

## The Tramp Is Back

Todd McCallum

Volume 56, 2005

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/lt56re01>

[See table of contents](#)

### Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

### ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

McCallum, T. (2005). The Tramp Is Back. *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 56, 237–250.

# REVIEW ESSAYS / NOTES CRITIQUES

## The Tramp Is Back

Todd McCallum

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* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press 2003)

OF TUDOR ENGLAND's vagrants R.H. Tawney wrote, "His history is inevitably written by his enemies."<sup>1</sup> For the hoboes, tramps, and bums who wandered across North America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, not much had changed. Ben Reitman, self-styled "King of the Hoboes," was a source for the seminal studies conducted by academics associated with the Chicago School of Sociology. Unlike most wanderers, however, Reitman read what the scholars wrote. Below is an excerpt from his review of Graham Taylor's 1931 *Pioneering on Social Frontiers*:

My dear Mr. Taylor:

Your evaluations of the rich and powerful men is bourgeois if not servile. Without meaning to be I am sure your defence and explanation of the rich give evidence that you have enjoyed their favor.

<sup>1</sup>R.H. Tawney, quoted in A.L. Beier, "Vagrants and the Social Order in Elizabethan England," *Past and Present*, 64 (1974), 3.

Your explanation of the anarchist and the radical is patronising but not illuminating.

To me your book sounds like a speech before an exclusive lady society where you have to be careful what you say....

You will admit that when you came to Chic[ago] there was the nucleus of a revolutionary movement in America that bid fair to overthrow the present economic order in society. And if that revolutionary movement is dead or distorted the capitalistic society have you and your colleagues to thank more than anyone else.

Down thru the years you have always been most kind and friendly to me. And I have always had a kind feeling towards you. And so when I say to you that the record of your life to me is the story of a colossal failure, I do so with genuine regrets.

The brilliance of Reitman's review, quoted in Tim Cresswell's *The Tramp in America*, lies in its final sentence with its reversal of the flow of centuries of history: it is the scholar, not the hobo, who has failed society. (78-79)

Reitman would no doubt be pleased to know that the tramp has made a comeback, even among academics. This hobo historian, who long believed he was destined to languish in an obscure and little-visited field, is delightfully surprised to have emerged from the PhD with a "sexy topic," thanks to the contributions of Tim Cresswell, Todd DePastino, and Frank Tobias Higbie. Cresswell's contribution focuses primarily on tramps, or rather "the tramp" as he was constituted in distinct and yet connected bodies of knowledge, while Higbie examines hobo workers as they moved in and out of urban and rural labour markets. Finally, DePastino offers a national survey of the rise and fall of the hobo as the archetype of homelessness in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, reminding us that "American homelessness was a house of many mansions." (8)

What matters most about these books is that they revive the powerful sense in which the transient worker was one of the most significant economic and cultural figures in North America in the period from the first "tramp scare" of the 1870s to the great Okie migrations of the 1930s. The explosion of industrial-capitalist growth, coupled with the equally dramatic wave of immigration that brought workers of every imaginable background to the continent, made mobility a way of life for millions. Chicago was the "Main Stem" of an elaborate network of railways built by masses of itinerants, who then used the products of their labour to travel thousands of miles in search of work and sociability, if not political fellowship in the form of the Industrial Workers of the World [IWW] and other organizations of transients. The death knell for this mobile workforce first sounded in Michigan in the mid-1910s, with the emergence of Fordism which, in its idealized form, sought to mould workers into efficient and responsible breadwinners, willing to work hard in order to further the home-centred values of consumerism and domesticity. The mass migrations of the 1930s were something of a last gasp for the itinerant worker and the wandering agitator, both of whom would be increasingly rare in the postwar world.

In America, the term “tramp” was first used in reference to transient working men in 1873, and quickly entered into the popular lexicon because of the events of the following five years, culminating in the railway strikes of the summer of 1877, as discussed below. But while the language used to characterize transients of all shapes and sizes remained fluid for decades — it would simply take too long to count the number of different words employed in reference to itinerant workers and wanderers in these pages — another picture emerges in these volumes, namely that tramp intellectuals were eventually able to rewrite the classification systems that partially governed their lives, and to do so in ways that stuck.

By this, I don’t mean that hoboes used “hidden transcripts” or other secretive forms of subversion (although they did that too), but rather that they created systems of thought that were incorporated within the most expert of expert texts produced by the Chicago School of Sociology. This process reached its pinnacle with the publication of Nels Anderson’s *The Hobo*. This 1923 volume by a former hobo-cum-academic quickly became certified as expert knowledge. In it, Anderson used Reitman’s own words to define “the three principal types” of those who called Hobohemia home: “There are three types of the genus vagrant, the hobo, the tramp and the bum. The hobo works and wanders, the tramp dreams and wanders and the bum drinks and wanders.”<sup>2</sup> Nicholas Klein, the one-time president of Chicago’s Hobo College, was quoted by Anderson as a warning to those who would confuse these groups:

A hobo is one who travels in search of work, the migratory worker who must go about to find employment.... The tramp is one who travels but does not work, and a bum is a man who stays in one place and does not work. Between these grades there is a great gulf of social distinction. Don’t get tramps and hobos mixed. They are quite different in many respects. The chief difference being that the hobo will work and the tramp will not, preferring to live on what he can pick up at back doors as he makes his way through the country.<sup>3</sup>

Although written and published after the tramping way of life had already begun to wane (and thus too late to translate into humane forms of social policy), *The Hobo* captured the imagination of the sociological marketplace, and, as a result, this triptych is still the “common sense” logic today.

In practical terms, this means that historians of tramping cannot themselves work without confronting the relationship between scholar and subject. Each of these books has its roots in a common, though unarticulated, basic assumption: that America simply can’t be understood unless one understands this trinity of working men, both in its internal dynamics and its relationship to wider social forces. In economic terms, the labour of itinerants in the forests and mines, on the railways, and

<sup>2</sup>Ben Reitman, quoted in Nels Anderson, *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man* (Chicago 1961), 87.

<sup>3</sup>Nicholas Klein, quoted in Anderson, *The Hobo*, 88-89.

on farms, was essential to the expansion of industrial capitalism. Yet, in the labour-intensive resource extraction industries, they were all too easily replaced, if not pitted against one another by bosses seeking to exploit racial, national, and regional tensions. Politically, they were tools of ignorance and corruption — bused in by party bosses and told how to vote in return for money or drink — if not the dangerously mobile bearers of radical ideologies. Morally suspect because of his or her tenuous grasp of the benefits of the work ethic and the unmentionable practices found in the “jungles,” and having culturally regressed under a “state of nature”-like existence, the transient thus existed as a curious hybrid, both fundamentally necessary to the workings of continental capitalism and a threat to tear it apart from within. These three authors have done much to restore the hobo and the tramp (and to a lesser extent, the bum) to their central place in American history.

Tim Cresswell’s *The Tramp in America* is the most theoretically oriented of the three books, and the most interdisciplinary. It is organized around “different knowledges” in which the tramp was constituted. Cresswell argues that the emergent figure of the tramp served to connect equally novel and yet disparate ways of knowing, from sociology and eugenics to silent film and photography: each was “instrumental ... in the process by which the tramp was made up,” and the tramp, “as an embodiment of marginality, was central to the delineation of these new forms of knowledge.” (10-11) He borrows from Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking the notion of “dynamic nominalism,” in which, to quote Hacking, kinds of people “come into being at the same time as the kind itself was being invented.” This approach offers much in the way of potential: as Hacking explains, “if new models of description come into being, new possibilities for action come into being in consequence.” (13) Because the first tramp scare of the 1870s resonated so powerfully in many parts of North America, the invention of the category had profound effects. Cresswell asserts: “I do not mean by this that tramps were simply fabricated. I mean that both the meaning and the materiality of the life of people who came to be called tramps changed when the word tramp and its meaning started to be used.” (49)

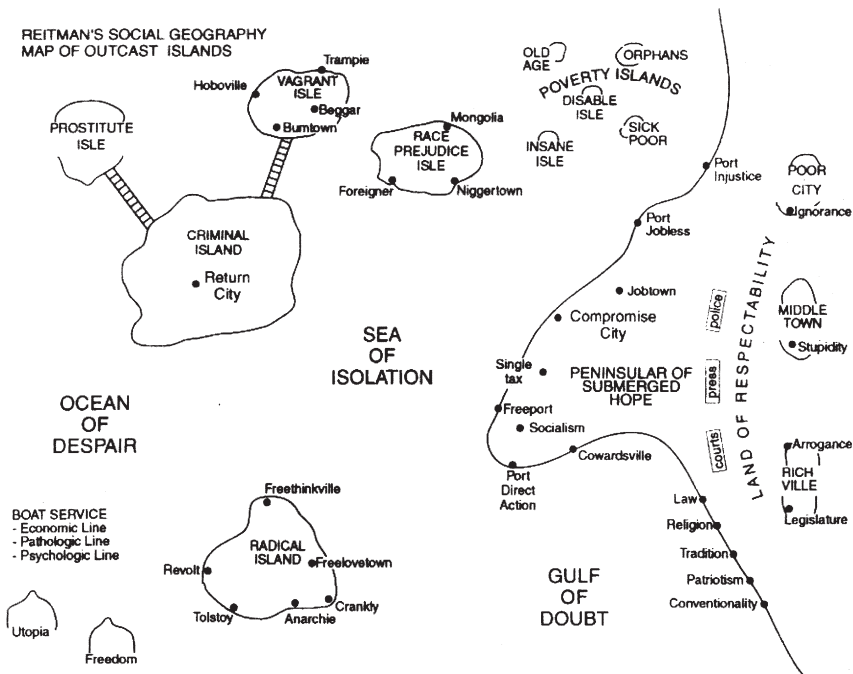
This is, I think, the right approach to take, given the context in which the term “tramp” came to be affixed to transient workers (DePastino notes that in Civil War America, the word commonly signified the long marches of soldiers). Here, however, knowledge about tramps is in most cases envisioned abstractly, in the form of texts to be read — most of the works under consideration would be considered classic representations of tramps — and unfortunately, in most contexts, tramps will never win a battle of books, let alone films, photographs, and the like. *The Tramp in America* offers relatively few transient voices, and these are overshadowed by the relentless onslaught of “the tramp” as rendered by Progressivism, whether in the form of sociology or science, social policy or mass culture. In fact, one occasionally gets the feeling from all three authors that half the scribblers in hobo jungles were sociologists in disguise, slumming for their salary. Of the three books, Cresswell’s

provides the fewest glimpses of the internal dynamics of tramping communities as understood by those who lived the life.

That said, *The Tramp in America* offers many brilliant insights, especially as to the spatial dimensions of this history, and is to be highly recommended. Cresswell argues effectively for the utility of the concept of “marginality” because it “conveys the spatiality of what might otherwise simply be termed deviance or referred to in the numerical concept of a minority.” (11) Central to his book is the notion of “sedentary metaphysics,” a term borrowed from Liisa Malkki. In one sense, the geographic mobility at the heart of tramping fit nicely with the frontier ethic and the quest for upward mobility, not to mention capital’s relentless need for unskilled labourers. But this was only half the story: where tramps roamed, fear and loathing were rarely far behind. Working from Zygmunt Bauman, Martin Heidegger, and Yi-Fu Tuan, Cresswell explores the moral dimensions of concepts like “home” and “place,” and asserts that these became bound up with notions of commitment and rootedness. By comparison, transience conjured up a lack of attachment and thus irresponsibility and disorder: the freedom of mobility could all too easily be understood as a threat to the moral life and stability of a community. And Cresswell is also attentive to the material dimensions of this spatial framework, situating “the necessary relationship between the tramp and the train” in the context of time-space compression and the unemployment and underemployment created in the course of the boom-and-bust cycles of industrial-capitalist development. (28)

Chapter Two, “Knowing the Tramp,” focuses on legal and sociological forms of knowledge and their reliance on spatially bound logics. Each author, in fact, takes a stab at sociology, with Cresswell spending the most time on Nels Anderson and Robert Park, the latter’s concentric ring model of “urban areas” understood as mapping both “geographical space and social space.” (65-67) This chapter ends with a fascinating discussion of a public talk given in November 1910 by Ben Reitman under the auspices of “Outcast Night” in New York City. Cresswell situates Reitman, a key source of information for more than one academic in the Windy City, in his role as “an uneasy bridge between formal knowledge with all its moral judgements, demarcated boundaries and purified spaces and the messy and often invisible world of Chicago’s streets.” (71) That night, Reitman described the subject of his talk as the “social geography” of transient communities. While the text of the speech is lost, there remains his map of “outcast islands,” a truly brilliant visual reworking of the Chicago School from the standpoint of marginality.

Cresswell emphasizes the extent to which the map focused attention on “the forces that lead to and maintain exclusion and, inversely, encourage assimilation.” (77) He notes that one’s life story from the “Land of Respectability” to one or more of the “outcast islands” can in some cases be read from right to left: from “Port Direct Action” to one of the communities on “Radical Island,” for example. The pairing of the vagrant and the prostitute is also revealing of the importance of vagrancy laws generally, I think, although I thought there should be a bridge linking “Race



20 Sketch by the author after Ben Reitman, *Outcast Islands*, c. 1910.

Figure 1.

Prejudice Isle” to “Criminal Island” given the historical importance of legal practices in fostering racial and national subordination. Finally, there is the bright ray of hope in the bottom-left corner, the two islands representing (rival?) visions of liberation, and the three ways to get there. Who would not want to have been in the audience that night?

In “Gendering the Tramp,” Cresswell deftly dissects the masculinist assumptions behind vagrancy legislation, and the extent to which male transients were portrayed as moral and sexual threats to women, especially in the privatized domestic settings of small-town and rural America. He also situates women transients within a broader discussion of women in public, noting that the mobility of female tramps distinguished them from “lady travellers,” prostitutes and *les flâneuses*. For many women, the road meant cross-dressing and other signs of “ambiguous gender and sexual identities,” including stories of a “secretive lesbian subculture,” many of them circulated by Reitman himself, *via* his role in the creation of Boxcar Bertha’s autobiography. (99, 102) This aspect of women’s tramping experience translated into much scientific and popular writing on the nature of their bodies, especially in

regards to physical appearance and health. Eugenicists, too, speculated about the biological underpinnings of “nomadism” and “wanderlust,” serving to pathologize transients and lend ideological support to campaigns to segregate, if not sterilize, tramps as a group. Syphilis was scary on its own; the presence of syphilis within highly mobile communities spelled a disastrous threat to democracy in the minds of many professionals.

Cresswell’s chapter on “laughter and the tramp” explores comics and vaudeville as well as the era of silent film, focusing mostly on Chaplin, whose tramp Cresswell describes as “a weapon directed against authority and discipline.” (131) Unlike the traditional comic tramp, “who was laughed at from a position of superiority,” Chaplin’s character accidentally and playfully mocked the conventions of the American dream such as those of the Fordist workplace, as seen in 1936’s *Modern Times*. Cresswell’s reading situates Chaplin in relation to carnivalesque inversion and what he calls the “subversive geography of laughter.” (159) Finally, *The Tramp in America* takes up photographic representations of transience, discussing the connections among documentary photography, realism, and the creation of “the social” in the works of Jacob Riis, John J. McCook, and Dorothea Lange. The latter was a key figure in the transition of the rhetoric surrounding homelessness in the context of the New Deal: her photographs helped to firmly establish the sympathetic figure of the Okie family, which served to diminish the cultural importance of the character of the tramp during the latter 1930s.

If Cresswell’s book falls short in its offerings of tramp-produced knowledge — a problem which is evidentiary in some respects — his attempts to advance analytical concepts such as “marginality” to address the spatial dimensions of knowledge and his fascinating readings of Chaplin and Reitman make this a worthy contribution to tramp history.

Todd DePastino’s *Citizen Hobo* explores “the history of homelessness as a category of culture as well as economy, focusing especially on how its racialized and gendered meanings shaped the entitlements and exclusions of ‘social citizenship’ in modern America.” (xix) Like Cresswell, DePastino makes fruitful use of the well-known commentators of tramping life during the Gilded Age and Progressive Era — Jacob Riis, Nels Anderson, James McCook, and Carleton Parker especially. Yet, in this volume, these writings are firmly subordinated to context, and surrounded by dozens of other strong voices, all speaking on the lessons about modern life to be found in the lives of hoboes, tramps, and bums. “More than mere shelter or the means of social reproduction, home provides a well of identity and belonging,” he asserts, and *Citizen Hobo* is primarily a meditation on the latter categories, exploring how the “crisis of home” that periodically circulated around the transient worker “was always also one of nationhood and citizenship, race and gender. Each crisis, in turn, reinvigorated efforts to resettle the hobo army and reintegrate the white male ‘floater’ back into the American polity.” (xvii, xix)



Of the three books, *Citizen Hobo* does the best job of situating the transient labourer within the broader history of poverty, periodically underlining the political implications of the centrality of the hobo image for other groups of poor people such as single mothers. One aspect of its mission, then, lies in tracing the emergence of the process whereby the wandering worker became so closely associated with homelessness, both economically and culturally. Railway expansion facilitated what would have been hundreds of millions of short migrations continent-wide by the millions who retained some relationship with the labour market for casual unskilled work. Generally speaking, tramping “was a young man’s pursuit, a virtual stage in the working-class life cycle”: for this majority group, “the road represented a brief stage of poverty, an episodic experience rather than a permanent condition.” (15) In the 1870s, the term “tramp” conveyed the new-found mobility of the unskilled worker, whereas “vagrant” usually referred to the sedentary urban poor. In its first incarnation, the “tramp scare” exposed the contradictions of “free labor” ideology: workers suffered the impersonal character of the labour market in full recognition that they were not counted among “the producers.” In such a context, “freedom” for them was usually delimited, meaning only the freedom to refuse work, and a number of them did exactly that. And the notion of a “tramp army” resonated with the popular memory of the Civil War, leading to the retooling of vagrancy legislation and calls to abolish private charity and public relief programs, which struck some as “reckless generosity” that only exacerbated the problem of transients. This first wave of panic peaked in the summer of 1877 amid the railway strikes involving more than 100,000 workers. Frances Wayland, Dean of Yale Law School, blamed the troubles on “large detachments of our great standing army of professional tramps,” and he was not alone. (24) One of *Citizen Hobo*’s best qualities is its sweeping narrative of the “tramp scare” as it instantly became one of the most significant struggles of the emerging industrial-capitalist order.

For DePastino, the homelessness that was the lot of America’s tramps “denoted a broader-based moral crisis of domesticity.” (25) Against the context of middle-class family formation and its stress on “the home” as a feminized refuge from the public sphere of market activity, the transient was often thought to suffer from a surfeit of masculinity, forced to rely on instincts in a savage natural world. Wayland explained that, outside the home, tramps were “inspired by no motive except a momentary impulse of gain, or lust, or revenge”: for the “innocent maiden on her way to school” or the “farmer’s wife,” the result could be an “outrage worse than murder.” (26-27) Those inspired to comment on the state of transient life could draw from deep wells to offer either natural or environmental explanations, if not a combination of both. Certain kinds of people — marked by racial, national, and other genetic categories — were more likely to become tramps. Yet, “society” could make one take to the road for economic or personal reasons, and once there, the practices and institutions found in actually existing tramping communities

could take hold, leading one to adopt not just the identity, but the way of life that went with it.

DePastino examines sociological practice as a “mode of urban exploration and encounter, a way of seeing that transformed the city itself into ‘a social laboratory’ for the study of human behavior in a modern urban environment.” (127) Sociology could also be a career, of course. While Cresswell emphasized Reitman’s pivotal role in vouching for Nels Anderson to Chicago’s academic community, DePastino sees Robert Park as most responsible for Anderson’s success. He relates how Park helped Nels Anderson with contacts and funding: when Anderson submitted his report, Park edited the manuscript for publication without informing him. *The Hobo* appeared in 1923, making its author “the nation’s leading authority on homelessness and one of the most recognized sociologists in the country.” (128) Intriguingly, most of DePastino’s discussion of Anderson, Park, and their ilk takes place in the second half of the book, set against the backdrop of the waning of Hobohemia. In other words, before we receive the dominant wisdom of the Chicago School, we are treated to glimpses of an already existing “ethic of reciprocity and mutualism” amongst itinerants — the organization in the jungle and on the road of “new forms of obligation and mutual aid among transients rooted in their ‘unapologetic rejections of acquisitivism’.” (69-70) Many workers laboured long enough to earn a “stake,” after which they would hit the road or hole up in a jungle until the money ran out. Once their funds had been exhausted, they would again look for work or rely on the generosity of fellow itinerants. Within Hobohemia itself, the IWW offered an alternative to urban culture, fashioning “a remarkably far-reaching intellectual life on the main stem” *via* the use of newspapers and concerts as well as lectures and debating societies. (100) Locations like the Dill Pickle Club in Chicago housed entertainers as well as activists, and operated as a forum for the free exchange of ideas. Food and shelter, fun and the good fight — all could be found on the main stem.

Yet, the code of the road also had racial hierarchies inscribed within it: generally speaking, Asian and African American itinerants were excluded from jungle life: “For hoboes, the main stem was a domain of the racially privileged” where whites “enjoyed an individual mobility and access not shared by their excluded counterparts.” (78) But while DePastino suggests that “‘whiteness’ served as a mercurial and contradictory, if monumentally important, marker of social difference” and recognizes that European immigrants could be denied the privileges of white skin, he nonetheless relies on a largely undifferentiated notion of “whiteness” that too easily collapses distinctions based on national and linguistic differences. (81) I think this argument would have been improved by incorporating the suggestive comments of David Roediger concerning those he labels “not-yet-white ethnics.”<sup>4</sup> In the Canadian context, for instance, I would argue that “whiteness” was

<sup>4</sup>See David Roediger, “Whiteness and Ethnicity in the History of ‘White Ethnics’ in the United States,” in his *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness* (New York 1994), 181-198.

primarily reserved for Anglo-Canadian transients (or those who could pass as such), while those from Southern and Eastern Europe such as Italians, Ukrainians, and Russians were understood as inferior, both by birthplace and by culture. Their association with political radicalism, particularly during moments of crisis surrounding the “enemy alien,” served only to further mark them as foreign. Following Roediger’s logic, these groups became “white” — and “whiteness” became more important than Britishness — not by matter of course but through struggle. Generally speaking, DePastino’s account could have done more to reflect the significance of national and racial divisions among transients, and the varying responses of foreign-born itinerants to American-style white supremacy.

DePastino spends a good portion of the book exploring the character of transient political activities in the early 20th century. *Citizen Hobo* effectively analyses two of the more significant protest movements, the marches on Washington of the Industrial Armies of 1894 and the Bonus Army of 1932, in relation to the transient’s exclusion from the benefits of white manhood in America. The Bonus Army, for instance, explicitly distanced its membership from that of Hobohemia, instead offering itself “as a spectacle of nationhood” that combined “the masculine romance of the road with the soldierly ideals of war” in an effort to “reconsecrate the obligations and privileges of citizenship.” (197) As well, we are treated to an interesting comparison of the IWW and the International Brotherhood Welfare Association [IBWA], the latter stressing education and uplift as opposed to the Wobblies preference for direct action. For the first decade, the two groups led an uneasy coexistence, until World War I, when the IBWA moved to the left ideologically and tactically. DePastino stresses the identity-based hierarchies found in radical propaganda, offering the gendered reading of the cartoons and songs of the Wobblies in terms similar to Schofield and Shor.<sup>5</sup> At times, the author’s analysis of the “conflation of class-consciousness with virile masculinity and the rejection of feminine civilization” found in these sources seems one-sided. (116) In singling out the figure of the manly hobo radical, we lose the significance of the equally profound (if less frequent) images of “rebel girls,” those who fought in mill towns and those who preached from the soap box. The study of one element of the IWW myth-symbol complex in isolation skews the more contradictory record of the IWW and other leftist organizations in this period.

To convey the broader culture in which the transient workingman figured, DePastino draws from a number of interesting sources, from dime novels to films. His use of poetry — for example, Robert Frost’s “Hired Man” and Walt Whitman’s “Open Road” — does much to enhance his arguments concerning the cultural meanings of home and the vocabulary of inclusion and exclusion that accompanied

<sup>5</sup> Ann Schofield, “Rebel Girls and Union Maids: The Woman Question in the Journals of the AFL and IWW, 1905-1920,” *Feminist Studies*, 9 (1983), 335-358; Francis Shor, “Masculine Power and Virile Syndicalism: A Gendered Analysis of the IWW in Australia,” *Labour History*, 63 (1992), 83-99.

them. That said, *Citizen Hobo* is also attentive to the range of methods whereby values are articulated: its discussion of the municipal lodging house and the philanthropic hotel movement wonderfully demonstrates the turn-of-the-century faith in the potential for rehabilitation of the homeless man. Institutions like hotels would, reformers hoped, allow for the regulation and reintegration of the tramp by relying on bureaucratic forms of administration that “resembled the ‘iron cage’ of instrumental rationality.” (145) In practice, these institutions did mean an improvement in the living conditions of many. Yet, DePastino also reveals the contradiction at work: “by succeeding as much as they did, these initiatives further incorporated homelessness into the very fabric of urban life.” (132)

There is much more to *Citizen Hobo*: some of its more fascinating readings are in the second half of the book, which examines the gradual “resettling of the hobo army” and the entrance of these “forgotten men” into the cultural marketplace, whether through New Deal-sponsored programs or in the fiction of Kerouac and especially Dos Passos. The postwar solidification of the Fordist compromise — in particular its reliance on labour stability and on a gendered division of labour secured through the setting of the nuclear family — meant an “era of domesticity, bureaucratic unionism, and unbridled consumption.” (220) As a result, most white workingmen had little cause, need, or opportunity to live outside of familial-based domestic settings. “Skid Row” was the last holdout of the hobo subculture, while homelessness became largely understood in racial terms as a condition of the “underclass.”

DePastino’s *Citizen Hobo* is an excellent overview of the rise and fall of the American hobo, and I hope that many of its arguments become the new “common sense.” Firmly rooted in an incredibly broad array of sources and displaying a sensitive eye for detail, it deserves a wide readership among historians, students, and even parents and grandparents who may recognize themselves in its pages.

Tobias Higbie’s *Indispensable Outcasts* offers a community-based study of transient workers in the American Midwest from 1880 to 1930. In 2004, it received both the Philip Taft Labor History Book Award and the Social Science History Association’s Allan Sharlin Memorial Award, and deservedly so. *Indispensable Outcasts* is not so much a model of social history as an instant classic that belongs in every classroom and on every comprehensive field list.

Higbie’s study explores the well-traversed ground covered by Cresswell and DePastino, and, aptly for a study of hoboes, moves beyond it. Particularly effective are the ways in which Higbie situates hoboes within the labour markets of both urban areas and the countryside. For much of the Progressive era, people regarded the American Midwest as the “heartland of the family farm,” a place where independent producers reigned in stark contrast to the nation’s cities, home to increasingly powerful industrial concerns and class conflict. Yet, Higbie operates at the juncture of labour and rural history, noting that the combination of industrial-capitalist growth and mass immigration “transformed the countryside as surely as it did cit-

ies.” (7) *Indispensable Outcasts* also looks beyond tramping subcultures to examine the connections between transients and residents in rural and small-town communities, from whom tramps could receive “an important margin of freedom from the labor market” in the form of food, shelter, and other kinds of support. (13) Finally, Higbie sensitively integrates gender analysis in his study of hobo workers in order to criticize those scholars unable to see anything but a violent “rough culture” on the road and in the jungles. “If the geographic metaphor for community is the neighborhood, seasonal laboring men as a group were at once part of tens of thousands of neighborhoods and outcasts from all communities.” (11)

*Indispensable Outcasts* generally sticks to hoboes, those who wandered and worked. Drawing from sociologist John Hall, Higbie suggests that the relationship of transients to labour markets was as important as their relationship to production. In this regard, many transients used the railroad to move easily from city to country in search of seasonal work. As well, work in rural settings could present an alternative to urban jobs that were considered more oppressive. Higbie traces the life history of several migrants, using maps to wonderfully illustrate the mobility of those in the unskilled labour market. In an eight-year period, Norman Daniel made at least eighteen separate journeys in search of work, one of which took him to the Philippines for four years with the American Army. Daniel moved easily back and forth between urban and rural labour markets: leaving his job at a Kansas City quarry after a “Negro boss” made what he saw as unreasonable demands, Daniel followed the wheat harvest, working some jobs and refusing others he thought paid too little. At the same time, conditions in the countryside were hardly ideal: dangerous working conditions and unsanitary living conditions were all too common, and the possibilities for exploitation by bosses and employment agents many. “Rural workers’ unwillingness to work for going wages and the high turnover rate among urban workers,” notes Higbie, “were two sides of the same coin.” (10)

*Indispensable Outcasts* also illuminates the ensemble of market and social relations on the family farm. Mechanization allowed farmers with capital to increase efficiency and reduced the need for common labour. In an often vain effort to match this level of output, the less prosperous relied increasingly on itinerants. These mostly young working men, for whom hoboing was a rite of passage and a stage in the life cycle, encountered this agrarian labour market in ways already shaped by patriarchal relations, and often found themselves negotiating the internal hierarchies of the farming household. “Laboring men were a living link between the rural household and the market economy that farmers hoped to use to their advantage but keep at arm’s length.” (48)

The third chapter explores the “social geography of work and community”: age, occupation, and skill provided the basis for hobo-generated systems of categorization, as did race, sex, and politics. For women transients, the road could mean reuniting with family or the freedom to escape from one, if not from other forms of incarceration. There, they experienced a range of gender and sexual relationships

shaped by the broader context of dependence, from rape and forced prostitution to more consensual commercial exchanges and genuinely affective relationships. “Although violence between men and by men against women was an ever-present threat, less destructive relationships were common,” Higbie concludes. (122) As well, he suggests that the “invisibility of homosexuality” — that is, apart from its predominance in the writings of sociologists — may be traced to the ubiquity of the dyad of the road, the older experienced tramp who protects or exploits (or both) younger men. Such relationships were key to the “apprenticeship of the road,” and were often described in sexual terms — ‘jockers’ and ‘prushuns’, ‘wolves’ and ‘lambs’, even ‘husbands’ and ‘wives’. More to the point, their “pervasive” character means that same-sex sexual activity could often have gone unnoticed or unremarked within hobo communities. (124) In short, Higbie argues that “men seeking the sexual companionship of other men did not necessarily give up their manliness.” (100)

Race and nationality also structured the lives of hoboes, helping to determine where they worked and the kind of work involved as well as the kind of living conditions found in labour camps. Census data suggest that, on the farm, the bulk of transient workers were native-born; only 11.6 per cent of wage workers on farms were foreign-born, compared to 36.3 per cent of nonfarm labourers. Generally speaking, native-born whites and “Americanized” Europeans were typically seen as “white.” Southern and Eastern Europeans were lumped together as “foreigners,” while African Americans, Japanese, Mexican, and Aboriginal itinerants were individuated. Whiteness had its privileges, in that foremen often adopted preferential hiring policies. But while conflicts between “white men” and “foreigners” were not unknown in tramping communities, Higbie stakes out a position similar to Roediger’s analysis of the “not-yet-white ethnics” in arguing that “the boundary between [these two categories] was real but not impermeable.” (112) Seeking solidarity, the IWW publicly attacked racial and national divisions among transients. Yet, organizers often employed ethnic and racial slurs in their propaganda, and a series of violent incidents involving hoboes and IWW members, white and black, effectively killed any real campaign, although there were glimmers of hope: one group of black men accused by Wobbly harvest hands of robbing them landed in jail, where they met more Wobblies. The next morning in the courtroom, the Wobbly witnesses failed to recognize the accused men, who, by this time, were Wobblies too.

One of *Indispensable Outcasts*’s considerable strengths is the manner in which Higbie weaves the Wobblies into the fabric of the whole book, rather than confining them to the typical chapter on unionization drives and free speech fights among the bindlestiffs. The final chapter, which looks at mutuality and violence among hobo workers, draws from the life histories of several IWWers to construct a portrait of transient life much more complicated than one of complete degradation or hypermasculine aggression. In particular, Higbie argues for the existence of an

ethos of “transient mutuality,” which, while fashioned in a context of “social marginalization,” was nonetheless a “marker of community among migrants and between migrants and nonmigrants who chose to help them.” (176) While starvation and violence were always present in hobo jungles, so too was much mutual support, coming in both material and moral forms. For their part, IWW organizers sought to remake what Progressive Era sociologists saw as degraded and hungry bodies into manly vessels of rebellion, and to redirect violence, to be used in the struggle against employers, railroad bulls, strikebreakers, and vigilantes as well as the occasional criminal enterprise.

Finally, Higbie analyses the tramp investigators of the period. While observing that information about the lives of homeless men would be scant indeed without the writings of academics and other observers from outside the jungles, Higbie emphasizes the “deeply ambivalent” stances taken by sociologists and other knowledge-producers. On one hand, they feared the dirt, disease, danger, and idleness that was the lot of the homeless man. On the other, whatever their views of the tramps, they characterized tramping itself as “a liberating experience.” (75) For their part, transients devised alternative interpretations of their physical and moral existence, offering “less the inverse of the investigators’ version of a downward life course than an alternative perspective on the same basic information.” (177)

I have really just scratched the surface here. Put one way, I seriously doubt that the sources exist to allow Canadian historians to duplicate Higbie’s considerable accomplishments, although it is no small consolation that he draws from our secondary literature, using Danysk on prairie bachelorhood and Parr on working-class manliness to inform his analysis. Chapter by chapter, *Indispensable Outcasts* combines the best of the ‘new social history’ — the first post-Thompsonian generation, for whom ‘experience’ was central — with that of the second-generation ‘new social history’ — the ‘race, class, sex, and gender’ generation. I was particularly struck by the insights gained by situating the Wobblies within, rather than against, the communities and cultures fashioned by hoboing workers and tramping wanderers. Of the three, Higbie provides the fullest and most vivid picture of the lives of his subjects.

Those more inclined toward the theoretical should start with Cresswell. Those who want historical narrative with a focus on citizenship would be better served by DePastino. All should finish with *Indispensable Outcasts*. Taken together, these books make the history of the transient worker say much about America.