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Jeffrey Ian Ross

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John F. Lennon

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Trains, railroad workers and illegal riders
The subcultural world of hobo graffiti

John F. Lennon

Introduction

Much as beat generation author Jack Kerouac attempted to do in literature, Harry Partch set out in music to capture a particular (masculine) spirit of America through experimental methods. One of the premiere composers of the twentieth century, Partch crafted his own instruments, threw out long sacred rules of compositional style and included within his text bawdy and personal conversations, all in a search of an authentic musical language. His inspirations – and conversations – often were realized on the road. And like Kerouac, Partch was fascinated with hobos.

Two of his major compositions, Bitter Music and US Highball, are specifically about his own hobo experiences during the early part of the twentieth century, highlighting the ways Partch played with language and tone to recreate an aura around this distinctly American tradition of traveling. Bitter Music explicitly details the loneliness of the hobo lifestyle, with its interspersed snatches of hobo conversations that expressed his alienating search for food, shelter, and sexual gratification in jungle camps and railroad yards throughout the country. US Highball, about a later hobo trip Partch embarked upon, is an aural montage of the protagonist Slim’s hobo trip to Chicago. Slim’s narrative interactions with other hobos and his crude and sometimes playful observations are distorted by Partch’s compositional method, forcing the listener to consistently attempt to decipher the hobo argot. By experimenting with the sound of actual conversations he had with other hobos, or by creating songs around the graffiti he spotted and jotted down in his journals while shuttling around in boxcars, Partch’s music taps into a refracted personal and national history.

Partch is interested in the tone of language – the way a hungry and tired hobo pronounces a certain turn of a phrase, or the comical inventiveness of a made-up word that a hobo uses to get his point across. Being accurate with these words and phrases was important to Partch but not in the same way a historian is beholden to his interviewees’ words. Rather, he was attempting to tap into the hidden codes of the hobo parlance. The layers of meaning – of what words say and don’t say – mattered to this composer and it is therefore no wonder that in the midst of his travels as a young man, he would find a specific interest in the graffiti of other transients.
Stuck in Barstow, California, in February 1940, he found eight different pieces of graffiti scratched into a railing that were, “eloquent in what it fails to express in words” (Gilmore 1998: 129). They were messages and complaints; seemingly simplistic offers of love and sex. They revealed a multitude of pressing desires, all dated and signed by different hands that were miles and perhaps years down the road. Hidden in plain sight, upon discovery, Partch was “thoroughly aroused by this sudden fountainhead of Americana.” Referred by Partch as a “Hobo Concerto,” the resulting musical work, Barstow, is sonically built by layering the graffiti messages, poetically arraigning the lived statements of everyday life from a certain segment of a hidden American populace (Gilmore 1998: 127–135).

I start off this chapter of hobo graffiti with a discussion of this “rebel composer” of American music for two reasons: When Partch sat shivering in boxcars, he took out a pen and wrote in his notebooks the words and symbols that he read because he knew that they were conduits into an American subcultural world that was consistently transforming. By recording them, he gave voice to forgotten men on the outskirts of society who marked their lives both materially and figuratively in the language and symbols that they used. But just as importantly, Partch knew that this subcultural world could never be fully revealed because it was also a ruse: the language, full of puns and made-up words, hid as much as they revealed. Partch, therefore, used the words of hobos (both written and spoken) not as a historical account, but as a musical platform to create an aura of hobo life. Hobos were an “invisible” subculture who survived by disappearing from sight in boxcars in one particular location before suddenly appearing in another part of the country. Their invisibility was the key to their movement and the graffiti on the walls of train cars, water towers or railroad towns speak of this transience. This graffiti is a testament to the everyday life of hobos that sometimes playfully and sometimes angrily reveals more about the instability and evolving nature of graffiti’s symbolic power than the subculture itself. Referring to the graffiti he saw scratched along both asphalt and iron roads in his songs that challenge the listener into hearing the hobo language in new musical tones and arraignments, Partch did not create a myth around hobo graffiti. Instead, he laid bare the myth itself, showing the way this transient subculture can never be fully understood by those on the outside who only “know” hobos by examining the graffiti left behind.

To discuss hobo graffiti – and hobos themselves – one must, like Partch, also deflate the large myths surrounding this subcultural form of expression. Google “hobo signs,” and webpage after webpage will reveal an intricate sign language system that hobos supposedly used. Like the symbolic, ubiquitous muted horn graffiti in Thomas Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49, these signs supposedly mask a hidden, sophisticated subculture with a strong infrastructure and regulated foot soldiers. In my research on the hobo, however, I do not see conclusive evidence to support this idea. Hobos were transient working class men and women who traveled by train, looking for jobs and sustenance in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. They were resourceful as they lived on the margins of society. Integral players in the political economy of the United States, they were needed when their labor power was in demand but quickly seen as dangerous and drains on society when they weren’t. Like any subculture, they lived by their own rules and formed their own codes of conduct that were internally policed within jungles (hobo encampments) and boxcars. And hobos certainly did write graffiti – waiting in sidetracked train cars or passing the hours in jungles, graffiti relieved boredom and was an outlet for artistic, creative, and political expression. It was also a way to communicate with other hobos in rudimentary ways – much in the same vein that New York City subway writers in the 1970s communicated with each other when tagging trains (Austin 2001: 38–75).

The myth surrounding hobo graffiti as a sophisticated language system, however, must be carefully examined. For example, does a box with a line emerging from its side universally mean
to hobos that “alcohol is in this town” as some have suggested (Wanderer 2002: 218)? In my research, I have found no evidence for this type of sophisticated symbolic language being used by a large swath of the hobo population. Hobo graffiti does not reveal an intricate symbolic language written by hobos during the Great Depression (and, conveniently, can be sold on t-shirts and hats on eBay in the present day). Instead, it helps us frame the working class politics of the hobo lifestyle within the narrative of graffiti history.

The hobo

A quick review of the hobo is needed before we can discuss the subculture’s graffiti. The hobo figure originated from a specific set of economic and technological entanglements in the United States in the second half of the nineteenth century. The anxiety felt by the nation due to the new factory labor system, immigration, and increasingly vociferous underclass found symbolic embodiment in this itinerant figure (Phontinos 2007: 995). Many hobos, however, saw not villainy in this lifestyle, but a practical way to live. Most folk histories of the hobo begin with returning veterans from the Civil War who, after finding their homes in ruins, and having already been accustomed to traveling by train during the war, became itinerant agricultural laborers. Some stories suggest that these “hoe boys” did not like the derogatory nature of this term and combined the words, creating hobo for a more positive self-identity (Higbie 2003: 5). Although this origin story is somewhat suspect, this narrative does reveal a crucial identity marker for the hobo: they were workers. Reitman echoes many critics, scholars and other hobos when he categorizes the homeless into three groups: “The hobos who work and wander, the tramps who dream and wander, and the bums who drink and wander” (cited in Anderson 1923: 4). While traveling was connected to all three, according to this often used definition, what separated hobos from the rest of the homeless were their willingness to work. Unlike tramps and bums who avoided work, hobos prided themselves on their ability to find employment by illegally hopping trains to get from job to job (whether that job was in the next town, next state or across national borders in Canada or Mexico). There were two main aspects that made one a hobo: being a self-identified transient worker (even if the individual was without a job for long stretches of time) who travelled by illegally riding trains (Anderson 1923: 87–107). By the late 1890s, this new mobile working-class subculture had differentiated themselves from many other migrants who were part of what Schwantes describes as the “wageworkers’ frontier” (1985: 150).

As “indispensable outcasts,” the hobo was a member of a working-class subculture that was necessary, as Montgomery writes, “to nearly all forms of manufacturing, transportation and commerce” in the United States (1987: 60). Not mere vestiges held over from a preindustrial society, hobos fulfilled an essential economic requirement for the country. The railroad, steel and other major industries needed large amounts of laborers; the powerful trains advertised in glossy brochures would not move across the continent if itinerant manual laborers did not arduously strike the rails into the ground. Besides the rail industry, hobos were employed in a variety of agricultural and industrial jobs throughout the United States. Often times, laborers would quit their jobs in the steel mills in the East during the summer months and travel West to harvest wheat or beets only to return again East as the air turned cold, repeating the cyclical geographical traveling the following year (DePastino 2003: 59–85; Higbie 2003: 25–66; Montgomery 1987: 59–60).

But while hobos were part of the working class, there was an obvious difference between hobos following the spring harvests through Cedar City, Utah and generational steel workers in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. An essential part of this difference was the way that hobos defined
themselves. Not tied to one job or geographical area, many hobos thought of themselves as workers who picked up various employments along the way – as opposed to being defined by a particular job in a specific geographic locale – and therefore could move to a different locale or job whenever they wanted. (Anderson 1923: 107–125; Higbie 2003: 8). In 1,349 interviews conducted by McCook in 1889, Solenberger’s data on One Thousand Homeless Men from 1900 to 1903, and Mills’ 1914 investigation of seasonal labor in California, all three investigators concluded that a majority of transient workers (which would include members of the hobo subculture) articulated their ability to transition from job to job as a way to escape the confines of a stultifying industrial environment. Hobos saw themselves as workers, but their relationship to the work force was different from those who hitched plows on farms in Ohio or smelt iron in Pittsburgh plants. The working class was not a monolithic entity and hobos were one subgroup; traveling from job to job in boxcars allowed hobos a particular labor vision that deviated from other working class individuals.

This ability to move made the hobo an object of study by those who were not hobos – resulting in draconian policies designed to keep the transient immobile (Creswell 2001: 48–87). There was generally a clear divide between the citizens of the town and the hobo who was traveling through their streets looking for jobs and sustenance. In national news, discussions of the itinerant worker were hyperbolic and often hysterical in nature and, as DePastino explains, this rhetoric highlighted many deep rooted socio-economic issues that had caused tensions in the decades after the Civil War including the socio-economic divides between the propertied and homeless over the use of public space and the rising numbers of transient workers converging in towns during the middle of the night (2003: 8). Hobos broke with official conventions of social, economic, and religious life and, like all homeless, were seen as pathologically harmful to their communities. Their poverty was explained as self-imposed rather than economic or political. Hobos were often viewed as suffering from “wanderlust” or other moral depravities and kept at arm’s length; they were ostracized as voluntary dropouts from the working class rather than a vital subculture within it (Anderson 1923: 82–83).

The transcontinental railroads transformed the United States and are symbolic of American capitalism at the turn of the twentieth century. Described as a bully, the railroad is loud and overpowering (Lennon 2013; Schwantes and Ronda 2008; White 2011: 1–37). Hobos, however, did not try to stand up to the bully; rather, they stole from him by sneaking onto trains. To speak about hobos is to therefore speak about their connection to trains. This subcultural connection is literal and symbolic. Expanding on the view of Verstraete (2002: 145), who states, “systems of transportation and communication have been the site of fierce struggles for power among the nation-builders,” the awesome technology that the train represents is also a site of struggle among those excluded from true citizenship. By hopping a train, hobos, whether they were members of the Industrial Workers of the World trying to cause revolution or distraught fathers trying to find money to send back home, were materially offering their bodies as resistance to the progress of an expanding capitalist society that the transcontinental railroad promised in its curling smoke and screeching wheels (Kornbluh 1988: 65–83; McGuckin 1987). The train is a powerful symbol and example of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American capitalism, and by physically stealing a ride, hobos were parasitic as they attempted to get to the next town, state, or nation. This materiality of resistance – of living the body politic – is crucial to understanding the hobo subculture. By hopping trains and disappearing into boxcars in one place and entering a new one the next day, hobos, consciously or not, were offering resistance, literally and symbolically, to the “progress” of the country underwritten by finance capitalism and embodied by the train. By stealing rides, hobos were parasitic to the life...
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force of the train (and to the profit margins of the owner of these railroads), and like parasites circulating within blood, they sometimes went unnoticed, often caused minor ailments, and frequently had the potential to inflict serious illness (Lennon 2014).

Hobo graffiti

Since graffiti can be a resistive political act, it is not unsurprising that this medium fits well into the hobo lifestyle. Like TAKI 183, whose job as a messenger brought him into contact with all areas of New York City, hobos’ jobs (and search for jobs) kept them in constant transit and the numerous boxcars they found themselves within offered plenty of canvases for their thoughts and messages (Austin 2001: 49). Produced before the era of aerosol cans, this graffiti was marked using oil based paints or carved into wooden boxcars (Burns 2005: 3). But a fascinating wrinkle into the complex world of hobo graffiti shows that much of the work often attributed to hobos actually did not come from them at all. Burns writes that train graffiti “inhabit[s] two specific worlds bound together by iron rails and wooden ties” (2005: 10). The first world is one of the railroad employees who were some of the most prolific train writers. Working in rail yards coupling cars together hours at a time, railroad workers were constantly in contact with trains. But while on duty, some rebelled against the rules of the company, painting train cars with their monikers – both hoboing and writing graffiti were illegal acts and therefore nicknames were often used (Burns 2005: 14; Gastman et al. 2006: 290–294). As one writer-employee succinctly stated about producing graffiti during company hours in Daniel’s documentary of the subject, “They can’t have all my time.” Two of the most prolific writers of freight graffiti–Herby and Bozo Texino – worked in the train yards for the majority of their lives, producing tens of thousands of their monikers and drawings. These simplistic, easily reproduced graffiti would be sent zigzagging across the country; although the trainmen were stationary in their particular yards, these images shuttled over hundreds of thousands of miles (Ferrell 2006: 596–598; Gastman et al. 2006: 288–312). As another prolific writer showcased in Daniel’s film, The Rambler, poignantly stated, “I’ll never get [to far off places], might as well send something.” Stealing company time to illegally mark their monikers on trains offered a creative outlet for these men who, unlike hobos, were rooted in particular places.

The second bounded world of hobo graffiti, according to Burns (2005), is the graffiti produced by hobos themselves. This work is extremely similar to the graffiti done by rail workers underlining the symbiotic relationship between the two worlds. An article in a 1939 issue of Railroad Magazine highlights this interrelatedness:

In addition to human faces and forms, students of boxcar calligraphy bump into figures of animals now and then, also pictures of trains and locomotives, but rarely any other type of machine. Most of these masterpieces are drawn by hoboes while they are waiting for freights or loafing around warehouses. Or, perchance, while enjoying free transportation at the company’s expense. Other sketches are done by railroad men in terminal yards (Hecox 1939: 30).

As Hultkrins (2005) rightly points out when discussing this quote in the context of the world of hobo graffiti, there is a nonexistent divide between the world of the hobo and the world of the rail worker when it comes to producing graffiti – and “students of boxcar calligraphy” would be unable to tell which one was done by a hobo and which one was done by a rail worker. Standing on the sides of tracks, watching trains make their way past, the graffiti these observers would most often see would consist of an image or logo, a moniker, a date, and sometimes a particular location (Ferrell 2006: 597). The graffiti being produced could be read as both practical and political–it could be quickly reproduced train car after train car all the while declaring an
illegal presence on the train for the writer. Both hobo and trainmen were part of the working class and their graffiti framed within the same hobo graffiti tradition that offered a physical announcement of the hidden, working lives of those that were intimately connected to trains. Frank Norris, a naturalist writer at the turn of the twentieth century, called the railroad conglomeration an Octopus who had a stranglehold of all the pieces of the political economy of the United States; by writing graffiti, hobos showed that these invisible voices were not completely choked off as they continued to leave markers of their presence on trains (Kornbluh 1988: 65–93)

**Framing hobo graffiti**

A 1972 ad for Heublein’s “Hobo Wife” cocktail in *Life Magazine* tells the fictional story of J.B. King, a millionaire who inherited railroads, but was unsatisfied with his life and decided to become a hobo. But although he eschewed the money and comfort afforded to him from his class position, he did not give up on the memory of ownership and started doing graffiti “on all the cars I owned just to remind myself they belonged to me” (in Daniels 2008: 11). While this fictional ad campaign was designed to show the hidden regalness of a “full strength cocktail,” it does tap into an idea popularized by many graffiti writers: writing your name implies a type of ownership (Gastman et al. 2006: 286). For J.B. King, it reminded him of actual ownership; for hobos, their names on the train symbolically rendered pieces of the train to them. Graffiti is one way for members of a disenfranchised subculture to claim a symbolic presence; by writing their monikers and symbols on train cars, these writers claimed their particular space on the train. If hobos were seen at inopportune times, they could be arrested or, worse, thrown out of train cars at high speeds; a great number of “tramp graves” throughout the United States speak of the dangerousness of being caught by railroad detectives “protecting” the property of their companies (Bailey 1973: 52–56; Barth 1969: 10; Black 1923: 62; Lawson 1980: 20). Being invisible was not only prudent, allowing hobos to get where they wanted to go, it was also a way to usurp the power dynamics as poor, homeless workers were able to escape from the watchful eye of the railroad companies (London 1907: 122–152). The cat-and-mouse game that hobos played “catching out” (hopping trains) and their lives hung in the balance, but by remaining unseen, the poor, penniless hobo beat the railroad company, parasitically stealing a ride. To be seen would invite potential grave danger, but their moniker placed on a train car stated their presence long after they had absconded.

Hobo graffiti can therefore be read in much the same way as reading New York City graffiti during the heyday of the subways – by placing their name on a train, writers were making their presence felt (Austin 2001: 38–75; Castleman 1982: 52–66). But while subway cars traverse a small geographic area, train cars could potentially travel over the whole continent – or across national boundaries into Canada and Mexico. Fame in NYC graffiti subculture was having your name seen in all the boroughs; fame in hobo community was having your name seen throughout the whole country or beyond (Ferrell 2006: 589–592). Hobo graffiti, therefore, is a subcultural reading and writing practice. Two short examples from a pair of famous hobos turned writers – Jack London and Jim Tully – will help explicate this particular type of communication system.

The man who would become a champion of the Socialist Labor Party of America (SLP) and tireless advocate for (white) workers anti-capitalism efforts was also a man who prided himself on being a premiere hobo. Jack London epitomized a specific subset of hobos: the individualistic rider who defined his self-worth by his train-hopping ability. It was a competitive individualist stance that placed him, at times, in competition with all members of society, including those within his hobo subculture (Lennon 2010). This competitive streak is epitomized in his graffiti
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as described in a tale from his book *The Road*. London’s moniker was “Sailor Jack” which he was fond of carving into trains and water towers. While hopping trains throughout Canada, he saw the moniker of “Skysail jack.” Perhaps because the name was too close to his own moniker, London then “chased clear across Canada over three thousand miles of railroad” following after the hobo (1907: 122). They never did meet but their race, described as a hyper-masculine competition where there were neither prizes nor even rules – just who could get farther ahead of the other – was marked by a trail of graffiti left in each other’s wake. As London describes,

I was a “comet” and “tramp-royal,” so was Skysail jack; and it was up to my pride and reputation to catch up with him. I “railroaded” day and night, and I passed him; then turn about he passed me. Sometimes he was a day or so ahead, and sometimes I was (1907: 123).

They knew of each other’s travels by watching the water towers and looking for their competitor’s moniker and date notifying when the other had passed through towns. The names were easy to miss and there was little information conveyed; however, it allowed for these two hobos to form a competitive bond. London states that he encountered hundreds of hobos when traveling “who passed like ghosts, close at hand, unseen, and never seen” (1907: 122). By reading hobo graffiti, London was able to “see” others in his “invisible” subculture, allowing him the opportunity to mark his status in the hobo hierarchy. London prided himself on his position in the hobo subculture and graffiti allowed him to secure his spot.

Not all hobos, however, were as competitive as London. Jim Tully, a contemporary of London both as a hobo and writer, published over the course of ten years during the 1920s and early 1930s, the five books of the Underworld Series that detailed his early life and wanderings on the road, showcasing his distinct style of short, hard-hitting sketches of poor dispossessed individuals. At their best, these books reveal an underclass of forgotten, wandering men at the beginning of the twentieth century. Brimming with dark humor, an undercurrent of raw violence weaves itself throughout all the stories. Moving away from the naturalist mode of Frank Norris, Tully was a hard-boiled realist writer with a penchant for sharp phrases pulsing throughout these texts (Lennon 2013). *Beggars of Life* specifically details his life as a hobo and the value he recognized in hobo graffiti. In one episode, Tully finds himself in a boxcar with other men. Noticing a hobo carving his moniker into the train, Tully writes, “When he had finished, he stood up and admired it like an artist. An arrow was cut through the letters of his name. It pointed west, and denoted the direction in which he was traveling. The month and the year of the trip were cut beneath the name . . . forming a crude directory for other tramps who might be interested in the itinerary of their comrades” (1924: 142). Here we see a symbolic communication system that uses the actual train itself to send and receive messages. Only those who are within the subculture, can read – or even think to look at – these systems embodied within the train. Learning to read graffiti is taught from one hobo to another as new riders become acquainted with more seasoned riders. In this way, graffiti is a way to link individuals, even though these people have no prior knowledge of one another and may not have even met. Reflecting the individuality of the person, these markings or monikers help to imaginatively suture the geographically disperse hobo subculture together.

What London’s and Tully’s retelling of their experiences with hobo graffiti shows is that these markings on the train represent a physical reminder of the illegal relationship that individuals shared with the subculture through their contact with the train. The railroad, as Verstraete states, is much more than a technology of transportation; it is also a technology of representation “about figuratively emplacing a specific citizenry” at the cost of others (2002: 150). But what this graffiti
shows is that the displacement is never fully complete and individual hobos are (literally) leaving their marks on the train to be read by other members of a subculture who are parasitically appropriating the train. Hobo graffiti is a type of communication that had both practical and symbolic value for members of the hobo community.

**Hobo graffiti is graffiti**

Many experts assume that during the 1930s hobos developed a highly sophisticated pictorial language that became a “living, associative map keys for orienteering in strange places” for “hundreds or thousands” of the transient poor (Campbell 2001). Although many have repeated these stories as fact, there is no documented proof that exists to support these claims. Although it seems reasonable that some hobos could have used common symbols – especially in populated urban centers – to communicate certain information, my research has shown that hobo graffiti is comprised of much more basic materials: monikers, dates, and logos. The examples from London, Tully, and Partch remove hobo graffiti from a pedestal of a sophisticated language system that supposedly revealed a secret coded history of hobos. Instead, these writers’ examples place hobo graffiti within the larger overall history of graffiti, where wall markings are about illegally emplacing a name on property, symbolically stating their presence as a member of minority subculture. As transient workers, hobos had only a fingertip grip on the bottom rung of the U.S. economy. But with their other hand free, many wrote their monikers on the trains, stating that, for a time at least, they had occupied a space on a train.

**References**


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