

PART I

Context

Introduction

Hobohemia and the Literary Imperative

The shock-trooper of the American expansion, the man with bed-roll on back who free-lanced beyond the community redoubts, building the canals and roads and rights-of-way, spiking rails, felling timber, drilling oil, digging mines, fencing prairie, harvesting wheat, was the hobo.

Kenneth Allsop¹

the idea of the hobo is still compelling. The dreamer, the iconoclast, pioneer, he pricks the yearning to break new ground, to be at the cutting edge of a frontier, to explore.

Roger Bruns²

In his 1965 hit song ‘King of the Road’, Roger Miller sings about living the carefree life of a hobo who has to work just ‘two hours of pushing broom’ to pay for his ‘eight by twelve four-bit room’ (Tree Publishing, T-071.000.635-1, 1965).³ One joy of this easy life is that although he wears ‘Worn out suit and shoes’ he does not have to pay any ‘union dues’, Miller being apparently unable to see the connection between these two facts. The song celebrates the freedom of the individualist hobo, whose unwillingness to be tied down to a particular job – and a union – makes him a paradigmatic American hero. While he may be a ‘man of means by no means’, his freedom to move around styles him as the titular ‘King of the Road’. This representation parallels the idealised hobo figure celebrated by the two epigraphs above: the ‘dreamer, the iconoclast, pioneer’ who, in the macho language of Roger Bruns, ‘pricks the yearning to break new ground, to be at the cutting edge of a frontier’. This conflation of the hobo with the ideology of the frontier indicates that this version of the hobo is, like the pioneers celebrated in Frederick Jackson Turner’s famous ‘frontier thesis’, both white and male.⁴ The hobo’s extreme freedom is a celebration of the rugged individualist qualities of white US American men, and the hobo becomes an example of America’s exceptional nature. The ‘pioneer hobo’, as I term this imagined transient figure, is the most enduring version of the

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hobo that has come down from the so-called ‘Golden Age of Tramping’: roughly the early 1890s to the early 1940s, which is the period under analysis in this book. This hobo became an American cultural icon, signifying freedom from restraint and rebellion to the established order, while paradoxically reinforcing conservative messages about American exceptionalism, individualism, race and gender.⁵ The pioneer hobo’s legacy can be felt in works of canonical American literature, such as John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), John Dos Passos’ *USA Trilogy* (1930–1936), and Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road* (1957). It reaches into popular culture through the idealisation of ‘the road’ in movies such as *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Easy Rider* (1969), and *Thelma and Louise* (1991), as well as in songs by Woody Guthrie, Bob Dylan, Merle Haggard, and many others. Yet as *Vagabonds, Tramps, and Hobos* sets out to demonstrate, the pioneer hobo image is a simplification of the era of the hobo, particularly regarding the complexity and diversity of cultural artifacts created by transient authors, poets and musicians in the early twentieth-century US.

Transients created what was arguably the first counterculture in the modern United States. Known as ‘hobohemia’, this working class subculture existed in the ‘Main Stem’ areas of cities such as Chicago, which were also called ‘hobohemia’, and which served as hubs for workers to pick up jobs and to hunker down over the winter.⁶ The subculture thrived in union halls run by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and in ‘Hobo Colleges’ run by the International Brotherhood Welfare Association (IBWA), both of which sought to educate and radicalize the transient worker through their respective street newspapers the *Industrial Worker*, *Industrial Solidarity* and the “*Hobo*” *News*. Hobohemian culture spread along what John Stilgoe has called the ‘metropolitan corridor’ that ‘evolved along railroad rights-of-way in the years between 1880 and 1935’.⁷ It grew in the thousands of temporary and permanent camps, known as ‘jungles’, that hobos established across the USA, in which they would trade tall tales and sing communal songs. It refreshed itself by watertanks, where train-hoppers would wait for a steam-powered freight to stop for water so that they could hitch a free ride to their next job, locations at which people often left marks stating their ‘road names’, the date and their direction of travel.⁸ It moved in boxcars, where hobos could exchange ideas in a manner that John Lennon has called ‘boxcar politics’.⁹ But it also dwelt in the home, since most transients were not, as the pioneer hobo image suggested that they were, individualistic loners: in fact, most remained connected to their families and communities, who they left for periods to seek work but to whom they would regularly return.

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The fruits of hobohemia were fiction, poetry, autobiography, sociology, journalism, and popular music, including works produced by women and African-Americans. The material examined by this book, much of which has been forgotten or neglected, demonstrates that hobos were not the all-American, white, straight, male hyper-individualists that they have been seen as by much twentieth-century popular history.¹⁰ Like Heather Tapley, I question ‘the assumption of the hobo as white and the suspicious absence of the African-American male in hobo history’.¹¹ In addition to being white men, hobos were also foreign, black, gay, female, and, in many instances, both socially-minded and politically communistic. They included blues singers such as Sleepy John Estes and Memphis Minnie, whose songs provide an alternate perspective to that of the pioneer hobo.

Despite or perhaps because of the idealisation of the pioneer hobo, some people have claimed that transient writers and artists created little of cultural worth. In 1956, for example, Frank Beck wrote that ‘With abundance of leisure he [the hobo] produces little literature, practically no philosophy and little else that has much social or scholarly value’.¹² One purpose of *Vagabonds, Tramps and Hobos* is to demonstrate that this is not true. I do so by looking at works created by transient artists and thinkers, including travel literature, fiction, memoir, early feminist writing, poetry, sociology, political journalism, satire, and music. I explore the diversity of meanings that accrue around ‘the hobo’ and ‘the tramp’, providing new insights into the meaning of these terms. This book is also the first analysis to frame transiency within a nineteenth-century literary tradition of the vagabond, which is, I argue, a figure who attempts to travel without money. I examine the vagabond, tramp and hobo as cultural figures, each of which was part of the discourse of US transient subculture from the late nineteenth- to the early twentieth century.¹³ In doing so, I provide new ways for American Studies scholars to think about the activity and representation of transiency.

Vagabonds, Tramps and Hobos is primarily a work of literary studies, a field in which the upper and middle class flaneur has had a great deal of attention.¹⁴ In contrast, and somewhat surprisingly given the abundant scholarship that also exists on picaresque literature of the Early Modern Period, later US tramp narratives have been almost entirely overlooked.¹⁵ This seems an example of class bias within US literary studies specifically.¹⁶ Most of the writers in this book are non-canonical for the simple reason that many of them, though not all, came from the US working class, whose cultural productions have been generally considered to be of little worth. In addition, while literary studies tends to privilege certain

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forms (novels over memoirs, poems over songs), my understanding of literariness treats different forms equally. Memoir and song, for example, feature heavily in the chapters that follow, not primarily because they provide access to experience but because of their craft. This book provides insight into a US working-class literary tradition and, especially in the case of T-Bone Slim, new conceptual frameworks for the analysis of working-class writing.

A key term in this book is ‘transient’, which I sometimes use as an adjective before ‘worker’ but more often as a noun to describe people whom I group under the overlapping headings of vagabond, tramp and hobo: the first term being one that I apply to travel literature and the latter terms being common period archetypes. Since it relates to capitalist modernity, my use of ‘transient’ is not intended to account for the experiences of first nations peoples, gypsy travellers or slaves: the disparate movements of each of these groups warrants its own conceptual framework and so falls outside the scope of this book.¹⁷ Nor does the term cover the experience of immigration although, as I discuss towards the end of this Introduction and in the book’s Conclusion, there are overlaps between the circular experience of transiency and the more linear experience of migration.¹⁸ As an alternative I considered using the legal term ‘vagrant’. I decided against this, however, because historically ‘vagrant’ has been so broadly applied as to mean almost anyone of whom the authorities disapproved, although I will use the term when discussing the effects of vagrancy laws. Another possibility was ‘nomad’, which has acquired academic popularity following the publication of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s influential concept of ‘nomadology’ in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987, first published in English 1988), having been further developed by feminist scholar Rosi Braidotti and applied to women’s road narratives by Deborah Paes de Barros.¹⁹ However, I found the term ‘nomad’ to be inadequate to describe the experience of historic US transiency and also, especially as used by Deleuze and Guattari, to be an idealised representation at best and a form of neo-colonialism at worst. In her excellent work on women’s road narratives, Alexandra Ganser has modified the term to ‘para-nomadism’ to indicate that many journeys are undertaken not always as acts of rebellion, as Deleuze and Guattari insist, but out of economic necessity.²⁰ I agree with this critique but have nevertheless chosen ‘transient’, partly to avoid any connotations with historic or contemporary nomadic peoples, partly because, as I discuss in the book’s Conclusion, the term ‘nomad’ has become a choice term for relatively privileged workers in the twenty-first century, and most

importantly because the term ‘transient’ speaks to both movement and time. Many transients lived as vagabonds, tramps or hobos only for a period, or would alternate between phases of movement and relative stability.²¹ As its name would suggest, then, transiency was rarely permanent. In this book, ‘transient’ is not a sociological category but a strategic one; that is, I do not use it to imply a fixed essence or inherent identity but rather as a description of a way of being that may be temporary, semi-permanent or for an entire life.

Recent scholarship on US tramps and hobos has been dominated by poststructuralist approaches that have emphasised the power relations to which transients were subject, especially the tramp and vagrancy laws which made it illegal to be out in the open or to cross state lines ‘without visible means of support’.²² Michel Foucault’s famous statement that ‘Visibility is a trap’ has been particularly influential.²³ For example, in his early work on the US tramp the human geographer Tim Cresswell, who would later become a leading-albeit-sceptical figure in a turn to ‘mobilities’ within the social sciences, focused on the nineteenth-century laws that constructed the categories of tramp and vagrant.²⁴ The concept ‘tramp’, he argues, was brought into being by various ways of knowing, including eugenics, sociology, and documentary photography, which acted as means of control over a potentially mobile class of transient workers.²⁵ For Cresswell, ‘Vagrancy, vagrants, tramps, etc. are what some people, in positions that enable them to define others, say they are’.²⁶ This may be true of the term ‘tramp’, which was an externally-imposed category, but it is not true of ‘hobo’, which came from within transient subculture, seemingly in response to the legal implications of the terms tramp and vagrant. Indeed, for John Lennon, who is influenced by the work of Michele de Certeau and Hakim Bey (Peter Lamborn Wilson), when they stole rides on freight trains hobos were performing acts of resistance by hiding their presence from a modernity that sought to categorise and pathologize them.²⁷ Like Cresswell, however, Lennon also positions visibility as a trap and invisibility as agency: hobos, he asserts, ‘have the most subcultural power because they are invisible ... hobos, unseen, have agency because they are invisible’.²⁸ But sometimes visibility, as Ariella Azoulay outlines in relation to photography, can bring welcome benefits, particularly for those who seek recognition.²⁹ For example, the fact that the ‘means of support’ mentioned in vagrancy laws needed to be visible indicates that visibility of capital could represent freedom from police persecution. In addition, invisibility could also be a trap. Some tramps laws explicitly categorised the tramp as male, which meant that women could not be arrested as ‘tramps’.³⁰ This

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invisibility of female tramps protected them from jail but it also led to their exclusion from the literary marketplace, which is why of the almost 80 transient memoirs published between 1890 and 1945, fewer than a handful are by women. The increased visibility of women on the road that took place during the Great Depression led to a more sympathetic portrayal, at least in some representations.³¹ Visibility can be a trap but sometimes, and simultaneously, it can demand the recognition of personhood.

I.1 Book Structure

Vagabonds, Tramps and Hobos is divided into three parts. Parts I, which includes this Introduction and Chapter 1, provides background about hobohemia and gives an outline history of representations of US transiency. As well as laying out the argument and structure of the book, this Introduction will shortly argue that hobohemia was a subculture that privileged storytelling, and that the popular genre of hobo memoir emphasises drift as a key aspect of the transient experience. Chapter 1, which is more of a cultural history than later chapters, examines how tramps were represented in mainstream constructions and how the concept ‘hobo’ developed within transient subculture to provide a cultural and legal alternative. Part II, which contains Chapters 2–4, explores the figures of the vagabond and tramp. These figures pre-date the popularisation of the hobo and so most of the texts in Part II date from either the late nineteenth century or from the first two decades of the twentieth. Part III, which consists of Chapters 5–7, focuses on the hobo and on ‘hoboing’. Since the hobo figure developed after the vagabond and tramp, the material in this section dates from the 1920s to the early 1940s. Finally, the book ends with a Conclusion that sums up the argument and briefly examines representations of US transiency from the end of World War 2 to the present day.

In Chapter 1, I outline a brief history of the representation of US transiency from the postbellum period into the early twentieth century. I explore how the term ‘tramp’ developed as a term of moral and legal exclusion to describe the mobile poor, who were felt to be opting out of the capitalist work ethos. I show that while the tramp had been a figure of mockery in popular culture, during the late nineteenth century the problem began to be treated more seriously by a range of proto-sociological figures. In the early twentieth century, investigators increasingly accepted a connection between vagrancy and unemployment, and representations became less hyperbolic as a result, although no less tainted by class bias.

Finally, the chapter shows how the term ‘hobo’, constructed to mean a transient wage-worker, was developed by the IBWA, the IWW and others to fight back against the cultural meaning and legal implications of the term tramp, creating what I call the ‘frontier defence’ of transiency. However, this defence had problematic connotations and exclusions based on gender and race.

Focussing on writing by Ralph Keeler, Lee Meriwether, Harry Franck, Stephen Graham and Vachel Lindsay, Chapter 2 charts the development of a subgenre of writing that combines the slumming narrative with the travelogue, which I call the ‘vagabond travel narrative’. In this subset of travel literature, a narrator attempts to sightsee without money. These narratives make a spectacle of the supposed ingenuity of the narrator in acquiring, in the absence of financial capital, what I call ‘experiential capital’. Yet these texts also reveal, against the intentions of their authors, that it is their privilege as white men that enables these journeys and experiences. Vagabond writers set themselves apart from hobos and tourists, seeing both groups as too closely associated with modernity. Unlike the hobo, the vagabond travels to escape modernity – to go ‘off road’, rather than ‘on the road’, we might say. Yet Vachel Lindsay in particular shows an uneasy solidarity with the transient workers whom he inevitably encounters.

Chapter 3 compares the representation of vulnerable transient youth in the work of Leon Ray Livingston, whose road name was ‘A-No.1’, and the author Jack London, neither of whom made a clear distinction between the hobo and the tramp. The chapter argues that both writers engage, in hesitant ways, with the frequent abuse and exploitation of young boys, known as ‘punks’ or ‘gay-cats’, on the road. A-No.1’s semi-autobiographical writings are more explicit, obsessively reproducing the same narrative in which the author (or his fictional stand-in) saves a punk from the clutches of an older hobo, or ‘jocker’. Livingston also wrote a fictional account of going on a hobo trip with Jack London, having gained the famous author’s permission to pretend that they had been road partners. For London, who was at the very least what today would be called bi-curious, questions of transient sexuality and abuse were particularly fraught. He acknowledges the existence of sexually vulnerable youths in early stories, written before he became a successful author. However, in his well-known work *The Road* (1907) he goes to great lengths to persuade his audience that he was never a gay-cat. The text positions London as a young man well ahead of his time, a claim that many critics have taken at face value. Yet paradoxically the text’s narrator seeks out the approval and protection of older men, including one who seems to expect sexual favours in return.

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Chapter 4 challenges the homosocial representation that is present in most hobo narratives, including those of Livingston and London, by examining accounts of female transiency from the early twentieth century. These accounts are obscure and have been either overlooked or dismissed by previous scholarship. Analysing writings by and about Dolly Kennedy Yancy, Agnes Thecla Fair, Kittie Solomon and Barbara Starke (whose real name was Helen Card), the chapter argues that female transient writing provides a different focus to representations of transient women written by men. When they do write about women, male writers, including A-No.1 and Ben Reitman, obsess about sex: presenting the road as a place of moral danger or, for Reitman, a space of fantastical sexual liberation. Female authors, on the other hand, treat sex as merely one aspect, and often an annoying one, of the transient experience. Yancy, Fair, Solomon and Starke focus on the liberatory aspects of moving beyond domestic confinement that transiency can offer to women in the early twentieth century. Yancy and Solomon discuss sex rarely, although Yancy does concern herself with notions of propriety and the challenges of maintaining a respectable appearance. Fair and Starke both discuss incidents of sexual assault or harassment. For Fair, the sexual threat she faced came not from being on the road but rather during her arrest for political activism. Stake, meanwhile, represents male sexual harassment as a constant background noise to the female transient experience. This harassment is so frequent, in fact, that she underplays it, troublingly laughing it off and presenting it as simply one of the inevitable dangers of travelling while female.

Chapter 5 turns to the figure of the hobo as constructed by Nels Anderson, a former hobo who became a member of the influential 'Chicago School' of sociology. It argues that Anderson's early writing, in particular *The Hobo* (1923) and *The Milk and Honey Route* (1931), projects the hobo as a distinctively American figure, separate from the supposedly European tramp because of his (and the figure is constructed as male) commitment to hard work. While *The Hobo* has been much commented upon by scholars, *The Milk and Honey Route* has been remarkably neglected. Rather than being merely a minor contribution as other scholars have implied or explicitly stated, I argue that *The Milk and Honey Route* is crucial to understanding Anderson's *The Hobo*. Both books contain a distinctive double voice that not only speaks to their author's position as a hobo-turned sociologist, but also expresses scepticism towards the project of sociology itself. In making this latter argument, the chapter pays attention to Anderson's tone and language. Making use of literary close reading, I argue that his early style is distinguished by a voice that mixes different modes, including

the sociological and autobiographical, in conflicting and paradoxical ways. While earlier scholars have noted Anderson's ambiguous representation of hobos, this chapter demonstrates that he was, at least during the 8 years between *The Hobo* and *The Milk and Honey Route*, equally ambiguous about the sociologists who studied them.

Chapter 6 focuses on T-Bone Slim (real name Matti Valentinepoika Huhta), a second-generation Finnish–American hobo who became the IWW's most popular and influential writer. In his regular newspaper columns and in his songs, Slim represented the hobo not only as a worker, as Anderson had, but also as the revolutionary vanguard of a post-capitalist society. His writing parodies mainstream and conservative ideas about work, hobos, and the working class more generally. He challenges the common stereotype of hobos and tramps as being unintelligent through wit and verbal dexterity that assumes intelligence in his transient audience. He uses puns, neologisms and dynamic wordplay to involve his readers in the process of making meaning. In doing so, he creates a mode of literary genius that is communal rather than individualistic, and which in turn allows him to challenge mainstream understandings of literary success. The chapter shows how Slim brings his body and the bodies of his working-class readers into his writing by representing hunger as a defining class experience. He portrays lack of food as a problem for workers not only in terms of quantity but also quality, arguing that adulteration of foodstuffs weakens both the individual body and the hobo proletariat's revolutionary potential.

Chapter 7 focuses on African-American representations of being a hobo and of 'hoboing' as a verb meaning to hop a freight train. Black transients suffered from the same problems of poverty and hunger as whites but they had to contend with the added problems of racial discrimination and state-sanctioned violence. They were also, to varying degrees, barred from hobo-hemian subculture. Black transients were entirely excluded, for example, from the publishing market for book-length hobo memoirs, even more so than the female transients discussed in Chapter 4. In contrast to scholarship that has largely accepted this lack of black written accounts from the early twentieth century, Chapter 7 seeks out representations of transiency in another medium: black vernacular music, particularly, though not exclusively, the blues. While train-hopping is a well-known theme in blues songs, it has been surprisingly overlooked by Hobo Studies. I argue that examining the lyrical content of black vernacular music changes the cultural representation of the hobo because blues is more sexually explicit, contains more examples of female empowerment, and places a stronger