glossary” of various terms tramps might use, pointing out that many of these terms “began in Hobohemia and were taken up in time by other groups” and helpfully cautioning against overuse: “many contemporary hobo writers … think by the use of slang to add a bona fide touch to the fiction they weave” (title page, 198).7

In stressing the centrality of the railroad in the life of the tramp, he explains that this figure—like the sociologist—possesses a specialized knowledge, that he “knows his railroads as the gangster knows the street corner” (23). This comparison emphasizes the tramp’s legally and morally marginalized position in society, while at the same time positions him as an object of intrigue. Anderson initially demurs from the instructional implications of this book, insisting that

It is not the purpose of this [writing] to tell the young novice how to get over the road. That would be like telling the groundling how to fly. If your foot is swift, your hand deft and your eye keen, the rest will come easy. To roam the roads of Hobohemia you need to be ready of wit, for ill fares the witless hobo. You may be as sure of yourself as any greenling, but too
often self-confidence backed only by desire may outstrip your sanity and lead you to grief. (25-26)

In effect, Anderson posits that theoretical instruction simply cannot substitute for the sort of hands-on learning that A-No. 1 offered Cigaret in *Emperor of the North Pole*: “It would be folly to undertake here to tell you how to become a train rider. You will have to develop your own style. If you want to take your style second-hand from a book then you must be content to remain a second-class hobo” (26). Still, Anderson admits, theory does have value, as “there are things that the novice can learn in advance,” such as how to interact (or avoid interacting) with railroad crews, the value of keeping out of view, points of hobo etiquette, and the importance of a reasonable grasp on geography (26-27).

Tramp pedagogy as practiced does not offer an unproblematic model of knowledge formation. It may be radical, but as it exists in these texts it fails to become truly revolutionary. It ultimately remains unable to imagine an alternative that does not rely on a gendered discourse that excludes the feminine as the opposite against which to define itself. Its specific practices (such as riding freight trains or scavenging usable material resources from the waste of others) depend on the existence of a capitalist model against which to rebel. As an alternative it can only exist within the architecture of the dominant liberal-humanist ideology. Tramps do function as an apparent challenge to that ideology, as an indigestible remainder that cannot be subsumed within the dominant culture; the formation of the subculture is situated both within and against the dominant culture. In this dialectic, the tramp subculture provides an image against which the liberal-humanist ideology can structure itself. As London argues, the tramp ultimately benefits capitalism. The challenge facing any pedagogical model derived from
that demonstrated in these tramp texts is how to rid itself of its gendered narrative and extend its practice to all groups while maintaining itself during times of economic prosperity.

The scope of a project detailing and analyzing the creative potentials of a tramp pedagogy does not end with this cursory look at a few texts produced during the first waves of rail riding. The idea of a tramp handbook persists beyond long after the historical decline of the figure, in the form of such recent volumes as *The Freight Hopper’s Manual for North America* (by Daniel Leen, first published in the 1970s and subsequently revised for the next three decades) and *Hopping Freight Trains in America* (published in 1993, and written by Duffy Littlejohn, a lawyer and freight train-riding enthusiast). Documents of an even less formal nature also abound, such as the “Crew Change Guide,” which circulates along a completely underground circuit, photocopied and passed from rider to rider (and deliberately not published on the internet, in order to prevent rail company police officers from gaining access to it), while also being amended and expanded each year with contributions coming from the rail-riding community, would also serve as a useful case study. These writings, unlike those of Livingston, London, or even Anderson, offer little to almost no autobiographical content, instead presenting pure information and instruction. In other words, in these documents, the pedantic goal of tramp pedagogy has been made both primary and formal.

A recent title in this ever-expanding genre, Josh Mack’s *The Hobo Handbook: A Field Guide to Living by Your Own Rules* (2011), continues the tramp’s practice of deliberately and playfully appropriating the methods of cultural pedagogy—much as the
tramp appropriates the mobility of the railroad—in opening with a multiple-choice Hobo Aptitude Test. The introduction then sketches a scenario that might resonate with the reader:

The daily grind has ground you down and there are days when given the option of sticking pins in your eyeballs or listening to your voicemail you’re not sure which way you’d lean. … The one day—perhaps today—after you’ve been on hold for twenty minutes and the automated customer service ‘person” is asking you to repeat your selection for the third time or press pound to return to the main menu, the obvious solution to your societal incarceration hits you: quit your job, donate your car, toss your credit cards, and become a hobo. Awestruck, you stop dead in your tracks and wonder why you didn’t see it before, thinking of all the time you could have saved if a hobo had just come in to school on career day and with a wink shown you the door marked “exit.” (xx)

By up-ending the presumptive response to a loss of employment, possessions, and home, this passage subverts the threat of precarity that keeps the vast majority of us frantically working for the benefit of the dominant order. The railroad tramp arrives as a figure of romantic fantasy to interrupt the citizen’s prescribed trajectory. Significantly, that interruption occurs during career day, that point at which the forces of school and work come together to reinforce an overdetermined subject formation. We nod in recognition—yes, how great it would feel to be free of all these obligations, these trappings of postmodernity. Perhaps we read the rest of the book, learning what to a tramp should bring on a journey, where and how to catch a train, how to negotiate the social space of a hobo jungle, what to expect in an encounter with the law. The more adventurous of us might actually go so far as to take a few rides. But that’s still just tramping. Only when we become tramps, this and other such pedagogical texts maintain, do we see that things can be other than as they are.

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Even the most sympathetic readers of the adventures of A-No. 1 tend to regard his tales as embellished variations on the truth.

This apparent paradox anticipates the claim attributed to Francois Truffaut that it is impossible to make a true anti-war film, because in cinematic representation tends to heighten the adventure and thrill of combat, whatever the intention of the filmmaker.

The McLoughlin Brothers of New York and Birn Brothers of London published books based on the song in the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s. Mother Goose anthologies of nursery rhymes also included versions of the song during this period. (See Martin 19-77 for an extensive history and analysis of the Ten Little Nigger genre.) McLoughlin Brothers also produced a card game, based on “Old Maid,” of the same name in 1895 (Asim 104). A sample verse from the rhyme: “Seven little nigger boys chopping up sticks / One chopped himself in half, and then there were six.” The basic plot still exists in contemporary counting books, of course, but with monkeys or other animals replacing the racial epithet. It also serves as the acknowledged basis for the plot of Agatha Christie’s novel And Then There Were None, which was originally published under title Ten Little Niggers.)

London similarly exhibited an accelerated trajectory through his studies when he returned home from the road and enrolled in school to prepare for college entrance exams: he completed the work so quickly that the administration returned his tuition.

DePastino thoroughly explores the idea of the hobo metanarrative as oppositional to domesticity in Citizen Hobo.

This work might be usefully compared to Abbie Hoffman’s Steal This Book, in that both books offer their readers explicit and precise instructions in breaking the law and leading a subterranean existence.

Anderson includes among his definitions an entry for Livingston’s hobo persona: “A-No-1—A famous tramp who writes his name ‘on everything like J. B. King.’ He writes books about his alleged adventures. Many young hoboes write this monicker [sic] on water tanks, and chalk it on box cars” (199).
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

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