



## **'Such was the law of The Road'<sup>1</sup> and Such were the Rules of The Text: Autobiographical Explorations of Hobo Subculture**

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Perhaps the greatest charm of tramp-life is the absence of monotony. In Hobo Land the face of life is protean – an ever-changing phantasmagoria, where the impossible happens and the unexpected jumps out of the bushes at every turn of the road. The hobo never knows what is going to happen the next moment; hence, he lives only in the present moment.

– Jack London, *The Road* (p. 37).

Jack London's assessment of tramp-life suggests its movement, fluidity, dynamic nature and present-orientated temporal dimension. These sentiments, however, are but a whimsical side step, for the rest of *The Road* centralises the image of a masculine subculture with a complicated set of rules and ranks. Thus, the suggestion of fluidity clashes with the 'laws' that frame hobo experience, as represented by London's text. Indeed, texts defining themselves as hobo autobiography demonstrate a number of structural similarities, suggesting that ideas of the romance or freedom of the road are, in fact, subservient to the repetitive, formulaic, mythic pattern of the subgenre. Yet, it is imperative to observe that while these texts are labelled as autobiography, charges of exaggeration and verbose storytelling could be levied against each of them. Indeed, their incorporation of tall tales dares the reader to question authenticity. However, instead of invalidating the claim to autobiography, this provides a springboard into multileveled issues of performance, creativity, artistry and authorship, succinctly linking with the myriad inter-textual references employed by the authors. Thus, Jack London's *The Road* (1907), Harry Kemp's *Tramping on Life* (1923), Jim Tully's *Beggars of Life: A Hobo Autobiography* (1924), and Jack Black's *You Can't Win: The Autobiography of Jack Black* (1926)<sup>2</sup> are interrogated here in order to explore these issues. It is posited that hobo autobiography is concerned with the 'rules' of the road that go some way to protecting the pseudo-fraternal practices of the subculture and that it employs linguistic strategies in order to develop a sub-categorised list of roles, revealing an interest in language. Most importantly, I argue that hobo writers associate much of hobo life with reading and writing, and, furthermore, are actively engaged in exploring the relation of hobo subculture to performance.

In spite of recent interest in the figure of the hobo from historians,<sup>3</sup> there has been little attempt to engage in literary and linguistic interpretations of hobo writing. This critical blind spot is particularly notable given that several dozen texts self-defined as hobo autobiography have been published. John Allen pinpoints the years between 1890 and 1940 as the key production period of the hobo autobiography.<sup>4</sup> Historians' examinations of the hobo foreground a similar timeframe; thus, it is perhaps unsurprising that a high volume of significant texts were produced during these decades. Richard Wormser states, 'The era of the hobo and the tramp lasted for almost eighty years in American life, between the Civil War and the Second World War.'<sup>5</sup> Tim Cresswell examines the tramp between 1870 and 1940. After this, he suggests, 'their successors were known as migrants or migrant labourers.'<sup>6</sup> Indeed, when considering the period after 1940, Nels Anderson, a hobo turned sociologist, argues that the hobo 'has just about disappeared.'<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Rodger Bruns observes that the hobo is all but 'history and legend.'<sup>8</sup>

Thus, my discussion privileges paradigmatic examples from this key period; texts that are nevertheless part of a wider phenomenon, encouraged by pre-existing public interest.<sup>9</sup> That is not to say, however, that the subgenre is exclusive to this timeframe, and it is possible to extend the discussion to include such examples as Nels Anderson's *The American Hobo: An Autobiography* (1975); Oscar Dexter Brooks' *Legs: An Authentic Story of Life on the Road* (1991); Charles Elmer Fox's *Tales of an American Hobo* (1989); Lucius Shepard's *Two Trains Running* (2004); and Paul Townsend's *Amateur Hobo* (1953), each of which goes some way to indicating the continuing appeal of hobo autobiography to both writer and audience. Indeed, it is arguable that earlier examples of the subgenre foreshadow the autobiographical-ethnography of Ted Conover, Douglas A. Harper, Michael Mathers and James Spradley in *Rolling Nowhere* (1984), *Good Company* (1982), *Riding the Rails* (1973), and *You Owe Yourself a Drunk* (1971), respectively, and the autobiographical-novels of Jack Kerouac: *On The Road* (1957), *The Dharma Bums* (1958) and *Desolation Angels* (1965).<sup>10</sup> Yet, in spite of the subgenre's significance, indicated by its demonstrable appeal to multiple literary genres, texts from the key production/key historical period suffer from scholastic neglect. Moreover, the rare critical investigations of hobo autobiography miss the subtleties of the linguistic strategies employed by the texts. My discussion, therefore, concentrates on examples from the key production period, viewing these under-discussed texts as significant enough to warrant a concentrated focus. As a result, it is useful to illuminate the point at which this article intervenes in existing debates.

Both Kingsley Widmer and Frederick Feied position the hobo as an important countercultural figure, providing a critique of mainstream society. Widmer argues that the most damning assessment of the mainstream arises from the hobo's choice to roam,<sup>11</sup> a position that disbars those compelled to wander from this conception of a rebel-hero hobo. Feied, meanwhile, suggests that hobo authors dramatise contemporary social problems through the hobo's marginality.<sup>12</sup> Unlike Widmer, Feied acknowledges the role that economic downturns play in swelling the ranks of homeless wanderers. Yet, both view the hobo as self-sufficient, daring, masculine, and individual; furthermore, both unquestioningly assume that the hobo's wandering is unfettered by familial responsibilities.<sup>13</sup> These readings of hobo autobiography, however, overemphasise the counter cultural aspects of the hobo lifestyle, supposing them to be akin to freedom.

It is assumptions such as these that John Allen seeks to trouble by arguing that the glamorisation of the hobo in literature by both writer and critic is, at best, questionable and, at worst, capable of negative cultural impact. Allen, therefore, suggests that hobo autobiographies tend to romanticise the hobo lifestyle, underemphasising hardships in favour of unproblematised and optimistic depictions, and thereby doing ‘detrimental’ (*Homelessness*, p. 95) cultural work. However, the glamorisation that Allen views as foregrounded within the texts is more appropriately read as authorial lip service to the pace and excitement of the adventure narrative. Moreover, it is sensible to assume that the autobiographies’ linkage of movement and action, coupled with the focus on a period of time immersed within a mobile subculture, forms a large part of their appeal. Indeed, I argue that rather than glamorise the hobo lifestyle, these texts are at pains to stress the pseudo-fraternal ‘rules of the road’ by which each author is bound. Rules continue to influence the representation of the subculture once the road is left behind, for each text works within the potentially prohibitive conventions of the subgenre. Thus, in this instance, the employment of the concept of cultural work as a framework for analysis and assessment results in an overly didactic critical approach that ignores the textual subtleties of individual autobiographies, such as the level of their adherence to, or manipulation of, the conventions of the subgenre.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Allen’s assessment bypasses reader response and does not acknowledge the ability of an individual to ‘read between the lines’ or pick up cues based on differing levels of interpretation, textual interaction, and subject-specific knowledge.

Each of the critics discussed thus far misses much of the subtlety of hobo autobiography. They overlook the manner in which the representation of hobo subculture in autobiographical form is constricted by the formulaic, mythic patterns of the subgenre. As a result, they miss a key feature of these texts: the importance of language, which is used both to further categorise hobo subculture and to knowingly play with hobo conventions, framing stories within stories.

Highlighting the conventions of the subgenre, texts self-defined as hobo autobiography tick certain boxes. Each refers to disruptive and transient formative years. Tully was an orphan, and the mothers of Kemp and Black died when the boys were four and ten respectively. Kemp’s father initially embraces a transient existence, and leaves the boy in his grandmother’s care. Comparably, Black’s father sent him away to boarding school. Continuing to wander and form temporary relationships, the young author becomes an apprentice to, or is merely influenced by, a hardened hobo (Black, *You Can’t Win*, p. 71; London, *The Road*, p. 89-91; Tully, *Beggars*, p. 12), and later experiences an attachment to a prostitute (Black, p. 57-58; Tully, p. 295-302). During this early period, he discovers that hobo subculture is structured around both roles and rules. Tully writes, ‘hoboes regard their chosen profession seriously. There is much to learn in the game and much more to endure’ (*Beggars*, p. 11). It is not incidental that the texts’ descriptions of hobo subculture are heavily invested with fraternal and military comparisons. Indeed, London refers to the subculture as ‘the fraternity’ (*The Road*, p. 47).<sup>15</sup> Moreover, he learns that the hobo’s mythologised mobility is tempered, not least of all by the policing of railroad detectives. London frames this as a part of ‘the game.’ He states, ‘The hobo defies society, and society’s watch-dogs make a living out of him’ (*The Road*, p. 107). This leads to further conventions based upon circumscribed mobility. The hobo fears the ‘hostile town’ (London, *The Road*, p. 110; Tully, *Beggars*, p. 92). Though it may play a

part, the hostility referred to is not a reference to an unsympathetic local population. Rather, it refers to the enthusiastic ejection or incarceration of hoboes by local law enforcement officials. Thus, these autobiographies feature a court scene (Kemp, *Tramping*, p. 135; London, *The Road*, p. 48-50; Tully, *Beggars*, p. 222), a prison scene (Black, *You Can't Win*, p. 77; Kemp, *Tramping*, p. 139; London, *The Road*, p. 59-69; Tully, *Beggars*, pp. 122-136), and the suggestion that the writer is now a reformed character (Black, *You Can't Win*, p. 376; Kemp, *Tramping*, pp. 337-338; Tully, *Beggars*, p. 335).

These texts normalise the tramp and hobo as male through their lack of interaction with female hoboes. Indeed, though there are autobiographical representations of the female experience of hobo subculture, it cannot be ignored that male hoboes are the numerically dominant gender within the subculture. While, of course, this makes the female hobo an elusive yet interesting subject of study,<sup>16</sup> it is important to note that the lack of interaction with female hoboes in male-authored autobiographies is repeated to the extent that it becomes a further convention of the subgenre.<sup>17</sup> Instead, suggesting a sectioning off of women within spaces marked charity, nurture and commercial sex, these autobiographies feature interactions with female mission or Salvation Army workers, housewives, landladies, mother figures and prostitutes. Thus, female characters take on symbolic, supporting and structural roles.

Kemp's autobiography is cyclically structured with the juxtaposed and contrasting images of women giving and taking away. Beginning with the death of his mother, and ending with the loss of his lover, Kemp's autobiography is encased by female departures, represented as abandonment. Mentioning them goes some way to highlighting Kemp's status as a man without the influence of women. However, as the women are not physically present in the text, they too are abandoned. It is significant that Kemp represents himself as the one left behind. In doing so, he supplies the basis of an alternative life that, he hints, was taken away from him. Kemp juxtaposes this hint with women who inspire creativity. In contrast to taking away, they give. In stating, 'I am writing these things just as I was told them by my grandmother,' he credits her with the genesis of his autobiography (*Tramping*, p. 7). His landlady's comments, made as the autobiography ends, mirror those of Kemp's grandmother. After the departure of his lover, she observes that Kemp's life provides him with 'all that God means you to have at present: *Your first book!*' (*Tramping*, p. 436) (italics in text). Though the suggestion is not fully realised or explored, this structure begins to hint that women play an integral role in Kemp's decisions to, first, become a hobo and, second, represent that experience in print. The latter is a choice that contributes to the propagating of this experience.

Early in his text, Black introduces a female fence known as Salt Chunk Mary. Her pseudo-motherly behaviour is represented as encouraging his petty criminality, and her ultimate rejection of him foreshadows his return to mainstream society. Her symbolic name has connotations of both motherhood and fallen womanhood. On the one hand, she is a member of the criminal underworld. On the other hand, she performs perfunctory caretaking duties. Indeed, her name is derived from her habit of feeding all who visit her salt pork and beans. Though the reader is not privy to these occasions, Black visits her several times. As well as selling on stolen goods, she provides a safe haven for Black. Thus, she becomes an anchor to criminality. Leaving Black to wonder what became of her, she disappears halfway through the text. She is re-encountered as the autobiography

draws to a close. However, she has deliberately attempted to leave her criminal life behind. As a result, she refuses to show any sign of recognition. At this point, Black experiences the strong desire to move beyond an underworld existence. Her reappearance after her unwritten transience and resettlement leads to her being represented as an unsettling apparition who, for Black, illuminates his current situation and forces him to question it.

Within Tully's text, women are a curious addition. The third chapter of *Beggars of Life*, 'Amy, The Beautiful Fat Girl' (*Beggars*, pp. 41-48), discusses an obese circus dancer who performs in a glass box. This episode is, structurally, a side step, comparable to a brief pause made to examine something odd before resuming the journey. Concerning the, arguably, self-imposed physical encasement of a dancer for the purpose of entertainment, this episode begins a dialogue with issues of marginalisation, power and performance. At this stage, and in this guise, these hints are not fully realised. However, Tully later returns to the idea of performance. Indeed, performance is a central part of these texts. Thus, while the lack of interaction with female hoboes moves some way to reinforcing the supposed gender rigidity of hobo subculture, these autobiographies are quick to point out hobo life's inherently performative nature. This is most notable in terms of what Nels Anderson, in his seminal text, *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man*, defines as the 'art' of storytelling (*Hobo*, p. 19; italics added).<sup>18</sup>

Indicating a desire to represent the 'art of telling a story' as a useful skill, Kemp, London and Tully describe the practicalities of applying artistry to begging. Kemp describes the performative aspects of begging. As he stands in front of a shop window in San Francisco, two passers by mistake him for a discharged and starving soldier. Kemp supposes that a soldier would provoke a more positive reaction than a tramp, and quickly takes advantage of the situation. Thus, the case of mistaken identity leads to him assuming the guise of a soldier (*Tramping*, p. 124).

Tully suggests that the successful tramp is something of an amateur sociologist, psychologist and actor:

A clever young tramp, if he has that indefinable something called personality, can always beg money on the street with success. He must have a knowledge of human nature, however, and be able to distinguish one class of citizens from another. (*Beggars*, p. 334)

Indeed, London asserts that:

The successful hobo must be an artist. He must create spontaneously and instantaneously – and not upon a theme selected from the plenitude of his won imagination, but upon the theme he *reads* in the face of the person who opens the door. (*The Road*, p. 15; emphasis added)

In London's reckoning, when begging, the hobo authors a tale that would most appeal to the 'theme he reads in the face of the person who opens the door.' On one level, this refers to the performer's ability to meet audience expectations. More complexly, it suggests a continually negotiated interplay between hobo and householder.<sup>19</sup> First, the hobo is 'read' by the householder, and understood to be a hobo or tramp. Knowing this, the hobo then 'reads' the householder in order to determine a begging strategy. This strategy is intended to produce a reading sympathetic to the hobo. Within such interplay, there is potential for confused readings and misunderstandings on both sides. However,

London does not entertain this thought, beyond hinting that a lack of success in this area reveals that the hobo is not an artist.<sup>20</sup>

These hobo-writers associate much of hobo life with reading and writing. This association is built into the image of the hobo presented to the autobiography's reader. Intriguingly, Tully compares the daring feats of the young hobo to the act of writing. He claims, 'the endurance learned on the road abided with me on many a sixteen-hour day during which I fumbled at a type-writer' (*Beggars*, p. 199). Interestingly, Black ends his physical – but, presumably, not imaginative – travelling by becoming a librarian. Kemp, Tully and Black are voracious readers from boyhood, and, for them, an interdependent relationship of book and imagination fuses under the umbrella of adventure. Tully found that 'The road gave me one jewel beyond price, the leisure to read and dream' (*Beggars*, p. 327). In this respect, the autobiographies concern themselves with the power of the written word.

Kemp seeks to dramatise this power. After sheltering overnight in a warehouse, he and his travelling companion, Bud, are arrested. As they break into the building to obtain shelter, their transgression is represented as justified. Moreover, a transgression against vacant property is unlikely to lose reader sympathy. This is, arguably, an authorial strategy adopted to ensure the autobiography explores a prison environment without alienating the reader. In spite of Bud's derision, Kemp writes to the owner of the warehouse asking him not to press charges. He suggests a spell in prison would ruin two young lives. To Bud's surprise, the charges are dropped. 'This was my triumph over Bud,' writes Kemp, 'the triumph of romance over realism' (*Tramping*, p. 151). Suggesting a style of writing, the written word is referred to as 'romance.' The letter's successful achievement of its aims begins to indicate Kemp's acknowledgement of the performative potential of the written word. In a comparable fashion to his adoption of a soldier's uniform, he has created a persona for profit; in the first instance, this is for money, and, in the second, it is for his freedom.

Kemp soon returns to this idea, and explicitly refers to the performative nature of telling a story. Inviting the reader to question him, he states:

at those times when I was talking to people prodigiously of my trip and what I had seen and been through [...] I wove huge strips of imagination and sheer invention into the woof of every tale or anecdote. (*Tramping*, p. 154)

Kemp then qualifies this acknowledgement of exaggeration. Adding that some of his more ghoulish inventions gave him nightmares, he states, 'I stopped making up adventures, especially the disagreeable ones' (*Tramping*, p. 154). These statements invite a simplistic reading. They admit a fondness for exaggeration, and acknowledge a sensitive temperament. However, Kemp is potentially being playful with the reader. He may be discussing the performative aspects of telling a story in person, but he has written a narrative detailing these same exploits. Referring to the ways in which he has exaggerated the same material suggests that Kemp is hinting that the reader should beware. After issuing this covert warning, Kemp claims he is reformed and shuts down the exploration of authorial exaggeration.

Tully's text explores the ways in which different hobo narratives become intertwined. Though the boxcar is represented as a creative and liminal space within which the stories of the socially marginalised are exchanged, Tully offers the most complete example of intertwining during an episode set in a dining room. In a chapter

entitled 'Bill's Story' (*Beggars*, pp. 101-109), Kemp offers a section of text framed as a story within a story. After they have successfully begged food from a German farm couple, Bill shares his narrative. The tale of his escape from reform school features misguided trust, betrayal and recapture. The couple are extremely distressed by the narrative, and press further food upon the pair. This chapter is open to interpretation on several levels. First, as stated, it is framed as a story within a story. Thus, it is represented as an autobiographical snapshot reproduced within Tully's text. This privileges Tully as author and editor, for without the mediating filter of his writing, Bill's story would remain untold. Tully does not question Bill's narrative, and thus grants it the appearance of truth. Second, however, as well as an account of either real or imaginary events, the word story can be used to signify a deliberate untruth. Thus, it is possible that the chapter's title highlights the questionable nature of the tale without explicitly informing the reader. This reading is supported by the provision of food as the main reward for the successful begging story.

Complementing their interest in the written word, these texts demonstrate concern with subcultural language systems. Black observes, 'The underworld is quick to seize upon strange words' (*You Can't Win*, p. 172). The roles denoted by these 'strange words' reveal linguistic attempts to subcategorise hobo subculture. Many hobo authors use the terms tramp and hobo fluidly, but employ other labels and categorisations to suggest subsections or ranks of hobo subculture. However, while employed to fix the borders of hobo identity, the meaning of the 'strange words' changes over time. Largely, this is common sense; however, it is neatly illustrated by London and Kemp's use of a word that has not crossed over into mainstream usage. London refers to the 'gay-cat,' who, he explains, may also be termed 'short-horns, *chechaquos*, new chums or tenderfeet.' The 'road kid,' he informs the reader, may be young, but is 'never a gay-cat' (*The Road*, p. 94). Kemp describes himself as a 'gaycat' (p. 126). Employing the term differently to London, he defines the 'gaycat' as 'a tramp who is not above occasional work.' He adds that he uses the definition 'as the word meant then,' and states 'now it means a cheap, no-account grafter' (*Tramping*, p. 126).

The word 'punk' is a common term within the decades of hobo subculture covered by these autobiographies.<sup>21</sup> It generally refers to a young male who, whether willing or coerced, is engaged in a homosexual relationship with an older male. London merely suggests that the 'punk' is a young boy not as experienced as the 'road kid.' However, he hints at this homosexual undertone when allowing that if the 'punk' 'travels with a "profesh" [...] [he] is known possessively as "prushun"' (*The Road*, p. 94). London does not openly acknowledge the hint of homosexuality when he defines himself as a 'profesh.' He uses this term to assure the reader that they are learning from an expert. He bombastically defines this group as hyper-masculine 'lords and masters, the aggressive men, the primordial noblemen' (*The Road*, p. 94). His definition over-emphasises dominance and control. Through this rejection of subservience and submission, it does appear that he is aware of the hints of homosexuality within a largely same-sex environment. Indeed, London's most explicit nod to homosexuality occurs when writing about a prison environment, and this too is surrounded by silence and hints of trauma, for London refers to the 'unprintable horrors of the Erie County Pen' (*The Road*, p. 63). Ultimately, this suggests London's view of homosexuality as a complex power play from which he wishes to distance himself.

More commonly, the ‘punk’ is paired with a ‘jocker’ or ‘wolf.’<sup>22</sup> Yet, whatever words are used, these authors reject homosexuality. However, this is a formulaic aspect of the subgenre which, when met, allows the authors to hint at levels of same-sex intimacies. Tully refers derisively to the relationship between ‘punk’ and tramp, stating, ‘The tramp always ruled the “punk” by fear. He practiced the same crude and brutal psychology that the pimp practised over the weak women of the underworld’ (*Beggars*, p. 131). Rather than a clear rejection of homosexuality, this comment reads as a rejection of sexual subjugation. Indeed, Tully describes emotional intimacy with a favourite companion, but does not openly acknowledge a homosexual attachment to him. He states, ‘Starved for affection through all the rough years of my short life – my heart went out to him. He was kind’ (*Beggars*, p. 268). Though Tully rejects the ‘punk’ and tramp relationship as a widespread phenomenon, he does refer to his own affection for a fellow hobo.

Black uses the hint of the ‘punk’ and ‘wolf’ relationship to reinforce a low point in his hobo experiences. Framing it within a period of geographical and racial dislocation, Black suggests that the hinted-at homosexual interlude is an alien experience. This episode is set in Canada and is juxtaposed with a series of adventures in Vancouver’s China Town, during which Black travels with a young Chinese boy. A ‘broke, hungry, wolfish’ Black feels that he has reached a new low when he considers robbing a ‘working man’ (*You Can’t Win*, p. 235). The reference to wolfishness is intended to convey the extent to which Black’s desperation has driven him to predatory behaviours. As discussed, within the linguistic lexicon of hobo subculture, the term ‘wolf’ refers to the older and supposedly predatory male within a homosexual relationship. Thus, though Black does not openly acknowledge homosexual interaction with the boy, the mere mention of this word evokes this meaning. To pick up the hint, the reader requires a certain level of subject-specific knowledge.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Black plays with this term and its meanings safe in the knowledge that readers outside of hobo subculture may not pick up the range of hints. Black continues to detail the ‘code’ of the ‘atmosphere [...] [that he] breathed’ (*You Can’t Win*, p. 241). He refers to a system of rules governing behaviour within the subculture, but the word code is more commonly used to denote a secret language system. This reinforces suggestions of secret levels of meaning.

Black’s representation of his time in Canada darkly plays with both the subgenre’s conventional rejection of homosexuality and the idea of levels of knowledge. Tully demonstrates a comparable playfulness, though more light hearted, when seeming to acknowledge areas of exaggeration in his writing or experimentation with sections of text framed as stories within a story. Indeed, these autobiographies demonstrate a particular interest in the art of telling a story, both via the written word and through oral performance. These interests, however, are used to demonstrate the artistry involved in begging or to explore the process of self-actualisation, while referring to the author’s intellectual credentials. Thus, although keen to demonstrate the levels of artistry to which they are capable, these texts are seemingly at pains to frame it as a useful skill, one from which money can be made, and which can be employed as a survival strategy. Therefore, far from representing the ‘road of life’ these texts are composed of various levels of censure and constraint, suggesting a rigidity of form. However, hobo autobiography is accommodating to rich and varied interactions with language and story, and when certain conventions are met, hobo authors engage in subtle and nuanced manipulations of form,



playing with reader expectations. In this respect, artistry is shown to be the ability to both adhere to and manipulate the rules which govern both the road and the text.

### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup> This quote is taken from Jack London, *The Road* (1907, LaVergne, TN: Aegypan Press, 2009), p. 89. Future references will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>2</sup> Jack Black, *You Can't Win: The Autobiography of Jack Black* (1926, New York: Amok Press, 1988); Harry Kemp, *Tramping on Life* (London: Willaim Heinemann Ltd, 1923); Jim Tully, *Beggars of Life: A Hobo Autobiography* (New York: Garden City Publishing Company, 1924). Future references will be noted parenthetically. London's collection began as a diary, which in turn was published as a series of articles for *Cosmopolitan* magazine in 1907. Though the other autobiographies are published in the 1920s, these texts benefit from a comparative analysis intended to illuminate areas of similarity and development.

<sup>3</sup> The tramp and hobo have been the subject of several recent and substantial historical studies, including: Rodger Bruns, *Knights of the Road: A Hobo History* (New York: Methuen, 1980); Tim Cresswell, *The Tramp in America* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001); Todd Depastino, *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003); Frank Tobias Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003); and Eric H. Monkton, ed., *Walking to Work: Tramps in America, 1790-1935* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it is possible to observe, as Allen does, 'the reading public was certainly interested in tramps.' See John Allen, *Homelessness in American Literature: Romanticism, Realism, and Testimony* (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 7. All future references will be noted parenthetically. For further examples from this period see Edwin Brown, *'Broke': The Man without a Dime* (Chicago: Browne and Howell Co., 1913); John Brown, *I Was a Tramp* (London: Selwyn and Blount, 1934); Josiah Flynt, *My Life* (New York: The Outing Publishing Company, 1908); Leon Ray Livingston, *The Curse of the Tramp: A True Story of Actual Tramp Life Written by Himself* (The A-No.1 Publishing Company, 1912); and John Worby, *The Other Half: The Autobiography of a Tramp* (New York: Arden Book Company, 1937).

<sup>5</sup> Richard Wormser, *Hoboes: Wandering in America, 1870 – 1940* (New York: Walker and Company, 1994), p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Tim Cresswell, *The Tramp in America* (London: Reaktion Books, 2001), p. 10

<sup>7</sup> Nels Anderson, *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man* (1923; repr. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. XIV. Future references will be noted parenthetically.

<sup>8</sup> Rodger A. Bruns, *Knights of the Road: A Hobo History* (New York: Methuen, 1980), p. 3. The decline of hobo subculture is attributed to the increased mechanisation of rural agriculture, which decreased the demand for manual labour, and technological developments in transport methods. Steam engines gave way to trains fuelled by diesel, in which it was more difficult to stowaway, and, from the 1920s, mass produced cars were both popular and increasingly available, though the hobo still had access to the freight train. For further discussion, see Higbie, *Indispensable*, p. 207.

<sup>9</sup> Interesting, London's contemporary celebrity impacted negatively upon initial publication plans for *The Road*, which was viewed as a risky text, meeting resistance from publishers who believed that the collection would damage both London's reputation and the sales of his novels. See, Richard W. Etulain, 'Introduction', in *Jack London on The Road: The Tramp Diary and other Hobo Writings*, ed. by Richard W. Etulain (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1979), p. 21 and Joan London, *Jack London and His Times: An Unconventional Biography* (1939; repr. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), p. 329. This resistance suggests that the publishers were primarily interested in protecting their investment in, and branding of, London and his work. Indeed, *The Road* received a lukewarm, if not indifferent, response from his readers, which, according to Joan London, contributed to an 'estrangement' broken in 1910 by *Burning Daylight* (Jack, p. 329). However, *The Road's* significant legacy is suggested by its healthy re-publication schedule, which is too lengthy to quote fully, but contains a 1914 edition by Mills and Boon, a 1916 edition by The Macmillan Company, a 1926 edition by Greenberg, a 1967 edition by Arco Publications, 1979 and 1987 editions by Utah State University, a 1991 edition by Star Rover House, and a 2009 edition by BiblioBazar. Indeed, in a hyperbolic embrace of the text, Roger Chateauneu argues, '*The Road* will take its

place beside *The Odyssey*.’ Roger Chateaufeun, ‘From the Abyss to the Summit’, in *The Critical Response to Jack London*, ed. and trans. by Susan M. Nuernberg (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1995), p. 218.

<sup>10</sup> Though it raises interesting questions of genre, an examination of ethnography or texts openly signified as novels is outside the scope of this essay, which focuses specifically on autobiography.

<sup>11</sup> Kingsley Widmer, *The Literary Rebel* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1965), p. 93.

<sup>12</sup> Frederick Feied, *No Pie in the Sky: The Hobo as American Cultural Hero in the Works of Jack London, John Dos Passos, and Jack Kerouac* (1964; repr. San Jose: Authors Choice Press, 2000), p. 82.

<sup>13</sup> Clearly, such descriptions of hobo subculture are gendered. Indeed, literary critics have presumed the hobo to be male, and have supported this view with appropriate textual selection. See notes 16 and 17 for discussion of the female hobo.

<sup>14</sup> Allen states that he draws upon Jane Tompkins’ work in order to map the interplay between literature and the society from which it is produced and into which it is received. Tompkins describes ‘cultural work’ as ‘the notion of literary texts as doing work, expressing and shaping the social context that produced them.’ See Jane Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 200. In the main body of the article, it is argued that Allen’s use of the concept is too limiting a way to examine literature, but in no way is this view intended as a critique of Tompkins’ work.

<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, London was briefly a part of the ranks of ‘Kelly’s Army,’ led by Charles T. Kelly. This, along with ‘General’ Jacob Coxey’s ‘Coxey’s Army,’ was one of the better-known industrial armies of 1894. These groups, comprised of veteran, unemployed and socially disenfranchised males, sought to march on Washington in order to gain government intervention in their plight. Importantly, the mobility of these groups was greatly aided by America’s expanding rail network, which by 1880 spanned 93,000 miles (Depastino, *Citizen*, p. 8). Thus, London’s involvement in this movement suggests a predisposition to militarise his period as a hobo. For a discussion of London’s experiences with Kelly’s Army see Jack London, ‘Two Thousand Stiffs’, *The Road*, pp. 97-106; Robert Barltrop, ‘On The Road’, *Jack London: The Man, The Writer, The Rebel* (London: Pluto Press, 1976), pp. 37-48; Richard O’Connor, ‘Man Among Men’, *Jack London: A Bibliography* (London: Victor Gollancz, Ltd), pp. 42-66; Bruns, *Knights*, p.59, 78.

<sup>16</sup> The female hobo is notably absent from the majority of scholastic considerations of the hobo, yet the following suggest growing interest. Cresswell, *Tramp*, pp. 175-192; J. R. Roberts, ‘Lesbian Hoboes: Their Lives and Times’, *Dyke* (1975-1976), pp. 37-50; Lynn Weiner, ‘Sisters of the Road: Women Transients and Tramps’, ed. Eric H. Monkkonen, *Walking to Work*, pp. 171-188.

<sup>17</sup> For examples of female hobo autobiography, see Ethel Lynn, *The Adventures of a Woman Hobo* (New York: George H. Doran company, 1917) and Barbara Starke, *Born in Captivity: The Story of a Girl’s Escape* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1931). These texts are written from the position of ‘deviation from the male hobo norm’ and, as such, are notably interested in presenting themselves to the reader as both exceptional women and non-deviant examples of the female hobo. The most well-known, yet most contentious, example of female hobo ‘autobiography’ is Ben Reitman’s *Sister of the Road: The Autobiography of Box-Car Bertha, as told to Dr Ben L. Reitman* (New York: Sheridan House, 1937). Though the text is authored by Reitman, it occupies a seminal place in the lexicon of female hobo representations. All of these texts complicate and reframe many of the conventions and interests of hobo autobiography. However, this article’s main purpose is to interrogate the dominant conventions of the subgenre, and so it does not seek to further complicate the discussion through an examination of female hobo autobiography.

<sup>18</sup> For examples of how the idea of hobo storytelling is romanticised and re-packaged for a non-hobo audience see Oats, ed., *Around the Jungle Fire I: A Collection of Original Hobo Poetry* (Deerfield, IL: The Hobo Press, 1994); Oats, ed., *Around the Jungle Fire II: A Second Collection of Original Hobo Poetry* (Deerfield, IL: The Hobo Press, 1997) and Oats, ed., *Around the Jungle Fire III: True Accounts of Life on the Rails* (Deerfield, IL: The Hobo Press, 2000).

<sup>19</sup> Rather than continually repeat London’s reference to ‘the person who opens the door,’ the term householder is used. It is recognised that ‘the person who opens the door’ could be any one of a selection of individuals including housewives, husbands, children and domestic employees and, thus, may or may not own or rent the property.

<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the efficacy of this style and its applicability to hobo subculture has been noted by later writers; in particular, Jack Kerouac whose hobo novel, *On The Road*, addresses the connection between survival and spontaneous storytelling in the character of Dean Moriarty, famously based on Neal Cassady. Indeed, Kerouac referred to Cassady's 'free-narrative letters' as the inspiration for the 'spontaneous get-with-it' style used to transform hobo orality into text; quoted in Barry Gifford and Lawrence Lee, *Jack's Book: An Oral Biography of Jack Kerouac* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978), p. 87. Isaac Gewirtz, however, argues that Kerouac was only partially successful, indicating the difficulty of transcribing an oral exchange into a literary medium. Isaac Gewirtz, *Beatific Soul: Jack Kerouac On The Road* (New York: The New York Public Library, 2007), p. 171.

This act of transformation is integral to the texts discussed here; however, the emphasis shifts slightly, for these texts are interested in demonstrating the usefulness of storytelling and thus sacrifice a degree of spontaneity in order to communicate retrospectively the levels of skill involved in spinning a successful hobo yarn.

<sup>21</sup> This word is most commonly used in contemporary Western society to refer to a style of, for example, music, dress, filmmaking or magazine production that is anarchic or anti-establishment in its aims, presentation or production methods. Prior to this, in North America, the term has also been used to describe 'upstart' adolescents or young adults. Though such a discussion is speculative, it is interesting to consider the cultural tracing of this word from its hobo subcultural origins.

<sup>22</sup> For example, Thomas Minehan refers to 'wolves using wiles and force to gain the body of a boy.' Kenneth Allsop describes the 'seasoned jockey or wolf' as 'the homosexual hobo.' See Thomas Minehan, *Boy and Girl Tramps of America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1934), p. 143, and Kenneth Allsop, *Hard Travellin': The Story of the Migrant Worker* (1967, London: Pimlico, 1993), p. 213.

<sup>23</sup> Indeed, while language systems are fluid and change in meaning or trickle into mainstream society, they still suggest that linguistic knowledge is required in order to become fully conversant with the subculture, and thus they reveal another level of exclusion.

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