

Can a Hobo Share a Box-Car? Jack London, the Industrial Army, and the Politics of (In)visibility

John Lennon

Mostly known for his adventure stories such as *The Call of the Wild*, *White Fang*, and *The Sea-Wolf*, as well as his heavily anthologized short story, “To Build a Fire,” Jack London was a prolific writer whose published books (50) exceeded the number of years that he lived (40). Experimenting with numerous literary forms ranging from proletarian fiction to one-act plays, London’s work addressed a wide-range of subjects, and he never shyed away from placing himself or his own adventures at the center of his narratives. His willingness to tell and retell his personal struggles with, and conquest over, cultural and economic poverty and his penchant for writing stories of man-versus-nature in strong, non-nonsense prose endeared him to the reading public at the turn of the twentieth century. From his first success at age seventeen when the *San Francisco Call* published “Story of a Typhoon off the Coast of Japan” in 1893 to playing a role in a film adaptation of *The Sea-Wolf* in 1913, London was a celebrity superstar who became the first literary millionaire in the United States.¹ A savvy public-relations entrepreneur, he closely studied the literary market, learned what techniques and forms were selling, and, undeterred by rejection letters, flooded the market with his writings. London’s prose and personality were a perfect fit for the last decade of the nineteenth century, when weekly and monthly newspaper and magazine circulations were at never-before-seen highs. Specifically, his adventure stories, filled with hard-living men who both weather and are bested by forces of nature outside of their control, found a substantial readership among many working-class people who saw parallels in their own struggles to survive in a labor market that was significantly and quickly changing.² As an autodidact

6 John Lennon

who had an immense larger-than-life personality (he was, for example, one of the first literary celebrities hired to endorse products ranging from fruit juice to designer suits), London, the person, became larger than London, the author, resulting in more than double the number of biographies being written on the man than book-length examinations of his texts.³

Biographies of London have both created and helped sustain myths that have always shadowed his life and texts—myths concerning his physical adventures, his tempestuous love life, his heavy drinking, and his racist views.⁴ As Jeanne Campbell Reesman has noted, there is a need for a less sensational look at London's biography and a more definitive treatment of the author and his politics.⁵ This article will discuss one of these intersections of his life and ideologies that has been mostly overlooked by scholars: the period from April to September, 1894, when Jack London was a hobo. During these turbulent six months, London hopped freightcars, spent time sightseeing on both U.S. coasts, joined Kelley's Industrial Army, watched a public whipping of a small boy, befriended socialists and anarchists, traveled illegally across state and national lines, worked on a steamer, begged for food, committed petty thievery, and was arrested and sentenced to thirty days for vagrancy in the Erie, Pennsylvania, County Penitentiary.⁶ As he did with many of his other traveling experiences, he recycled this journey in various periodicals, eventually publishing nine essays in *Cosmopolitan Magazine* that were later collected in *The Road* (1907).

But what effect did his hobo travels have on his understanding of the world? London himself indicated that these six months were a turning point in his life, a juncture that forced him to rethink his lifestyle and turn toward socialism. In two of his most famous essays about why he embraced socialism, London specifically mentioned these hobo experiences. In his essay "How I Became a Socialist" (1903), London described the road as a place of degradation, where honest, strong men were powerless against the economic forces designed to keep them in a continual state of poverty and subservience. In "What Life Means to Me" (1905), London again stated that the road gave him a "terrible scare" and his experiences convinced him that he needed to get off the road, head back to school and become "a vender of brains" instead of a directionless wanderer. Scholars have taken London at his word and have used these articles and *The Road* to prove that his time as a hobo was clearly the catalyst that changed him from an avowed individualist to a strong believer in socialism.⁷

However, Richard Etulain, who collected London's hobo travels and stories in *Jack London on the Road: The Tramp Diary and Other Hobo Writings*, questions the impact that these experiences had on his overall psyche, pointing out that neither *The Road*, nor London's travel diary, contains much criticism of the social and economic problems of the day.⁸ Instead, they are primarily boastful and lively essays about life on the road as a young, single, white male. There seems, therefore, to be inconsistencies between London's romanticized and witty account of his hobo experiences in *The Road*, his stark analysis of these journeys in his articles about socialism, and most critics' credulous acceptance

of the author's analysis of his travels. Some of these disconnects can be erased, however, if instead of looking exclusively at what London *wrote*, we contextualize and analyze what he *did*: in the depths of the depression of the late nineteenth century when thousands of workers found themselves suddenly unemployed, Jack London quit his job in a jute mill and spent six months living voluntarily as a hobo. By focusing on London's time riding the iron road, we can better understand how his individualistic politics were both sustained and fostered by his intimate and illegal intertwining with the greatest symbol of nineteenth century capitalist expansion and modernization: the railroad.

One of the reasons that London hopped trains is that he felt that his vagabond life would be full of adventures and experiences, offering him a respite from the mundane world of the factories and its poverty-level wages. In an oft-told story of why he headed for the road, London recounts being tricked and abused by his boss:

I was willing to work, and [my employer] was more than willing that I should work. I thought I was learning a trade. In reality, I had displaced two men. I thought he was making an electrician out of me; as a matter of fact, he was making fifty dollars per month out of me. The two men I had displaced had received forty dollars each per month; I was doing the work of both for thirty dollars per month.⁹

Realizing his exploitation, London quit his job. Much like the character Johnny in his short story "The Apostate" (1906), who, after realizing he had been cruelly used by his employers, quits his job and, smiling, crawls into a boxcar, London, after he leaves his job, also became a hobo.¹⁰ By leaving the factory, he was not only separating himself from the bosses who were cruelly exploiting his labor, but he was also distancing himself from his fellow workers who were likewise being exploited. His sense of superiority to these workers who toiled in the same types of jobs that he just left, while he "freely" traveled the country in 1894, is evident throughout *The Road* but can best be summarized in his romanticized descriptions of his hobo lifestyle as he enjoyed a free meal from two older women who had worked their whole lives at the same job: "Into the sweet scents and narrow confines of their uneventful existence I brought the large airs of the world, freighted with the lusty smells of sweat and strife, and with the tangs and odors of strange lands and soils."¹¹ By voluntarily giving up his job in order to travel, London was consequently no longer defining himself in terms of a "worker" living a feminized "uneventful existence" but rather he saw himself as a thoroughly masculine adventurer whose identity was centered upon his ability to move. Jobs, he felt, could be had when needed or desperate, but it was specifically his mobility and not the labor that he produced which undergirded his identity at this moment in his life. While London in his later years championed the (white, male) proletariat in his numerous books, plays and

articles, in 1894, he is consciously and excitedly separating himself from the other members of the industrial working class and celebrating the train-hopping lifestyle.

But what happens when a person whose identity is based on perpetual movement meets a politicized group traveling in order to *stop* moving? Exploring the contact zone of the boxcar where the individualistic hobo, as championed by London, meets Charles T. Kelley's Industrial Army as they marched toward Washington to demand jobs and security from the federal government allows us to not only flesh out the author's complex political ideologies, it is also a significant resource to discover how an individualist interacts within a collective working-class political movement.

General Kelley's army of unemployed men was a regimented, working-class political organization that slowly traveled from Oakland, California to Washington, D.C. to protest the federal government's indifference to the unemployed while simultaneously demanding jobs to be created for them. By 1894, there was no shortage of people looking for work.¹² As the industrial armies began their marches, more than 150 railroad companies and 30 steel companies had gone bankrupt.¹³ Five hundred banks and 16,000 businesses had failed.¹⁴ The country was in a major depression and the armies were one of many outbursts of public contempt towards the government. Kelley's army was an offshoot of Jacob Coxey's "Commonweal of Christ," which was the first regiment to walk to Washington to petition Congress for \$500 million for a public works program that would give the unemployed jobs building roads. They believed that by being this "petition in boots," their visibility would force the government to act.¹⁵ But while Coxey left his Ohio mansion for the (relatively) short trip to Washington, many other industrial armies formed around the country, making their own pilgrimages to the country's capital. Unlike Coxey's Army's overall religious tone, the armies from the west were much more secularly militant.¹⁶ The largest of these armies, over twelve times greater than Coxey's, was headed by General Kelley.

Kelley believed that if Congress would give jobs to men for three years building irrigation ditches in the west, "the people would be on their feet once more. . . This is the richest country in the world and there is no reason why a single individual should beg for bread."¹⁷ The central goal of the plan was to give men jobs so that they could create their own homes; the arid lands irrigated, these unemployed men would then settle this new fertile land and build houses. While this petition was seen by some as dangerous because it allowed "dependence on the federal government" and foreshadowed a modern welfare state, the plan actually had its roots in a Jacksonian belief in the yeoman farmer.¹⁸

But while the trek was hailed as a "March on Washington," most of the armies of the west commandeered trains to take them to the nation's capitol. The distance was too great for the armies to walk and, consequently, over fifty trains were stolen by the various regiments.¹⁹ It seems logical, then, that the armies, which were stealing (or, as they described it, "liberating") whole trains, and hobos,

which were stealing individual spots within the trains, would make good riding partners. This shared ride, however, although not completely antagonistic, was a bumpy one and an examination of this time allows us to more closely investigate one subsection of the emerging hobo labor class that became both a critical part of early twentieth-century revolutionary working-class politics as well as its foil.²⁰ To understand this contentious contact zone between the individualistic hobo and collective army, I will first analyze the lifestyle of the hobo that London embodied.

The Hobo

Ben Reitman, agitator, scholar, anarchist, hobo, and confidant of Emma Goldman, echoed many critics, scholars and other hobos when he categorized the homeless men of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries into three groups: “The hobos who work and wander, the tramps who dream and wander, the bums who drink and wander.”²¹ While wandering was connected to all three, according to this accepted definition, the main issue that separated the hobo from the rest of the homeless hierarchy was his willingness to work.²² Unlike the “tramp” and the “bum” who do not work, the hobo was someone who prided himself on being able to find work wherever he went. Placing himself above others in the hierarchy of the homeless, the hobo was a “migratory worker” who illegally hopped trains to get from job to job.

These categories, of course, are too rigid. Scratch the surface of any hobo memoir and the terms are imprecise. Many “hobos” spent lean times begging for food, many “tramps” split lumber for their dinner, and all “bums” needed to know how to travel among the city streets to avoid harassment from, for example, angry teenagers with a gasoline can and a match.²³ Trying to classify the homeless was not an exact science and in the 1890s, as many more men found themselves hitting the road, this sorting of hobo/nonhobo became even more difficult. Consequently, the mainstream press painted the homeless with a wide brush, noting little distinction between the different categories. This influx of people traveling by train led many from within the subculture to declare the death of the “authentic” hobo almost as soon as the term became widespread during the economic depressions of the last decade of the nineteenth century.²⁴

Whether or not they were deemed “authentic” hobos, many men (and women) were forced from their homes onto the road. If they could not find a job in a particular town, then they moved to a place that did have a job available—even if it was only temporary. Boxcars became crowded as large numbers of the unemployed hopped trains when a rumor of jobs gave them hope for a few days of work, and therefore, many workers, who had deep ties to communities and geographic locations, found themselves rootless. Frank Tobias Higbie, author of *Indispensable Outcasts*, a look at hobo labor in the Midwest between 1880 and 1930, writes that, for many, “seasonal work was a way of life” and therefore “very few people held year-round employment,” resulting in a somewhat fluid

movement of workers traveling between the city and the country.²⁵ While this movement was extremely hard and unstable, it also allowed many workers to “embody different social positions at different times in their lives: the bachelor homesteader, the husband and father, or the freewheeling hobo.”²⁶

Reactions to this hobo lifestyle were varied as some saw it as a dangerous, unwelcome component of economic downturns and desperately wished to get off the road.²⁷ Others, however, reveled in their mobility and saw it as a freedom from the exploitative labor found in the factories. Some hobos, therefore, traveled to find work; others, like London, worked in order to keep traveling. This difference is important to note; the ability to move allowed some men to view work in alternative and resistive ways. Jobs could be seen as continually temporary due to an intense desire on their parts to escape the perils of the industrial labor market. In *Down and Out, on the Road*, an examination of homelessness in the United States, Kenneth L. Kusmer specifically reads these workers’ mobility in the 1890s as a possible site of resistance to industrialization, resulting in both a real and imagined agency as they traveled around the country taking and leaving jobs. They were men who “declined to adapt quietly to the demands of the new factory production system, or who viewed life on the road as preferable to starvation wages in dead-end jobs. . . . A man who rebelled against being ‘cooped up in a factory’ found intervals of vagabondage made work more acceptable.”²⁸

These types of hobos did not define themselves in relation to a job but rather to the mode of transportation that allowed them to stay in motion. Their ability to illegally hop trains and to move whenever they needed, or, more importantly, wanted to, gave them an agency that they did not feel when they were connected to factory life.²⁹ And while the constant and hazardous traveling might not be easy, it did offer an alternative to the exploitation many found in their jobs. “Life on the road was arduous and, at times, dangerous,” Kusmer notes. “Nevertheless, it represented a respite from—and often a reaction against—many of the trends that were transforming the American social and economic system in the decades after reconstruction: the increasing power of technology, the quest for economic efficiency and the growth of organizations and bureaucratic thinking.”³⁰ These particular hobos were finding agency not in their ability to find jobs, but rather in their train-hopping skills.

One by-product of this agency, however, was competition. Not only was this type of hobo in competition with the police and railroad employees which were attempting to keep him off the train, he also competed with all other hobos and unemployed transient men for a space in the boxcar. If a hobo defined himself not in terms of his labor but rather in his ability to “catch out,” then his success would not be in terms of getting a job at the end of his travels but rather in riding out on the next train. Jack London was this type of hobo when he found himself riding in the same train car with Kelley’s Army in 1894 and, consequently, his competitiveness put him at odds with the politics of the Industrial Army. In fact, it was the way that he defined himself as a hobo that made him a foil to the ideological underpinnings of Kelley and his men’s cause. The best example of

London's nascent individualistic, competitive hobo identity can be found in his initial train-hopping experience when he was a young man of sixteen.

Jack London's Competitive Hobo Beginnings

Increasingly disillusioned with factory work and feeling that his life as the hard drinking "Prince of the Oyster Pirates" was not sufficiently rewarding or exciting, London in 1892 found himself fleeing from the law and hiding out along the Sacramento waterfront, where he met some "road kids" who were swimming near a railroad bridge.³¹ Never having met anyone like them before, he was instantly intrigued. The first thing that attracted London was the way that they talked: "It was a new vernacular. They were road-kids, and with every word they uttered the lure of The Road laid hold of me more imperiously."³² The aspiring writer found their language compelling, but he was mainly attracted by the allure of the adventures of the iron road about which these young hobos talked—adventures "that made [his] oyster-piracy look like thirty cents."³³ His awe, however, did not last long, and, in fact, after first being enamored with their language, he soon dismissed them, writing, "I was just as strong as any of them, just as quick, just as nervy, and my brain was just as good."³⁴

While no one could accuse London of being modest, his statement suggests that he saw the road as a means of competition with the "road kids;" instead of just desiring to join them for a strictly communal adventure, he felt he needed to prove that he was better than they were. He set himself up for a test. With the moniker "Sailor Kid," he and another novice, "French Kid," attempted to hop a train that was going "over the hill" (the Sierra Nevada mountain range)—an experience that would initiate them into this subculture and earn them recognition as "road kids." It was a tough first journey in which London not only had to pass undetected by the railroad men but also by forty or so "road kids" who, in an initiation rite, tried to throw him and his companion off the train.³⁵ But while "all" of the other experienced and inexperienced hobos had been thrown off and "French Kid" had slipped, losing both legs under the wheels of the powerful locomotive, London, "alone, had made the train out."³⁶

This was London's initiation to the road: a novice who had never hopped a boxcar before was not only able to survive his first foray into riding the rails but also succeeded where all the experienced hobos had failed.³⁷ He was a successful, self-professed "natural," whose skill and nerve in his very first trip allowed him to rise rapidly in the hobo hierarchy, evolving from a "road-kid" to a "blowed-in-the-glass profresh" without ever having to be a "gaycat" or a "prushan" (inexperienced travelers who were often the "possession" or "punk" of the profresh).³⁸

Avoiding Law = Creating Law

What is significant about the bravado with which London described his hobo travels is that unlike some who saw transitory life as a defeat, London's handling

of the iron road as well as or better than anyone else would be a victory. He wanted to be part of the “profresh” class who were, as he wrote without any sense of irony (and, at the same time, completely misrepresenting the philosopher), “the lords and masters, the aggressive men, the primordial noblemen, the *blond beasts* so beloved by Nietzsche.”³⁹ While in the factory, London was earning \$1.40 for a ten-hour day with seemingly no way to advance in the company.⁴⁰ His experience with the road kids, however, showed him that he could, through his own efforts, rise quickly in the world of the hobo.

While London realized that he had a lot to learn from the road kids in terms of begging and “the strong arm” (a technique for robbing unsuspecting victims) so that he could eat on a daily basis,⁴¹ he knew, from the very first trip, that he was one of the special “knights of the road” because he placed himself in a situation where he would either survive or perish—and he had succeeded where the others had failed. While those who did not have London’s skills or bravery might, literally, fall to the side of the road, London competed and quickly rose to the top of this subculture. He was a success, characterizing himself as the hero of a bastardized American Dream story—the “lord and master” of all other illegal train riders who could not reach his stature, and, when he had won and was standing above all others, he simply left the road and his friends and headed back for the coast. This first trip accentuated his individualistic ideological framework that he would continue to cultivate two years later during his travels with Kelley’s army.

Without extensively discussing how London’s misreading of Nietzsche undergirded his competitive nature, it is important to note that he conflated Nietzschean philosophy with Social Darwinism. This misreading enabled him to believe that his quest to rule over this underworld was a masculine ideal of which both Nietzsche and Darwin would approve. Eight years after he rode with the Industrial Army, London wrote “Rods and Gunnels” (1902), in which he clearly defines and adamantly defends the “profresh” title, lending insight into why this accolade was so important to him:

They [skilled hobos] are . . . the blond beasts of Nietzsche, lustfully roving and conquering through sheer superiority and strength. Unwritten is the law they impose. They are the Law, the Law incarnate. And the underworld looks up and obeys. They are not easy of access. They are conscious of their own nobility and treat only with equals.⁴²

London thought of himself as belonging to the class of nobility that was the Law—a man who had dominion over all in the underworld. There was a strict divide for London in the hobo underworld, and, as “the Law,” he did not want to unite this subculture—he wanted to stratify and hierarchize it. The “profresh” were “conquerors” and their “superiority” and “strength” allowed them to decide their own rules. They constituted a hyper-masculine ideal, and, for London, they

established the law that all others of the underworld must obey if they wanted to attain his stature. There was no class solidarity in the boxcar for London; the unemployed men who were in his boxcar looking for work were competitors and as a “lord” he strove to impose his own laws upon them. There was, however, a practical limit to the superiority of the hobo. Although London received pleasure from being a “profresh” and becoming the law of the underworld, he still had to remain invisible from the world of the police and their laws in order to retain his top hobo position.

The presence of the law is prominent throughout London’s massive *oeuvre*. In what is probably London’s most famous novel, *The Call of The Wild*, Buck, the fearless St. Bernard/Scotch Shepherd dog ruled the kind Judge Miller’s house in sunny California but then quickly learned in the cold climate of the Klondike that “a man with a club was a lawgiver, a master to be obeyed.”⁴³ Those who had the power to inflict their law on others were to be strictly observed; Buck understood the law after three brutal swings of the Man-With-The-Red-Sweater’s stick. The law for London was something that must be learned, not as an abstract concept but rather felt and experienced in the blood and skin. Buck felt the sting of the club on his back, side, and nose and learned to respect the law; London, who witnessed an actual whipping while he was hoboing across the country, knew that the body always broke under the law, and, cognizant of this, he was able for the most part to avoid spilling his own blood: when he saw that the law was bigger than he, he simply headed for the next train and disappeared.⁴⁴

To London, hopping a train was neither merely an escape, nor a means to get to another locale. As the example of his first train-hopping experience shows, London defined himself, and consequently all others who could not reach the stature of the “profresh,” in the very act of riding the rails. This understanding of the hobo lifestyle, however, made him a disagreeable riding partner with Kelly who was trying to unite out-of-work men into one visible display of working-class solidarity. But although London might empathize with Kelly and his men, he was not interested in the politics of the march. Rather, he was committed to his own brand of boxcar politics.

London’s Box-car Politics

London, when “catching out” and riding trains, sought to create a space for himself on the train by staying out of sight and hiding in order to be able to ride. If he was seen and caught, he would not only miss the train but, depending on the moods of the train crew and the police, might find himself in places (jail, for example) that would limit his future movements. Using tactics that relied on presented opportunities (for example, a moving train with an open boxcar and no “bulls” [police] or train employees looking), London needed to stay out of sight and remain hidden to be successful and safe.

Train riders knew that if they were seen, there was a possibility of sanctions. Even though the transient’s labor was sometimes needed and townspeople

actively searched for these men at harvest times, when men were plentiful and work scarce, the hobo was seen as, at best, a nuisance and, at worst, a threat to the community. Be it a constable ready to lock up the hobo on vagrancy charges or a vigilante crowd “welcoming” him with bats and guns, hobos found it very difficult to make their way through many towns and cities during the hard times of the 1890s.⁴⁵

As Jack London’s writings, along with many hobo autobiographies, indicate, there was a real sense of pride resulting from outwitting and tricking the bulls, whose job was specifically to ensure that the ‘bo stayed off the train.⁴⁶ Although London put his physical self in much danger when “catching out,” his movements were no longer subject to the same regulations as those who were “riding the cushions.” Unlike these passengers who had to accept the rules of the railroad company when they bought their tickets, London did not have an assigned seat nor had he exchanged money for the ride; there was no knowledge that he was even there on the train. “Officially,” then, he did not exist. And while the railroad engineers might have suspected that he was there (or, in many cases, turned a blind eye that they may have seen him), London was not counted. As a homeless wanderer participating in an illegal activity, he did not exist in the ordered world of the train, and therefore he was not recognized.⁴⁷ London had, in a sense, rendered himself invisible.

Ted Grossardt, a social geographer, writes in his article “Harvest(ing) the Hoboes,” “when the activities of a mobile group of people are no longer observable and thus cannot be fully known, those people become potentially omnipresent to the fixed observer. The observer suddenly faces the possibility of being the observed.”⁴⁸ This lack of control was, obviously, a disconcerting feeling for farmers dependent on the labor force of men who appeared, suddenly, in the middle of the night and many laws were passed to make the movements of the hobo more visible.⁴⁹ London, however, sneaking alone onto a train in the middle of the night, resisted the authorities’ gaze (and swinging batons) by stepping outside of “official” history. While the passenger was always under the gaze of established authority as he sat within the place of the railroad car, London, in an act of resistance, existed in the space of noise and movement as the train traveled along the iron road. This resistance used invisibility as its tool. If London was able to become invisible and escape those who wished to stop him from riding, he was successful. If he were visible, he failed. His resistance was in the individualized spaces that he created when hopping a train. Like the other members of Kelley’s Army, London was an unemployed worker, but unlike the army faithful, London could define himself as a “profresh” whose success was determined not by the job he received *after* the journey, but, rather, by the journey itself.

In his 1894 travels London was an individual whose strong sense of self centered upon his ability to disappear and move. But how, then, did London deal with the apparent inconsistency of being a “primordial noble man” and yet, at the same time, also be forced to hide and remain invisible? How did he reconcile

his lofty position as a hobo with the sneaking around the underbelly of a train?⁵⁰ The answer lies in his particular understanding of being a “profresh.” Being a part of this elite group of hobos—a group based on individual masculine ideals of fearlessness, strength, and skill—allowed London to place himself as both the dispenser and the very embodiment of the law, thus transcending any feelings of inferiority.⁵¹ He was playing by his own set of rules: that he was invisible to those who were searching for him was, in fact, *the very thing* that made him part of the nobility of the underworld. He was a success, a “lord and master,” only if he perfected his ability to disappear. Those “gay-cats” and inexperienced rail riders that London so despised would eventually be seen and caught by the bulls, but the “profresh” would remain undetected and ride wherever they wished. Instead of reading his invisibility and hiding as a mark of weakness, London wore them as badges of honor.

The professional train-rider, as constructed by London, dictated the rules of the game and therefore felt he had agency as he attempted to use his invisibility to hop a train without being thrown off by bulls or by the train crew. For London, it was a competition the hobo, *as he personified him*, could always win. As he writes confidently in *The Road*:

Barring accidents, a good hobo, with youth and agility, can hold a train down despite all the efforts of the train-crew to “ditch” him—given of course night-time as the essential condition. When such a hobo under such conditions makes up his mind that he is going to hold her down, either he does hold her down, or chance trips him up. There is no legitimate way, short of murder, where-by the train crew can ditch him.⁵²

So long as it was dark and chance did not look unfavorably on the noble train hopper, the hobo would always be able to ride. This success, however, did not come without consequences and it meant isolation. There could, after all, be only one “lord” of a particular train.

The Isolation of the Hobo

In his chapter, “Holding Her Down” from *The Road* which details one of his attempts to “catch out,” London makes clear the competition that was involved between the individual ‘bo and the rest of the “world” of the train—including bulls, train crew, and, most tellingly, other hobos. Much like his initial ride when he met the “road kids,” London writes that his attempt to ride a train guarded by “two brakemen, a conductor, a fireman, and an engineer” was an individual contest, lacking all feelings of cooperation with the other twenty ‘bos who were also trying to ride out.⁵³ When the train started moving, all headed for it. London, the arch-individualist who was in direct competition with the other ‘bos for a spot on the train, wanted to be the “tramp-royal” who alone succeeded.

The train crew was ready, however, and with clubs in their hands reminiscent of The-Man-With-The-Red-Sweater from *Call of the Wild*, they quickly knocked off five of the least experienced. “The weeding out process had begun nobly, and it continued station by station. Now we were fourteen, now twelve, now eleven, now nine, now eight.”⁵⁴ As a “profresh,” London hoped that his fellow riders would be knocked off. And indeed, through daring and skillful moves, he was able to outlast all other ‘bos and outwit the train crew who, although they knew that he was somewhere on their train, could not see him and were unable to get their hands on him.

In a moment of realization, London, tired and out of breath, suddenly understood the enormity of what he had done, writing, “As I wait in the darkness, I am conscious of a big thrill of pride. The overland has stopped twice for me—poor me, a poor hobo on the bum. I alone have twice stopped the overland with its many passengers and coaches, its government mail, and its two thousand steam horses straining in the engine. And I weigh only one hundred and sixty pounds and I haven’t a five-cent piece in my pocket!”⁵⁵ London, the individualist (“I alone”), was able to disrupt the ordered and regimented world of the train. In this David and Goliath scenario, the boy won—“It was five to one, including the engineer and the fireman and the majesty of the law and the might of the great corporation are behind them, and I am beating them out.”⁵⁶ Although it was not a knock-out shot, London earned the reluctant respect of the crew who, after a consultation among themselves, knew that they were beaten and yelled out into the dark, “Well, I guess you can ride, Bo. There’s no use trying to keep you off.”⁵⁷

The Tension in the Boxcar

For London, this was proof that the professional hobo could win. The law, however, was actually never fully defeated; the train crew still *allowed* London to ride. There was a ceiling to the success of the ‘bo, and London, through his skill and bravery, was hitting his head against it. If they had wanted, the train crew could have stopped the train indefinitely and called in additional authorities to capture the young hobo. In other words, London’s success as a hobo was fleeting, one that he had to relinquish as soon as he had won it. The train moved again and people and merchandise, even though slightly delayed, made it to their stations; the hobo’s resistance forced only a mild inconvenience. Because London had created a new set of rules for himself by remaining invisible, he had become the law in the underworld and his actions on this train proved that he was part of the elite of illegal train hoppers. For the hobos who were left on the side of the road, and for the train crew who could not get their hands on him, London was recognized as a premier hobo who, for a night at least, had bested all others. And for young Jack London, breathing deeply in the dark and swelling with pride, that was enough.

For many of the 1500 unemployed laborers who joined Kelley’s Army, however, a job was preferable to an adventure. This hard journey across hundreds of miles was not seen as an enjoyable expedition—for many their lives as

workingmen depended on it. London's celebration of the solitary moments in the dark was not what the army was searching for, and these unemployed men had no interest in creating new invisible subcultural systems or laws. Joining Kelley's Army, they were seeking to reestablish many of their communal working-class bonds that had disappeared when they could no longer find jobs in their home towns or cities and eschewed individualistic, self-appointed titles as "profresh" or "comet." Far from desiring to disappear, these dispossessed workers wanted to make themselves seen in order to force the Washington politicians to acknowledge their needs as workers. It was visibility that these men sought and they refused to sneak or hide on their way to the nation's capitol. United in their message of solidarity, there would be no space for individualized addendums.

The Industrial Armies and the Railroad

It was with a faith in this power of group solidarity that Charles Kelley rose through the ranks of the largest industrial army and assumed leadership of his men in April of 1894. In one of his first public acts, he demanded railroad transportation for the first leg of their journey from Oakland to Sacramento. Knowing that he and his men could not make it to Washington simply by walking, Kelley realized that the railroads of the West would play an important role in the army's crusade, and audaciously demanded from the Southern Pacific Railroad free transportation.⁵⁸ When he was quickly refused and jailed, he replied that he was going to once again call for transportation the following day. Believing that poor men had rights under the current laws, he was not a revolutionary; rather, he wanted to receive rights that he felt were guaranteed to him as a U.S. citizen. Kelley, therefore, did what London could never do when he was sneaking around trying to avoid the train engineers on the Overland Express—after leaving jail, he rallied the men by climbing on the roof of a railroad car and urged them to stay and fight together because public opinion was on their side. Unlike London and other hobos who had to hide in the bowels of the train, Kelley stood proudly on top of the boxcar while being photographed, allowing his face to be a visual representation of the poor man conquering the machine.⁵⁹ Here Kelley was symbolically taming the iron horse: refusing to hide in the shadows, he was grabbing its reins and directing it towards Washington.

Kelley's men and the public received him most favorably in California, where there was a particular "[b]itterness against the Southern Pacific, which opposed the army with every means at its disposal." This bitterness was shared by middle and working class alike, and sympathy for the Industrials grew daily.⁶⁰ The mayor of Oakland, feeling pressure from citizens who supported the men as well as from the drain of more than 1,000 army regulars (who still needed to eat) on the local economy, finally convinced the railroad to offer free boxcar transportation to the army. But Kelley, after receiving this concession, initially refused the "gift," demanding coaches to take him and his men: "We, the Industrial Army, emphatically refuse to ride in boxcars. We are United States citizens and

not hogs. When we are furnished with proper transportation we will then proceed to Sacramento, not otherwise.”⁶¹ In other words, although they were unable and unwilling to pay, Kelley was separating his men from the hobos who poached off the railroad and illegally road trains; the army, he implied, would arrive in Washington with dignity. Again, Kelley was speaking about his men as workers who were connected to places because of their crafts—the farm, the mill, the mine—and was distancing himself from a transient and unstable workforce. While listening to Kelley, men, unemployed and with very few prospects for a job, were able to stand together on the tracks and confident in their numbers, stop trains from moving past them; they were going to ride the iron horse and their collective weight would stop it from bucking. Unlike London and his “profresh” ilk, these men weren’t content to hop a train; they would stop it dead in its tracks.

To have any chance of having the march lead to a productive end, Kelley needed to stay visible in both the towns and the media that reported their trek in order to show that they were collectively united, honest working men in search of relief from their joblessness.⁶² Kelley clearly tried to disassociate himself by publicly proclaiming that the Industrial Army’s cause was just and not a rag-tag outfit of mere hobos—the furtive and beggarly image of the hobo was not what Kelley wanted the general public to conjure up when they thought of his army.⁶³ He denied that any professional wanderers were in his regiment, and because the army conducted itself in an orderly and disciplined manner, the thousands of men and women who came to gaze at the army throughout their trek believed him.⁶⁴ To gain public sympathy, Kelley needed to convincingly show that there was an end to their travels—a job building roads that would lead eventually to stable domiciles—and that unlike London and his hobo brethren, they did not wish to keep traveling and moving.

But London, and it can be assumed other hobos with his individualistic leanings, shared the train with Kelley and his men. Although Kelley was squarely against having any hobos in his regiment, London was not antagonistic to the central idea of Kelley’s Army; he just defined success differently. Success for him was not based on a possible future homestead somewhere in the arid lands of the west but rather it was in his ability to move and remain in motion. In other words, his success was not based on how he measured up as a worker but rather how he measured up as a hobo. During his six months on the road, whether he was with the army or traveling alone, Jack London defined his own measure of success by his ability to outwit those who attempted to limit his movements—be it a railroad engineer who did not wish him to ride his train or General Kelley, who wanted him to walk from town to town and refused to allow him to ride in the back of a supply wagon.

London and the Industrial Army

London’s sympathies were with the army; like the out-of-work miner and the landless farmer, London felt he had been exploited and, when he heard about the

army, decided to join.⁶⁵ But, as his biographer Joan London notes, London “was mastered by the determination to be his own boss.”⁶⁶ Unlike the other members that he shared a boxcar with on this trek, London identified himself as a “profresh” who was the law of his own underworld kingdom. During the six months where he traveled across both the United States and Canada, London was convinced that his mobility would keep him from harm; his quick wittedness, agility and skill as a train hopper would always allow him to continue unmolested down the line. His loyalty was therefore to himself and not to the army.



Figure 1: The Industrial Army makes camp as they travel through Iowa. Jack London is in the lower right hand corner. (*The Palimpsest*, June 1971) Courtesy of The State Historical Society of Iowa.

London attempted to join Kelley on April 6th, but just missed him by a few hours when the army left Oakland and consequently, he spent eleven days hoboeing his way through Utah and Nevada trying to catch up. Finally, he met up with Kelley near Council Bluffs, Iowa. Unfortunately for him, during this time, the army was having trouble moving forward and was stalled, desperately searching for transportation to allow them to continue onto Washington.⁶⁷

As London was hopping trains searching for Kelley, and the Industrial Army was heading out of Sacramento towards Utah, the police, preachers, politicians, and the army itself ardently debated the laws that these unemployed men were breaking when they were traveling on the trains:

The main question . . . was whether state and local authorities of California could load vagrants upon trains and dump them

upon Utah without liability on the part of these authorities or of the carrier. From another point of view, the legal battle was between the Southern Pacific which wanted to get the army off of its hands and the Union Pacific and the Rio Grande Western which had western termini at Ogden and which doubtless feared the consequences if it hauled these men to some point further down the line.⁶⁸

For the most part, local and state politicians, fearing riots and also the cost of maintaining these armies in their towns, wanted to pass Kelley and his men to the next locale. Even though they did not consider themselves hobos, there were attempts to treat the members of the army as such as towns wanted to keep pushing the men further down the line. Kelley's insistence on the army's visibility (as well as the complex logistics of the march), however, made this an impossibility.

When London was hopping trains on the sly into various hostile towns on his way to Iowa, he thought of himself as an individual against all others. If he won, he was able to ride the train. If he lost, he would have to watch the train from the side of the track as it sped past him. Unlike the impotence he felt when he was working in the factory, as a hobo, he was dependent on his own skill and determination—and nothing else—to ride. But because of the visibility of hundreds of men on the side of the road, London, when he began riding with Kelley's army, would no longer be able to disappear. The visibility of Industrialists caused them to be the subject of debate from the courtroom to the bar room with no clear solutions or strategies emerging for dealing with a stranded army. While the law clearly stated that these men did not have the right to ride on the train, editorialists and street preachers began to question the validity of these laws. The men were stationary and under the gaze of the public, which came out in droves to witness the spectacle; at one point, "thirty thousand people came to see the army."⁶⁹ With the large crowds and the excitement surrounding the men, every time the Industrial Army entered a new community it was as if "a big circus had come to town."⁷⁰ The army was a public event and the drama was on center stage for all to see. With the large crowds of people coming to observe and mingle with these men, restlessness abounded.

What the owners of the railroad companies feared most was that the army was operating in the public sphere. They were the subject of too much talk; if citizens of the town did not come out and see it personally, they could read about it in the newspapers, hear about it from the Sunday pulpits, or listen to debates over a glass of beer in a saloon. The carnival-like quality of the "petition in boots" scared the owners and politicians because the visibility of the men made many fear—especially in this time of economic hardships—the threat of collective politics.⁷¹ And so government officials relied on what they knew: the law. Clearly transporting the Industrial Army across state lines defied existing laws: large numbers of dependents of one state could not just be transferred to another state where they would once again become dependents. Although local



Figure 2: Kelley's Industrial Army is met by a large crowd in the Council Bluffs freightyards on April 15, 1894. (*The Palimpsest*, June 1971) Courtesy of The State Historical Society of Iowa.

officials were quite capable of handling individual transients who attempted to cross their borders, no one was quite sure how to legally handle the armies who were still trying to get to Washington.

While officials were debating legal ways to deal with the army, others found an illegal way: find a train and steal it.⁷² This is exactly what happened in Council Bluffs, Iowa, where local citizens, tired of seeing the army waiting for politicians and railroad executives to decide on what would happen to Kelley and his men, "liberated" a train and brought it to the army. But while there was much celebration by everyone involved, including Jack London who wrote about it favorably in his diary, after a few hours, the train was returned. Even though Kelley asked for free transportation whenever he had the chance, he stated that the reason he didn't take this particular train was not because of the lack of boxcars (it was insufficient to carry the whole army) but because that act was illegal and he and his men had pledged not to do anything against the law.⁷³ Kelley believed fully

that they were on the side of the law, and, as good citizens whose only “crime” was that they were poor and looking for work, they would follow it. Whether Kelley was anticipating that the authorities were looking for an excuse to swoop down and arrest him and his men, or whether he really believed that they had not violated any laws, is debatable. Either way, Kelley was trying to work within the law.

This collective regard for society’s law, however, marks a clear distinction between the Industrial Army’s mass politics and London’s individualistic belief that he was the dispenser and embodiment of his own law. The Industrials’ politics called for a helping hand from the government, and Kelley was beholden to both his men and to the laws of states that they passed through. London’s boxcar politics called for an avoidance of the government all together and he was beholden only to himself. Eventually this ideological difference would form an irreconcilable wedge between the two. While there are plenty of examples that show the various manifestations of this difference, it becomes most apparent when the army was finally stopped in Des Moines, Iowa and all requests for rail transportation were adamantly refused. After realizing that there was no way to continue their pilgrimage on foot, Kelley had the army turn into a navy and they constructed rafts to sail down the Des Moines River. Here the former “Prince Oyster Pirate” found a perfect opportunity to break away from the collective, crystallizing his competitive nature that kept him from embracing the army and its group politics.

On Wednesday, May 9th, 1894, London and the rest of the army headed down the river in boats that were built for ten men each. Soon, London’s boat manipulated its way to the front of the group and separated itself from the rest of the army. London explains why in his chapter, “Two Thousand Stiffs:”

There were ten men in my boat, and they were the cream of Company L. Every man was a hustler. . . . The ten of us forgot the remaining forty men of Company L, and by the time we had missed one meal we promptly forgot the commissary. We were independent. We went down the river “on our own,” hustling our “chewin’s,” beating every boat in the fleet, and, alas that I must say it, sometimes taking possession of the stores the farmer-folk had collected for the Army.⁷⁴

Townsppeople, fearful that the army would descend on them en masse but also sympathetic to the cause, would leave food, tobacco, and milk on the shores for the men to pick up. London and his crew of “independent” men, however, went first down the river getting far ahead of the rest of the boats and reporting to whomever they met that they were the emissaries for the army; in the process, they grabbed possession of anything they wanted. In his journal entry for May 11th summarizing his life on the water, London writes simply that he was “Living Fine.”⁷⁵ Tellingly, there was hardly any mention of the other men in the

army, except when London boasted about how he had outwitted them. Just like the incident in which London hoped other hobos attempting to board “his” train would fail, London here was fulfilling his desire to be the “tramp-royal” whose success came at the cost of his fellow travelers. While he acknowledged that he stole from the men, he also felt it was his right as a strong individual to get what he could—and the group politics be damned. As he explained in greater detail in *The Road*, “While we were ahead, skimming the cream, and while the commissary was lost far behind, the main army, coming along in the middle, starved. This was hard on the army, I’ll allow; but then, the ten of us were individualists. We had initiative and enterprise. We ardently believed that the grub was to the man who got there first, the pale Vienna [coffee with milk] to the strong.”⁷⁶

Here is a concrete example that shows the individualistic hobo lifestyle in conflict with collective action. As a hobo, London survived by hiding and remaining invisible in the bowels of a boxcar. To be brought into the light and made to stand collectively with the army was not directly beneficial to him, so he only used the name of the army in order to fulfill his individual desires. In his diary, London makes constant mention of the soreness of his feet from walking or his attempts to hide on the back of a supply cart; there is no mention of his political affiliation with these men. To be part of the collective body meant to suffer, and to a man who wanted to be his own boss, this was not acceptable. As a “profresh,” London believed that he could board any train that was pulling out and, therefore, to be “stuck” waiting with other “stiffs” to be *permitted* to ride to Washington was degrading to his sense of self. Priding himself as an individualist, London would not accept subservience to the higher ideals of the group. In other words, his success as a hobo would outshine the eventual failure of the Industrial Army.

The Aftermath

For London, unlike many of the out-of-work factory workers who had so much riding on their trip to Washington, the dissolution of the Industrial Army was not the end of his travels.⁷⁷ After a few weeks in the national spotlight, London was able to fade back into the darkness and the crevices of the train and once again cloak himself in his invisibility. There would always be another ride. London’s daughter later described her father’s experience, “[h]e left the army lightheartedly, careless of whether it would reach its destination or not and pushed off alone. He was still lighthearted and believed that [although] he was a member of the lower class he was different, special.”⁷⁸ Throughout his travels with Kelley’s Army, London was ever the individualist, and when opportunities appeared before him, he took them with both hands. W.M. McDevitt, a historian of the March on Washington, when evaluating London’s entries in his diary, writes, “[w]hat puzzles me is that in all the pages from his diary . . . there is not a single word as to the political, sociologic, or economic views of the members of the Industrial Army that he contacted or fraternized with during the month

and a third.”⁷⁹ His belief in his own brand of boxcar politics afforded him space from the politics of the Industrial Army.

For the hobo that London both was and admired, success was equated with slipping around unnoticed. During his time on the road, then, London was in a constant state of competition and his resistance to the laws and regulations of the states that he passed through were comparable to the competition he had with other train riders. London was not attempting to travel vertically on any figurative ladder of success. Rather, he was concerned with traveling horizontally wherever the tracks headed. For him, the prestige of being a top “profresh” was more immediately gratifying than the hope for some promised change in the political landscape and he centered his sights only on physical landscape on which he traveled. The boxcar might have been lonely, but there was always a ride to be had.

The Lonely Boxcar

Contrary to what London expressed in *The Road*, however, the odds were against the hobo—skilled or not—and eventually even a “tramp-royal” of his stature would become visible at the wrong moment. This happened to London shortly after he deserted from the army when he was arrested for vagrancy on his way to see Niagara Falls. Standing in court along with sixteen other homeless men who were each sentenced to thirty days in fifteen seconds by a judge more interested in having breakfast than administering justice, London discovered that his “profresh” standing meant nothing to the courts or to the other men. Lumped together with all the other vagrants who had no money in their pockets, London found out that he was, in fact, not “special, different” from the other members of the working class. Because he had no money or home, London writes, “I had been denied my right to trial by jury, I had been denied my right to plead guilty or not guilty, I had not been allowed to communicate with a lawyer nor anyone . . . I was forced to toil hard on a diet of bread and water and to march the shameful lock-step with armed guards over me.”⁸⁰ When he lost his invisibility, London lost his freedom of mobility along with many other freedoms that he thought impossible to relinquish. But although this trip to jail was a major moment during his hobo journey, it is equally important to analyze what led him to Niagara Falls in the first place: he identified himself not as an unemployed worker in search of a job but as a premier hobo whose invisibility was the key to his success. Even though later in life he would champion the causes of the working-class, in 1894, when he was a young hobo happily traveling the iron road, whenever he found himself in a boxcar with someone else, he made sure that he was the only one who would be able to successfully “catch out.”

Notes

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1. Jack London's literary influence has been substantial. According to a study conducted in the 1990s of global reading patterns, he is the most widely read. See Hank Gutman, ed., *How Others Read Us: International Perspectives on American Literature* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), 5-6.

2. In his highly influential book, *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working Class Culture in America* (1987; repr., New York: Verso, 1998), Michael Denning traces the rise of the reading culture among the working class as adventure texts became readily available for a minimal sum.

3. Jonathan Auerbach, *Male Call: Becoming Jack London* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 5.

4. There is no shortage of London biographies. A small sample (in chronological order): Charmian Kittredge London, *The Book of Jack London*, 2 vols. (New York: Century, 1921); Joan London, *Jack London and His Times* (New York: Doubleday, 1939); Philip Foner, *Rebel Jack London: American Rebel* (New York: Citadel Press, 1947); Richard O'Connor, *Jack London: A Biography* (New York: Little, Brown, 1964); Daniel Dryer, *Jack London: A Biography* (New York: Scholastic Press, 1997); Alex Kershaw, *Jack London: A Life* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999); Clarice Stasz, *Jack London's Women* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001).

5. Jeanne Campbell Reesman, "Prospects for the Study of Jack London," *Resources for American Literary Study* 25, no. 2 (1999): 147. A partial list of critics with varying views of London's politics includes: Frederick Feied, *No Pie in the Sky* (Secaucus, N.J.: Citadel Press, 1964); Steven Dhondt, "There is a Good Time Coming: Jack London's Spirit of Proletarian Revolt," *Jack London Newsletter* 3, no. 1 (1970): 25-34; Eric Homberger, *American Writers and Radical Politics, 1900-39* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986); William E. Cain, "Socialism, Power and the Fate of Style: Jack London and his Letters," *American Literary History* 3, no. 3 (1991): 603-613; Christopher Gair, *Complicity and Resistance in Jack London's Novels* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 1997). While a few of these scholars do mention London's hobo days, they do not explore the nuances and complexities of the hobo lifestyle itself. These scholars are most concerned with London's political nature after he became a spokesperson for socialism.

6. See Richard Etulain, *Jack London on the Road: The Tramp Diary and Other Hobo Writings* (Logan, UT: Utah State University Press, 1979), 29-60 for a complete reprint of London's tramp diary in which the author recounts his experiences with Kelley's Army. The following is London's general itinerary during his six months as a hobo:

On April sixth, 1894, twelve hours after Kelley and his men left Oakland, London attempted to meet the army there. When he discovered that they had already left, London followed on a passenger train to Sacramento only to learn that they had once again left without him. He then began hopping freights, planning to meet Kelley somewhere along the road. Each night he hopped an eastbound freight train, hiding out in boxcars and avoiding the watchful train crews. London made his way through Nevada and Utah and eventually, on April 17th, he met up with a group of 80 men who were also trying to catch up with Kelley. Two days later, this group eventually united with Kelley's main force near Council Bluffs, Iowa.

From here they traveled through the small towns of western Iowa and reached Des Moines at the end of April. They were stranded in Des Moines, however, and no further transportation was provided for the men to continue onto Washington. The army, out of necessity, became a navy and built flat-bottom boats to sail down the Des Moines River to the Mississippi.

There were continual delays with Kelley's army and on May 25th in Hannibal, Missouri, Jack London deserted and made his own way to the Chicago Columbian Exposition where he enjoyed his first night in a bed in over two months. He then made a quick side trip to St. Joseph, Michigan to visit family before returning to Chicago. Eventually, hopping many freights, he made it to New York City. London spent a week there before visiting Niagara Falls. Late in June, he hopped a train to Buffalo where he was arrested for vagrancy and sentenced to a month in state penitentiary. [For a detailed description of his time in prison, see chapters, "Pinched," and "The Pen" from *The Road*.] After leaving the penitentiary, he then hoboed his way south, finding his way to Washington D.C., where he spent about two weeks. It was now the middle of August and London headed north again, returning to New York City, then Boston and Lawrence, Massachusetts. The first two weeks of September found him in Montreal, then to Vancouver. Tired of the road, London worked on a steamer, slowly making his way back to San Francisco.

7. Writing about London's hobo experiences in *American Dreamers: The Story of Charmian and Jack London* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), Clarice Stasz wrote, "he was humbled that such a system could make him, a healthy and intelligent man, helpless to prevent the inhumanity brought on by those in power. He left with a fervent wish to change the society that would allow such conditions, and in later years wrote brilliant, bitter indictments that stirred public outcry" (53). Frederick Feied wrote in *No Pie in the Sky: The Hobo as American Cultural Hero* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1964) that, "[w]hat emerges as significant out of his experiences of that year, in addition to familiarity with the details of the hobo's experience, is a conscious formulation of a life-view which was to put its imprint in one way or another on everything he ever wrote" (28). While Stasz and Feied are quite hyperbolic in their analysis of London's travels, Earle Labor is far more restrained in his assessment of London's time on the road, writing in *Jack London* (New York:

Macmillan Library Reference, 1995) that the author's six month hobo sojourn, "tempered his naively individualist attitude and started his questioning of the American socio-economic system" (32).

8. Etulain, *Jack London on the Road*, 17-27.

9. *Ibid.*, 140.

10. In this short story, Johnny, the main character, suffers immensely, enduring long days of intense manual labor. He finally is able to break free from the death grip of his bosses and crawl, undetected, into a boxcar. Although his body is broken and his mind dulled, as he hides in the shadows, Johnny begins to smile. While certainly not a lasting solution to the problems of capitalism, London gives the boy some agency by simply allowing him to disappear and become a hobo.

11. Jack London, *The Road* (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1907), 56. The following quotes may also be found on the Jack London Collection website, a superb resource for all London scholars. Found on this easily navigated site are whole books and articles that London published. See "The Road," Jack London Collection, <http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/London/Writings/TheRoad> (accessed September 6, 2007).

12. See Douglas Steeples' *Democracy in Desperation: The Depression of 1893* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998) for a social and economic history of the depression and its aftermath.

13. Roy Rosenzweig, et. al., *Who Built America? Working People and the Nation's Economy, Politics, Culture, and Society, vol. 2, From the Gilded Age to the Present* (New York, Pantheon Books, 1992), 138.

14. Carlos Schwantes, *Coxey's Army: An American Odyssey* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 13.

15. *Ibid.*, 32.

16. Western contingents were organized specifically as Industrial Armies and not Commonweals of Christ. For a detailed description of the western armies, see Todd Depastino, *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 59-71.

17. *Omaha Bee*, April 15, 1894, quoted in Schwantes, *Coxey's Army*, 116.

18. Schwantes, *Coxey's Army*, 261.

19. *Ibid.*, 195.

20. Radical political organizations had members who attempted to use the hobo labor force as front line agitators in the class war, and many non-political train riders became passionate leaders of the revolutionary struggle. The most significant organization that made the recruitment of the hobo a central strategy, with limited success, was the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). Both Todd Depastino, *Citizen Hobo*, and Frank Tobias Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), in their astute historical analyses of the hobo have highlighted the crucial connection of the hobo and the IWW. See also Henry E. McGukin, *Memoirs of a Wobbly* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Pub. Co., 1987) for an absorbing autobiography that explicitly shows the way that the IWW used hobos for agitation. For a discussion on how some hobos avoided all types of political organizations, see Nels Anderson's *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1923), 230-250. For an example of how traveling homeless men were hired as "scabs" for temporary work in order to break strikes, and for a discussion of ways that industry used the wandering homeless man for their own ideological purposes, see Allan Pinkerton, *Strikers, Communists, Tramps and Detectives* (New York: G.W. Carelton and Co., 1878).

21. Ben Reitman, quoted by Nels Anderson, "Sociology Has Many Faces," *Journal of the History of Sociology* 3:1 (1980-81): 4. This is a standard definition used by many hobos in order to define themselves as separate from other homeless men and women.

22. While women did travel as hobos, for this article, which looks at the individualistic male hobo in relation to Kelley's army, I will use the masculine gendered pronoun.

23. How the homeless person was defined, both by those inside and outside of the hobo subculture, had real, physical consequences. Tim Creswell, a historian of the railriding subculture, observes that once railriders have been labeled, defined, and categorized, "they can be dealt with, argued over, confined, made to work on log piles and disenfranchised." See, *The Tramp in America* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 2001), 49.

24. The deathknell of the hobo has been ringing for almost as many years as hobos have traveled throughout the United States. In his autobiography, *The American Hobo* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1975), Nels Anderson wrote that the hobo was "already vanishing about 1920" (ix). In 1929, these wandering men were said to be bound for extinction. Jeff Davis, a self-proclaimed "Emperor of the Road," who was a popular hobo authority and leader of a loose Hobo Union, named both "Hobos of America, Inc." and "Knights of the Road, Air & Seven Seas," claimed that "real" hobos had disappeared before World War II (quoted in Steam Train Maury Graham, *Tales of the Iron Road* [New York: Paragon Press, 1990], 157). An Association of American Railroads' publication in the 1950s claimed that the hobo disappeared when railroad companies replaced steam with diesel locomotives; the hobo was an anachronism in the modern age, and technology left him on the side of the tracks. The Mobile, Alabama, Gulf, and Ohio railroads all reported in the late 1960s that "[m]odern railroading in the United States does not lend itself to the . . . old time transient who used to ride from one town to another or follow the harvest each year. This is the thing of the past"

(quoted in Kenneth Allsop, *Hard Travellin'* [New York: New American Library, 1972], 41-42). In 1993, Dale Maharidge pronounced in *The Last Great American Hobo* (California, Prima Publishing, 1993) that Montana Blackie was the "last" of the dying breed. Ted Conover, a journalist who in the early 1980s traveled the rails with various hobos around the United States, wrote in the preface to the 2001 edition to *Rolling Nowhere* (New York: Vintage, 2001) that in the twenty years since he first published his book, "the world of hoboes with road names who cooked in jungles with 'gunboats' (coffee cans) is a thing of the past" (xix). Eddy Joe Cotton, a young railrider who hopped freights in the 1990s, however, wrote a book about his travels, titling it *Hobo* (New York: Harmony Books, 2002). After more than eighty years of being proclaimed dead, the hobo still seems to have some life.

25. Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts*, 7.

26. *Ibid.*, 19.

27. DePastino, *Citizen Hobo*. He writes of the transient in the Gilded Age, "[f]or most homeless wanderers, the road represented a brief stage of poverty, an episodic experience rather than a permanent condition" (15).

28. Kenneth L. Kusmer, *Down and Out, On the Road: The Homeless in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 123-125. While Kusmer looked at the hobo from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, Nels Anderson, in his classic study, *The Hobo* (1923), also discussed this particular nature of the hobo, stating that the hobo was a "critical selector" of his job (87-122). Although many people were unemployed, desperately attempting to find any job, Anderson and Kusmer define the hobo as men who have an alternative relationship to, and attitude with, work.

29. London romantically writes of this agency in *The Road* as he enjoys his free meal from the two older working-class women. He writes, "Ah, I can see them now, those two dear, sweet ladies . . . discoursing upon the way of my feet in this world, brushing away their kindly council as a real devilish fellow should, and thrilling them, not alone with my adventures, but with the adventures of all the other fellows. . . ." (56). He clearly separates himself from these women with their squandered lives spent working "on the same shift" of a mundane job and is liberated by connecting himself to the adventurous men who travel the open roads.

30. Kusmer, *Down and Out*, 132.

31. Before he was sixteen, London was part of the oyster black market, illegally selling oysters to restaurants up and down the San Francisco coast. See Joan London, *Jack London and His Times*, 39-53, for details of his many escapades eluding police and other pirates as he dug for oysters in the shallow coastal waters.

32. London, *The Road*, 158.

33. *Ibid.*, 159. In his early tramp short stories which he wrote for his high school newspaper, *The Aegis*, London would try to capture this language. See "Frisco Kid's Story" (1894) and "Frisco Kid Came Back" (1894) reprinted in Etulain's, *Jack London on the Road*.

34. London, *The Road*, 159.

35. It is interesting to note that while these "road kids" were friendly to London, they also participated in this competition where they "weeded out" the individuals who could not survive the iron road. I have not read this type of overt competition in any other hobo autobiography. On the other hand, there are examples of road kids sticking together. One fictional example is *Wild Boys of the Road* (dir. William Wellman, 1933), a film in which the road kids joined together, forming a force that was both successful (killing a trainman who had raped one of their fellow friends) and unsuccessful (trying to fight the police who, using water guns, broke up their shanty town where they were staying). Regardless of the outcome, they always worked together. The individualistic competition so pronounced in London's description of his involvement with the road kids is not present in *Wild Boys*. This is not to suggest that there was no community among London's gang, but the element of competition, so crucial to London's identity and political understanding, was prominent in London's characterization of these young train-hoppers.

36. London, *The Road*, 163.

37. This immediate success (and his willingness to brag about it) is not necessarily the case with other writers who have ridden the rails. For example, Steam Train Maury Graham (who spent substantially more time on the road than London) went through a long learning process, spending time with older hobos in the jungles around his home, asking questions and learning the proper ways to hop trains before embarking on his first ride. And while hopping that first train was a frightening experience for him, he was more confident because he had questioned those who had gone before him for advice and suggestions (*Tales of the Iron Road*, 18-25).

38. London describes the gay-cat as "short-horns," "new chums," and "tenderfeet" (*The Road*, 173). The "prushan" was a young, inexperienced traveler, a "punk" who was the "possession" of the profresh. London in his brief discussion of the prushan makes no mention of the sexual relations that often existed between the prushan and the older hobo, who was also known as "a wolf." This might be one of the reasons, however, why he was adamant in asserting that he "was never a prushun, for [he] did not take kindly to possession," and why he did not want to "own" any younger travelers. See Thomas Minehan, *Boy and Girl Tramps in America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1976) and Anderson, *The Hobo* for a more detailed view and analysis of hobo

sexuality. Sexual innuendos aside, London's desire for individuality and superiority within the hobo subculture would not allow him to consider himself a "gay-cat."

39. Etulain, *Jack London on the Road*, 95. London scholars have debated how much of Nietzsche's philosophy he understood. Katherine Littell in "The Nietzschean and the Individualist in Jack London's Writings," *Jack London Newsletter* 15 (May-August 1982) points out many of the author's misreadings. "London's designation of his tramp experiences as 'this new blond beast adventure' falsely attributes to Nietzsche enthusiastic approval of the 'blond beastie' as a symbol of egocentric reliance upon individual superiority in the physical and intellectual spheres. In reality, Nietzsche used this term as an ideogram to describe the ruthless drives of 'unsublimated animal passion,' the lowest level of human existence away from which the 'Übermensch' was to evolve. London's reading of Nietzsche suggests that the blond beast and the 'Übermensch' are identical, the exact opposite of Nietzsche's theoretical conceptualizations" (83).

40. Carolyn Johnston, *Jack London—An American Radical?* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), 10.

41. Begging, mentioned in most hobo autobiographies, is a substantial issue that novice hobos must face. At first, there is usually a revulsion towards begging before an eventual acceptance. See, for example, John Worby, *The Other Half: The Autobiography of a Tramp* (New York: Furman, Inc., 1937), 54. Woody Guthrie in his autobiography *Bound for Glory* (New York: Signet, 1943) spends many pages discussing the humiliation of his first begging experience (201).

42. Etulain, *Jack London on the Road*, 95. While this article was written after London had begun to embrace socialism, he was still adamant about calling attention to the strict hierarchy of this subculture. The article itself was written "to correct some of this misinformation" (89) about the hierarchy of the rail riders and to distinguish and describe "professional Trampland" (90) for his readers. There was a very strict divide for London in the hobo underworld. As the Law, he wanted to place very specific borders around its internal class systems as well as have road signs that marked these divisions.

43. Jack London, *The Call of The Wild* (London: Macmillian Company, 1903; New York: Puffin Books, 1994), 13.

44. London, *The Road*, 60-67. London witnessed violence during his hobo travels when he met a group of itinerant fakirs. While sitting on the grass and enjoying the conversation and a glorious day, two young boys committed some small infraction and the "chief of the tribe" who was "the Law, pitiless and omnipotent . . . picked up a heavy whip" and inflicted twelve fierce blows on one of the boys. When the second boy, after receiving heavy lashes that caused blood to run "down his thin little legs" (64) could not take any more of the beating, a young woman threw herself in front of the blows and received the fierce lashes from the man. London, watching this scene play out in front of him, however, did nothing to interfere. As he writes, "Nor did I move, and without shame I say it. . . . I knew life . . . the reason why I did not interfere was . . . that the law was stronger than I" (65). London, both in the character of Buck and in his own personal travels, respects any law that is greater than he.

45. There was a clear divide between the hobo and the citizens of the town. Local residents viewed the homeless men who stepped off the trains as inferior. "In other words, the homeless are often seen as untrustworthy, dirty, lazy, pathological, and dangerous. Their condition is viewed as natural rather than political or economic." Kathleen R. Arnold, *Homelessness, Citizenship and Identity: The Uncanniness of Late Modernity* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 2004), 7.

46. Duffy Little John, who wrote a how-to book on train hopping entitled *Hopping Freight Trains in America* (Los Osos: Sand River Press, 1993), in the 2003 documentary *Catching Out*, (dir. Sarah George) explains one of the best perks of stealing rides on trains: "There is nothing better than getting up on the heat." In Jim Tully's autobiography, *Beggars of Life* (New York: A. & C. Boni, 1924), he is given the advice, "It's all'n the game, Red. When you're on the bum long enough, someone'll stick you up for somethin' some other guy done. The big trick's don't let 'em ketch you" (53). Autobiographies abound with these tales of attempts to outwit the bulls—although not all are successful and "games" turn deadly. The very nature of the hobo's illegal rides places him in defiance of the law; he must keep hidden in order to travel. London writes of many experiences with bulls in *The Road* and his joy in outwitting them. He is, though, afraid of some of the more notorious, sadistic bulls and unabashedly explains that he avoided Cheyenne on the Union Pacific line because of Jeff Carr, a bull that had a national reputation for violence among hobos (204).

47. An example of how a homeless person is a non-person can be found in the wake of September 11, 2001, and the "official" counting of the dead from the attacks upon the World Trade Center. As Andrew Freidman first reported in *The Village Voice* on November 21, 2001 in his article "From the Margins Erased," homeless men and women who were living in the subway station underneath the World Trade Center when the planes hit will never be known or remembered among the dead. There will be no memorial, no memory of them; their names will not be read along with the other victims of the terrorist attacks. This anonymity may also be seen in the countless "tramp graves" that are found along the railroad tracks of the United States. See Jim Tully's *Beggars of Life*, 137.

48. Ted Grossardt, "Harvest(ing) Hoboes: The Production of Labor Organization through the Wheat Harvest," *Agricultural History* 70 (Spring 1996): 285.

49. The wandering male who entered towns in the nineteenth century was not so readily accepted. In the 1870s, when homeless men were first getting off trains in large numbers, scholar Francis Wayland proclaimed that all traveling men, regardless of their circumstances were a "dangerous class . . . at war with all social institutions." See Francis Wayland, "The Tramp Question," *Conference of Boards of Public Charities Proceedings*, 1877, 113. One of the solutions to the homeless "problem," offered by the *Chicago Tribune* (July 12, 1877), was a call for housewives to put "a little strychnine or arsenic in the meat and supplies furnished to tramps" so that the bloated dead bodies of the decaying corpses would serve as a warning sign for anyone looking for a handout. While many people did give hobos free food when they knocked on their back doors asking for assistance, many others called the police and supported harsh tramp laws that placed these wandering men on chain gangs and in overcrowded jails. For a discussion of the way that the hobo has been defined and categorized by both the law and in popular culture, see Tim Cresswell's *The Tramp in America*, 48-86. Cresswell writes of the suspicion and fear caused by these mobile workers and relates a history of the U.S. tramp laws in the later part of the nineteenth century that was imposed upon the transients to keep their travels regulated and visible.

50. This is literally how some hobos traveled. Commonly called "riding the rods," hobos would place themselves underneath the boxcar by situating themselves on the iron bars (gunnels) that ran eighteen inches below the belly of the car. This was obviously a very dangerous way to travel and if the hobo slipped in any way, certain death was to follow. See Kenneth Allsop's *Hard Travelin': A Hobo and His History*, 159, for a detailed description of this perilous way to travel.

51. This understanding of the law is a common motif in hobo autobiographies. See especially Jim Tully's *Beggars of Life*, in which the author, who is constantly evading the police, vigilante mobs, or other hobos, lives specifically by the "law of the road" (59).

52. London, *The Road*, 51.

53. *Ibid.*, 32.

54. *Ibid.*, 32.

55. *Ibid.*, 34. This quote perfectly encapsulates London's individualistic boxcar politics. The young hobo is not in competition with a capitalistic ideology, or consciously resisting the modernization that the train is bringing to the United States. London, instead, is taking on the physical train itself. London is trying to best the train and its crew, not the system. This is very different from, for example, Frank Norris's naturalistic novel, *The Octopus* (New York: Doubleday Page & Co., 1901), a blistering attack on the negative systematic entrenchment of the railroad in the lives of the California wheat farmers.

56. London, *The Road*, 41.

57. *Ibid.*, 50.

58. Schwantes, *Coxey's Army*, 100-101.

59. Donald Le Crone McMurray, *Coxey's Army: The Study of the Industrial Army Movement, 1894* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1968), 150.

60. London, *Jack London and His Times*, 72.

61. McMurry, *Coxey's Army*, 154-155.

62. Although there was widespread public sympathy for the Industrial Armies' search for employment, there were also pundits who, from their pulpits or their newspapers, denounced their tactics. Dr. Stetson of Des Moines College, in a chapel talk stated harshly, "no men with a determination animated by high moral purposes will live like swine" (*Iowa State Registry*, May 4th, 1894), quoted in William Peterson, "Kelly and His Men," *The Palimpsest* (Iowa City, Iowa: The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1971), 302. Thorstein Veblen saw the men as only idlers with no clear goal and therefore no substance to their crusade ("The Army of the Commonweal," *Journal of Political Economy* (June 1894): 456-461). The dean of Yale Law School denounced them as both morally and physically "dirty" (Editorial, *New York Times*, May 1, 1894, 4). Other editorials, especially after trains were hijacked by the armies, called for a return of whipping posts for vagrants ("The Whipping Post for Tramps," *Century* 49, 1895): 794.

63. Kelley wanted to promote the image of a collective, regimented group and stifle any projections of individuality and personal gain. It was of utmost priority for Kelley and the other generals to keep the public sympathetic of their plight and not fearful of them. Order and discipline—waking up at the same time, marching in unison, etc—were all important to presenting an organized group of working men to the public. See Petersen, "Kelly and his Men," *The Palimpsest*, 289-304).

64. Regimental order under harsh conditions enhanced public sympathy for the army. Local newspapers in Iowa such as the *Salt Lake Tribune* described the Army as "men, pale, cold, without covering or blankets and wan with hollow sunken eyes, hunger and destitution pictured on their faces, looked out the side of common cattle cars" [quoted in Schwantes, *Coxey's Army*, 104]. Not seen as "dirty" hobos who were only out for their own sake, the public, therefore, could empathize with them.

65. Johnston, *Jack London—An American Radical?*, 11.

66. London, *Jack London and His Times*, 70-71.

67. Etulain, *Jack London on the Road*, 2.

68. McMurry, *Coxey's Army*, 157.

69. *Ibid.*, 164.

70. Carl Browne and Jacob Coxey, *When Coxey's "Army" Marcht [sic] on Washington, 1894*, William McDevitt, ed. (San Francisco: 1944), 11.

71. There were many violent labor strikes and riots from the 1870s onward beginning with the 1877 railroad strike that nearly paralyzed the national transportation system and culminating with Eugene Deb's 1894 Pullman Strike, see Lynne Kirby, *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and the Silent Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 19-75. For a detailed look at Debs, see Nick Salvatore, *Eugene V. Debs: Citizen and Socialist* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1982).

72. McMurry, *Coxey's Army*, 195-201. Train stealing was a common event among many of the western Industrial Armies with more than *fifty* train thefts reported. "So frequently did they occur during May 1894 that when Commonwealers commandeered a train in the mountains west of Missoula, one newspaper ran the item under a simple headline: "The Same Old Story" (195). One of the problems with reporting the "theft" of trains was that many times sympathetic railroad workers would "give" the train over to the army. Many average citizens were also sympathetic to the plight of the armies and saw the "stealing" of trains as "liberation" and not an act of thievery. Regardless of what they were called, however, when the armies commandeered a train, it also allowed the federal authorities (who had jurisdiction because mail delivery was being hindered by these thefts) to arrest the men. See 123-124; 149-165 for a detailed analysis of the various train robberies.

73. As reported in Keokuk, Iowa's *The Weekly Gate City* (May 24, 1894), quoted in William Peterson, "Kelly and His Men," *The Palimpsest* (Iowa City, Iowa: The State Historical Society of Iowa, 1971), 300: "Each man who joined the army had to take a Pledge where they would have to state out loud 'to not intentionally violate any law of the United States or any state or territory in which I may be of aid and abet any riotous conduct; to respect the right or property and law and order.'"

74. London, *The Road*, 183.

75. Etulain, *Jack London on the Road*, 51.

76. London, *The Road*, 183.

77. Kelley's army disintegrated in Ohio when, after renting a barge to take them from Portsmouth to Cincinnati, they were unceremoniously dumped on the shore twelve miles short of their destination. Kelley became ill with typhoid fever and ordered his army to make it to Washington in any way that they could. A few eventually did make it to Washington and set up camp with the remnants of the other armies who were squatting right outside of the capital. Kelley arrived in mid-July to see his men but left less than two weeks later for his home in California.

78. Joan London, *Jack London and his Times*, 84.

79. Carl Browne and Jacob Coxey, *When Coxey's "Army" Marcht [sic] on Washington, 1894*, William McDevitt, ed. (San Francisco: 1944), 29.

80. London, *The Road*, 95.