

Perseverance of North American Train Hopping Travels
A Look at the Past & the Present

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A Thesis
in
The Department
of
Sociology & Anthropology

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts (Anthropology) at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

September 2018

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CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

School of Graduate Studies

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ABSTRACT

Perseverance of North American Train Hopping Travels A Look at the Past & the Present

Drawing on ethnographic materials gathered at three different locations namely Britt, Montreal and online, this thesis looks at aspects of the persistence of contemporary train hopping travels from the perspective of young adult travelers who hopped and traveled via freight trains, once and again, between North American locales. To better understand the current contexts and motivations that continue to entice these travelers to engage in train hopping journeys, I sought to review the historical backgrounds or processes that encouraged earlier forms of train hopping travels in North America especially between the few decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. In considering the orientations of the interlocutors participating in this research in light of the historical accounts associated with earlier train hopping travels, this thesis suggests that a certain category of travelers is likely to continue their involvement in train hopping journeys because they consider themselves particularly advantaged in knowing how to navigate the prohibited space of railroad freight lines. More specifically, these travelers derive a peculiar sense of pride in fashioning a style of train hopping by continuing to improvise new train hopping paths of their own. Such improvised paths are not only uncertain, irregular, unpaved or un-pedestrian-like, hence difficult to navigate, but also diverge from other previous yet ephemeral routes. The willingness of some insiders to the train hopping traveling culture to resume finding or tracing their own fleeting paths to a departing freight railcar machine may account in part for the persistence of train hopping journeys today. At times, a few will never hesitate to encourage or even take other potential travelers on such journeys.

Keywords

Train hopping, Freight hopping, Tramping, Hoboing, and Catching out

Acknowledgements

To my dear father Sidi-Mohamed, my friend, mentor and source of inspiration. Thank you for all your encouragements and generous support.

To Hakima, Driss, Meryam and Kawtar. You are just amazing and lively. I miss you and I love you all.

A very special gratitude goes to my thesis supervisor Prof. Vered Amit. Thank you so much for instilling the pleasures of learning, thinking and writing. Your guidance and mentorship were particularly helpful in producing this thesis.

With a special mention to Prof. Christine Jourdan, Prof. Sally Cole, Prof. Kregg Hetherington, Prof. David Howes, Prof. Meir Amor, Prof. Maximilian Forte and several others at the Department of Sociology and Anthropology. Thank you all for teaching me a wide variety of concepts, methods and skills on how to conduct ethnographic research from an ethical and a critical stance.

Thanks Alessandra and Tarran for reading some of the drafts and encouraging me to keep on writing.

Finally, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the interlocutors who agreed to participate in this research project. Thank you so much for your time and your willingness to talk about your train hopping journeys. You were my companions during my fieldwork and I have learned so much from you all. Safe travels for those who are still on the road. Take care.

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GLOSSARY

Train Hopping Terms

Train hopping or Freight hopping: The act of surreptitiously boarding a freight train with the intention of traveling elsewhere.

Catching out: The act of hopping or jumping onto a freight train

Dirty kids travelers: A category of train hopping travelers known for hopping freight trains as a means of traveling across North America.

Oogles: Inexperienced travelers who show up nearby railroads with the intention of ‘catching out’.

Hop out spots: Specific locations from which to hop on and off a freight train.

Flying a sign: Panhandling or making money on the road.

Skunk: bandana used to cover the mouth and the nose of travelers during train hopping rides.

Hobo jungles: campgrounds that host gatherings of hoboes, tramps and train hopping travelers.

Catch the Westbound: Pass away.

Abbreviations

DIY: Do It Yourself principles.

CN: Canadian National Railway Company.

CCG: Cabin Crew Change document.

CCGV: Centre Culturel Georges-Vanier auditorium.

GPS: Global Positioning System tracker.

FTRA: Freight train riders of America organization.

Introduction: On the Practice of Train Hopping

The term train hopping (freight hopping) denotes the illicit act of boarding a freight train for the purposes of traveling elsewhere. As a surreptitious form of travel, train hopping often involves trespassing onto a railway property for an eventual ‘jump’ onto a railcar machine of a freight train either in slow motion or awaiting clearance to move. One may conceive of the act of train hopping then as an intense moment of encounter between an adventurous train hopping traveler and a freight railcar machine. Such an encounter is likely to culminate in intermittent train hopping travels ranging from short local trips to extended journeys within and across Canada and the US. Obviously, there are no (passenger) seats in the restrained space of a freight railcar machine to accommodate transient train hoppers unless one is lucky enough to sneak into a caboose designed specifically for crew members.

Overall, according to most research interlocutors, navigation of train hopping routes appears as an uncertain multifaceted process that requires at least a degree of resilience and alertness to the surrounding environment. For instance, the capacity to move about railroad premises, undetected, predisposes familiarity with a set of skills, tactics and pragmatic calculations that may or may not help in catching a good train hopping ride. In addition, the experience of traveling inside a freight railcar machine can be tiresome, uncomfortable and boisterous especially when the locomotive gains momentum in unpleasant weather conditions. Despite such inconveniences, among many others that will emerge in the ethnographic chapters, train hopping journeys are not only still carried out nowadays by certain travelers but are also continuing to generate ongoing online and offline discussions in a myriad of ways. The salient discussions among insiders of such a ‘traveling culture’ often revolve around the most enjoyable or memorable impromptu encounters or events associated with their train hopping journeys. At times, some debates may also veer towards the most efficient and responsible ways to navigate the best existing train hopping routes and so on. Perhaps there is no best way to be prepared for a train hopping journey in the first place.

Thesis Statement

This research is primarily concerned with aspects of the perseverance of train hopping travels and practices in North America. It seeks to understand both the historicity and the material conditions

that may have encouraged and provided a space for train hopping journeys. This research is also an effort to better understand the current implications involved in the persistence of train hopping travels beyond readymade media discourses that often overlook the diversity of train hopping travelers. Accordingly, this research focuses on the category of contemporary travelers who associate their train hopping journeys with inclinations to thrill, adventure and sightseeing. Because of particularly enriching encounters during fieldwork, this research also looks at the worldview of ‘dirty kids’ train hopping travelers who were immersed in a form of temporary ‘drifting’ that may have involved panhandling, flying a sign and dumpster diving to keep on traveling. Overall, this research focuses on travelers who hopped freight trains, once and again, as a mode of travel or a means of transportation for the purposes of sightseeing and other touristic orientations. It is by no means concerned with refugees, asylum seekers or ‘undocumented’ migrants likely to have hopped a freight train with the intention of crossing borders and settling down in a host country.

At a particular phase of this study, I wished I could be simply satisfied with the prevailing tendency to associate current train hopping journeys with romanticized notions of freedom, wanderlust and liberation from the mundane. But I couldn’t. While writing up the ethnographic data relevant to the fieldwork I carried out in three different locations namely Britt, Montreal and online, I found myself looking for historical clues and accounts from the past about earlier train hopping practices likely to help me with the difficult process of cultural translation. I had also carefully re-examined most of my interlocutors’ spontaneous verbalizations about the current situation of train hopping practices in hopes of making sense of those historical accounts associated with earlier train hopping journeys. I grappled with recurring definitional problems and comparative representations of both tramps and hoboes of the past. But I enjoyed more the slippery ambiguities and the diversity of opinions mostly articulated by interlocutors participating in this research, not only in relation to their train hopping travels but also vis-à-vis their own contentions about living life in an intense way while dwelling and traveling in North America. Perhaps what may be gleaned from pursuing such a research direction is that it was a worthy endeavor despite the difficulties and the uncertainties of probing current train hopping practices from an anthropological perspective.

Likewise, this thesis suggests that train hopping travels in North America continue to persist not only because of the relevant recurring stories and interactions exchanged in both online and offline venues, but also because the paths likely to lead to an operational track from which a freight train might roll out of town are not necessarily easily identified, cleared, visible or fixed in time and space. The paths that facilitate train hopping journeys are not only uncertain, ephemeral or camouflaged at times, but also keep changing with every tactical move to ‘catch out’ (i.e. to hop onto a freight train). It is precisely this uncertainty and lack of control over navigating the prohibited space of railroad freight properties that bestow train hopping travelers with enough willingness to continue reinventing and affirming themselves through appropriated train hopping paths, of their own. The process of navigating unfamiliar prohibited railroad routes also continue to stimulate the senses of train hopping travelers and makes them feel somehow more alive while ‘on the move’.

Thesis Layout

As a student intending to conduct an ethnographic fieldwork on current train hopping travelers in North America, I found myself passing through several locations, interacting with several interlocutors who helped me in many ways, at different levels, with carrying out my fieldwork/research journey. I walked through different spaces and, like any other traveler, used some means of transportation on my way to reach what I imagined as a field site. I also navigated my way through several online venues while spending time sitting in front of a computer trying to figure out some kind of meaning or significance behind the posted train hopping contents and the salient interactions that circulated around them.

For some reason, I was very excited about my short trip to Britt to attend the national hobo convention. Before reaching Britt, I hanged out at different places of transit including airports, bus stations and motels. I met and talked to several people in such ‘contact zones’ namely customs and border protection officers, taxi drivers, bus drivers, receptionists, flight attendants, a bar tender at Des Moines airport, an office worker at Mason City Municipal Airport who offered me a lift to Britt and so on. These ‘travel encounters’ occurred in specific locations ‘constituted by displacement as much as stasis’ (Clifford, 1997:2). Once in Britt, a series of encounters took place with other travelers and attendees hailing from different places to simply attend or even participate in the events of the hobo convention. When I passed through a campground that apparently hosted

most of the travelers and attendees of the hobo convention, I felt that it was the right place where I can finally put aside my backpack and start introducing myself. Overall, I managed to conduct four face-to-face interviews with elderly attendees who agreed to talk about their general interest in the hobo culture as well as their previous journeys on freight trains. Their pseudonyms rather than road names are as follows: Brother, Whitebeard, Beardfree and Freesteam. In addition, I interviewed four young adult train hopping travelers who were also attending the hobo events and identified at the moment of interacting with them as ‘dirty kids’ travelers. Their pseudonyms rather than road names are as follows: Yvaan, Madar, Spoo and Slumber. For an extended period of time, I was tempted to think about the latter interviewees as a contemporary version of historical nomads or drifters. Perhaps they were so, but only during a specific phase of their life course.

The Montreal venue manifested the existence of a different approach to train hopping travels. Only three interviewees agreed to participate in this research. They referred to their involvement in train hopping travels as occasional and rather experimental. In contrast to the interviewees in Britt, the interviewees in Montreal had no road names. Their pseudonyms are as follows: Aventurier, Snowowl and Velo. All of them resisted to associate their previous train hopping journeys with any inclination towards adopting a particular traveling lifestyle. However, they took the time to explain their childhood and adolescence experiences of playing outdoors and the circumstances that initiated them to train hopping temptations. They have verbalized detailed accounts about their personal experiences of traveling via freight trains. Most importantly, Snowowl and Velo clarified for me that train hopping practices do not necessarily revolve all the time around long distance travels across the country, but also can be enjoyed for very short distance trajectories within Montreal. Overall, the three interviewees in Montreal were also proud to articulate their variant perspectives on the specificities of train hopping journeys.

Finally, the online venue was also informative of various aspects of current train hopping practices. It was very easy to navigate the digital space relative to train hopping practices yet particularly difficult to represent its empirical data comprehensively. But I think I did my best to describe the salient train hopping digital contents and review the dynamics of online interactions ethically and responsibly. Accordingly, on several occasions, I had to refrain from including certain information or details about users and their exchanged interactions. Most users also take the necessary precautions while interacting via the internet. The second section of the online train

hopping venue is dedicated to three young adult female users who agreed to chat online about their train hopping travels across the US. Their pseudonyms rather than road names are as follows: Amira, Radia and Kenza. The three interlocutors had their own unique style of riding freight trains. They informed me about some aspects of their train hopping journeys and experiences of socializing with, or avoiding, other train hopping travelers while ‘on the move’. I think that traveling via freight trains from the perspective of women travelers constitutes a particular ethnographic project in its own right.

Chapter 1: Temporal/Localized Contextualisation of Train Hopping

In contemporary North America, the term train hopping refers to the surreptitious activity of hopping a freight train for the purposes of traveling and sightseeing. Train hopping travels range from short trips towards local or nearby destinations to long journeys within or across Canada and the US. Train hopping is an illicit means of travel that predisposes trespassing onto railway properties. To navigate railroad lines, potential train hopping travelers must be able-bodied, resilient and vigilant. Most importantly, they should be familiar with a set of skills and tactics that I hope to address in detail in the ethnographic chapters, later in this thesis.

Historical Train hopping Travels

The following section however seeks to probe the phenomenon of train hopping in North America between the few decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. More specifically, it seeks to examine the historical circumstances that may have provided a background for the emergence and persistence of train hopping travels. Broader historical forces including industrialisation and urbanisation, in addition to the aftermath of the civil war, the two world wars and the great economic depression, may have encouraged and provided a space for train hopping practices especially among the itinerant poor. Hence, an understanding of the historical incarnations related to such a form of mobility requires familiarity with both the historical figures of the tramp and the hobo. Accordingly, the following section seeks also to provide a brief background and description of both categories of travelers. It draws a comparison between both categories in relation to the different motivations or constraints likely to have prompted their transient life on the road. Last but not least, and based on several accounts, I will be concerned to shed light on the role of temporary locations and venues in facilitating the flow of train hopping travels. Temporary camps referred to as hobo ‘jungles’ for instance acted somehow as homes away from ‘home’ for both tramps and hobos. Most provided short-term accommodation, a space for respite from long train hopping journeys and opportunities for socializing. To pass time in such venues, hobo and tramps took on the habit of swapping anecdotes and stories of their experiences of travels around the campfire whenever the occasion made this exchange possible.

Train Hopping in the Aftermath of the Civil War

A reflection on the history of train hopping in North America must entail an examination of the material conditions that might have fashioned aspects of its emergence and persistence. Observers pointed out that the early beginnings of the phenomenon of train hopping might be traced back to the few years following the end of the American civil war (Bruns, 1980; Cresswell, 2001; DePastino, 2003). The war had devastating consequences for the country and its peoples on many levels including an unprecedented proliferation of a displaced population described by DePastino as ‘a veritable army of homeless men, predominantly white and native-born’ (DePastino, 2003: XVIII). A fraction of this ‘army of homeless men’ was composed of war veterans who were particularly immersed in the habit of wandering the country (Bruns, 1980:33). Most were knowledgeable about the art of train hopping and probably displayed little or no interest in any form of sedentary lifestyle at that time.

‘Veteran riders [unsettled war veterans] were students of train anatomy. They could recite the cubic footage of various cars, their vintage and makers, could carefully explain how they operated and for what purposes, could point out the crevices and crannies which, with a degree of ingenuity, were transformed into riding places’ (Bruns, 1980:35).

In addition, members of this particular mobile, yet homeless, population of war veterans were more attracted to hang out and spend time in places ‘located just outside of town, near running water and tracks’ (Bruns, 1980:16). They had a penchant for seizing opportunities of travels via freight trains. Because of their involvement in army training or warfare experience, most were already prepared physically and perhaps even mentally to endure the hardships of a vagabond mobile life including sleeping outdoors (Spence, 1971:6). Nonetheless, a minority of these wandering veterans might have also been affected deeply by traumatic events associated with warfare. Their sense of self might have been altered. Despite the enduring psychological effects, they had little choice but to adapt to the realities of the homeless poor in the aftermath of the American civil war. In other words, instead of ruminating over the past or resigning to a ‘sedentary perspective’ on life, many drifted aimlessly on the rails from town to town in search of a better standard of living or simply a means of subsistence.

‘The Civil War had turned thousands of boys into disciplined foragers, resilient, hardened, able to find food and shelter in all conditions, proficient in the use of the railroad. After the war, many of these men, uprooted and inured to years of wandering and fighting for

survival, found peace an unsettled time. Many had no homes or ties—or had forgotten them’ (Bruns, 1980:7).

However, ‘Unsettled’ war veterans were not the only category of homeless travelers who were involved in historical forms of train hopping. Prompted by adventure and/or work opportunities elsewhere, both tramps and hoboes also experienced surreptitious train hopping travels especially in the context of the ‘westward expansion’ of the railroad network and the economic recessions that characterized this period. Thus, the idea of ‘stealing rides’ on mixed trains, hauling both passenger and freight cars, became more appealing to a larger population beyond wandering war veterans.

The Golden Age of Train Travel

Rapid expansion of the railway network across the US for instance can be understood as an expression and a manifestation of a much needed economic growth in the few decades following the American civil war. Railway expansion can also be understood as one industrial capitalist project, among many, geared towards building the nation and its infrastructure, ensuring movement of people and commodities and opening up to vast landscapes. Railway expansion was part of a broader process of industrialisation oriented towards a national policy of ‘westward expansion’. According to observers, the network of railroad tracks in the United States expanded from nine thousand miles in 1850 to more than seventy thousand miles by the end of the 1860s (Bruns, 1980: 26; Cresswell, 2006:16). In a lapse of twenty years, such an exponential growth marked the beginnings of the golden age of the railroad transport especially when construction of the first transcontinental railway was completed in 1869 (Cresswell, 2006:16).

Accordingly, the cultural historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch pointed out that the American railroad lines did not proceed in a straight line, like in Europe, but rather by curves (Schivelbusch, 1979:98). He explained that for economic reasons and perhaps out of respect for nature, railroad engineers in the US have designed the rail lines in a way that circumvented natural obstacles such as cliffs, hills, valleys and mountains and so on (Schivelbusch, 1979:98). The engineers must have decided to avoid the European model of straight lines because it was neither appealing nor pragmatic to build tunnels or bridges whenever faced with a natural obstruction in wilderness. In addition, Schivelbusch averred that the nonlinear or rather serpentine movement of the trains in the US resembled in its twists and turns the circulation and flow of water in rivers namely the ones

with a strong current (Schivelbusch, 1979:95). Schivelbusch employed the metaphor of the existing winding movement of waterways in the US to argue that ‘in nineteenth-century American thought, the machine appears closely linked to nature, and simultaneously the American landscape is seen as closely linked to the machine’ (Schivelbusch, 1979:94). By extension, Schivelbusch suggested that the industrial revolution in the US came to be associated first and foremost with the domains of transport and agriculture in contrast to Europe where it began with manufacture (Schivelbusch, 1979: 97).

On the one hand, the introduction of machinery in Europe, especially in the domain of manufacture such as textile, replaced a ‘highly developed artisan culture’ hence perceived consequently as ‘largely destructive’ of the lifestyle and livelihoods of the working poor including artisans (Schivelbusch, 1979:94). In the domain of railroad transport, the traveling situation in England for instance, although ‘experienced as participation in an industrial process’ was largely marked by extreme class segregation well into the 1840s (Schivelbusch, 1979:75). Unlike the bourgeois or the affluent who traveled in first class ‘carriages [that] looked like coaches mounted on rails’, the working poor was assigned to the fourth class carriages that looked like ‘open freight cars’ generally attached to the end of the passenger train. ‘They [members of the poorer classes] were not regarded as recipients of passenger service but as freight goods’ (Schivelbusch, 1979:75).

On the other hand, industrialization in North America began with mechanization of transport and agriculture. The process of industrialization was not conceived as destructive to some (the working poor and artisans), as in Europe, but rather as a unique journey that implied a rationalized connectivity with (physical) nature for the purposes of cultivating its resources or taking advantage of its existing affordances. In other words, Schivelbusch argued that the introduction of the railroad machinery in the US for instance could be conceived as a ‘means to gaining a new civilisation from a hitherto worthless (because inaccessible) wilderness’ (Schivelbusch, 1979:94). Accordingly, the steam locomotive was an important technology that not only connected vast regions of the North American Atlantic coast to the Pacific coast and vice versa, and by extension facilitated transportation of people and commodities, but also opened up access to an immense wilderness that was not previously reached by river steamboats (Schivelbusch, 1979: 97).

In addition, Schivelbusch pointed out that American railcars were designed to render longer journeys more bearable and comfortable. While European carriages transported passengers in the

limited space of compartments, the seating arrangements in American carriages allowed passengers to move freely from one railcar to another. 'Travel in the compartment is characterized by immobility, whereas in the American car there is a great deal of mobility during the trip' (Schivelbusch, 1979: 102). In addition to the possibility of moving between railcars, passengers embarking on a long distance voyage across North America might also have needed other travel arrangements associated with the comforts of one's place. For example, Pullman railcars, best known as Pullman sleepers, provided passengers with designated areas for sleeping to make night travel more restful. Pullman's clientele (passengers) must have felt at home during such railroad journeys. Also, the interiors of Pullman Railcars, according to Schivelbusch, were designed in a style that resembled the saloons of luxurious steamboats 'These Pullman cars reflect the nation's wealth, which becomes increasingly apparent after the end of the Civil War. With them, a first class is introduced into the until then classless American railroad system' (Schivelbusch, 1979:114). However, these Pullman cars, among others, not only attracted affluent travelers but also other types of nonconventional travelers mostly interested in 'stealing rides' especially on mixed trains carrying both passenger and freight cars. Looking for a means to travel for free, tramps and hoboes did not mind hopping freight trains or clinging to the outside of a (Pullman) passenger railcar to 'see the world' or simply reach the next destination. Both categories of travelers were experts at finding openings in railway carriages that offered a possibility of a surreptitious train ride. 'For many, the freight yards and cinder beds were playgrounds. The short hops of one or two miles in a side-door Pullman became ten- or twenty- or fifty-mile treks to more distant towns. The boy who rode 100 miles one day likely dreamed of riding 1000 the next' (Bruns, 1980:7).

Tramping & Hoboing in Late Nineteenth Century

The economic booms and busts of late nineteenth century North America also encouraged a form of train hopping that came to be associated with two particular sets of travelers identified as tramps and hoboes. In an attempt to convey a brief background and description of both categories of travelers, I sought to review several historical and sociological accounts on tramping and hoboing. While it is impossible to delineate between tramps and hoboes as two distinct groups of travelers, identification of the convergences or divergences of their collective attitudes towards train hopping travels, work and leisure time may ease the way towards a glimpsed understanding of the salient characteristics of their lifestyle.

On Tramping

More specifically, the economic recessions in the late nineteenth century, especially the ones that occurred in 1873 and 1893, gave rise to a widespread phenomenon of displacement in the US among the unemployed poor and the homeless. Tim Cresswell averred that the notion of ‘the tramp’ first emerged and circulated in America in the 1870s to refer specifically to a category of ‘mobile and homeless people’ whose proliferation came to be described in pejorative terms or remarks such as ‘the tramp scare’ or ‘tramp evil’ (Cresswell, 2001:9-10). Local authorities and residents must have perceived tramps as a nuisance or perhaps even a threat to local towns’ social and economic arrangements partly because of the prevailing sentiments of suspicion in regards to mobile people who were unemployed and homeless (Cresswell, 2001:16). In addition, Cresswell maintained that as a reaction to the increasing number of mobile, unemployed and homeless people following the economic downturn in 1873, several social reformers or progressive policy makers referred to tramps as potential transient workers (Cresswell, 2001:12). These policy makers among others might have possibly portrayed tramps as transient workers in an attempt to redirect their drifting towards destinations likely to provide them with work opportunities. Although the notion of the tramp in this period came to be associated with transient and casual work, most tramps did not necessarily see themselves as transient workers. Most continued drifting with little or no apparent interest in work. Perhaps they were more interested in other means of ‘getting by’ rather than relegating their aspirations to casual and seasonal work.

Accordingly, radical propaganda schemes began to surface and circulate for the purposes of lessening the concentration of tramps in several towns or hindering their movements towards others. Some newspapers, for instance, targeted tramps in biased ways portraying them as immoral, undesirable and ‘unwanted wanderers’ who deserved to be chased away from local towns (Cresswell, 2001:10). Increasingly, some state authorities across America hastened to implement laws that criminalized loitering and vagrancy. For example, ‘The Delaware tramp law of 1879 simply defined an offender as any person wandering about without home or job, and provided for a sentence from one to thirty days’ (Bruns, 1980:51). Given such disciplinary measures employed to not only curb the ebb and flow of tramps but also to render their life more difficult and unbearable, a considerable number of tramps were left with little or no choice but to immerse themselves in a mobile lifestyle characterised by surreptitious travels on freight trains. While some may have been involved at times in the already prescribed trajectories leading to casual or seasonal

work, the majority sought to prioritize learning more about the art of train hopping and other means of survival to carry out wandering across the country.

Although at one point or another some became ‘experts’ at hopping freight trains and dodging railroad police, others experienced several obstructions or misfortunes partly because of their unfamiliarity with the railroad lines and how to navigate them. ‘Between 1888 and 1905, official figures listed 156,390 “trespassers” killed or injured on American railroads. One railroad official noted in 1907, however, that this figure was “not one-third” of the real number’ (Higbie, 2010:399). For others, a trip carried out to reach any destination likely to improve their lot ended up in subsequent or intermittent journeys motivated primarily by sentiments of wanderlust and attraction to a form of drifting on the rails. In other words, a significant fraction of the tramp population might have first engaged in train hopping travels in search of work opportunities elsewhere but veered off the course of their initial plan to adopt a bohemian lifestyle of wandering across the vast landscapes of North America. ‘The technology of the railroad provided the conditions for the emergence of a new social type—the tramp. Most directly it gave the homeless and jobless people the ability to travel vast distances in a short period of time’ (Cresswell, 2001:28). Hence, the railroad technology in late nineteenth century did not only provide the tramp with a means to travel (illicitly) for free in search of transient work as and when needed, but also with opportunities to view wondrous sights and vast landscapes, as a tourist, while traveling on those moving freight trains. In short, the notion of the tramp in late nineteenth century referred to almost all able-bodied homeless peoples who became specialists at ‘stealing rides’ in freight trains and ‘getting by’ occasionally through work and other tactics of survival. They were homeless, unemployed and professional wanderers par excellence.

On Hoboing

In the late nineteenth century, however, American hoboes emerged as a category of migratory workers who traveled surreptitiously in boxcars primarily for the purposes of seeking transient casual or seasonal work opportunities. Hoboes must have travelled in conditions relatively similar to the traveling situation of members of the working class poor in Europe during the 1840s who were often assigned to be transported like commodities in fourth class ‘open freight cars’ (Schivelbusch, 1979:75). Unlike American tramps who became known for excelling at the art of train hopping mostly for the sake of wandering, the majority of American hoboes preferred to hop

in the kind of boxcars heading towards destinations likely to provide them with transient and casual employment. ‘Hoboes were likely to prefer boxcars, but many tramps were not particular: they rode atop cargo in open gondolas, among livestock cattle cars, on bumpers between cars, or in the empty ice boxes of the fruit specials’ (Spence, 1971:10). Hence, in the absence of a well-established network of roads and highways prior to the 1920s, railroad boxcars were a typical ‘free of charge’ mode of transportation for hoboes willing to reach specific rural destinations to work as ‘hired hands’ (Higbie, 2010:399).

During harvest seasons, hoboes traveled to work hand in hand not only with other farm apprentices but also with a wide range of versatile migrants who also worked in several areas including but not limited to ‘railroad and highway construction, in logging, mining and factory labor’ (Higbie, 2010:394). While some managed to secure extended sojourns in particular farmhouses where they worked and ate with the farm owner and the rest of family members, others were recruited temporarily to perform specific menial tasks and dismissed when no longer needed. ‘For the most part, the relationship between farmer and harvest hand would be only temporary and monetary. As much as the rural community relied on the timely appearance of harvest labor, it also relied on that labor’s quick disappearance’ (Higbie, 2010:401). Nels Anderson for instance, a former hobo and member of the Chicago School of Sociology, worked and sojourned in a farmhouse located at eastern Kansas in 1908 during some of his excursions hoboing across Midwestern US (Higbie, 2010:401). His past journeys and experiences of hoboing across the US were probably a source of inspiration for him to conduct a sociological study about the hobo persona in Chicago.

Anderson carried out a study about hoboes and managed to convey an insider stance regarding their living situation in the city of Chicago. According to Anderson, hoboes were generally males under middle age interested in ‘jobs that have long [train] rides thrown in’ (Anderson, 1923:5). Hence, unlike ‘stationary’ homeless peoples mostly attracted to local petty jobs whenever available, hoboes demonstrated a willingness to travel long distances in search of ‘casual manual labour’. In addition, Anderson contended that hoboes in general underwent a sort of ‘social dysfunction’ or rather an estrangement from North American mainstream society. He identified a number of variables likely to have shaped the marginalization of hoboes including ‘a/ seasonal work and unemployment, b/ industrial inadequacy, c/ defects of personality, d/ crises in

the life of the person, e/ racial or national discrimination and f/ wanderlust (Anderson, 1923:61). According to his theoretical construction, the notion of wanderlust is a 'pathologic behaviour' that results in the inability to resist the desire to be in other places with other strangers (Anderson, 1923:82). Accordingly, Anderson contended that hoboes were perceived at times as a threat to the general public partly because of the ebb and flow that characterized their mobile lifestyle. 'Suspicion and hostility are the universal attitudes of the town or small city to the hobo and the tramp' (Anderson, 1923:26). He explained that hoboes' occasional involvement in reckless behaviours including drinking and gambling during their temporary stays in towns may account for such sentiments of suspicion or hostility. 'Hobos are not clever enough to be first-class crooks nor daring enough to be classed as criminals' (Anderson, 1923:51).

But there were a number of critical gaps regarding Anderson's emphasis on social and psychological deviance in characterizing the condition of hoboes. For example, he disregarded the influences exerted by major social and economic upheavals associated with the era of industrialization and the great economic depression in his analytical investigation. Probably, hoboes were simply immersed in an adventurous lifestyle detached from the ambitious projects of realizing the dream of upward mobility often promoted by the capitalist system. Also, the fact that hoboes were less likely to be attracted to 'sedentary' fulltime employment did not necessarily mean that they were deviants or that they suffered from 'wanderlust' and social or psychological dysfunctions. Therefore, Anderson's portrayal of hoboes at times is at odds with the fact that he used to be a hobo as well in real life before embarking into academia. In short, a scientific construction of a particular group should have taken into consideration the historicity and the material conditions that shaped its coming into being as a group with or without a common worldview. Anderson may have identified some appropriate categories or variables likely to have eased the way towards a legible representation and understanding of the historical figure of the hobo. But his emphasis on deviance as a social or psychological dysfunction while accounting for hoboes' marginalisation was at the expense of explicating the messy realities in which hoboes dwelled and moved about their mundane lives.

Indeed, the practice of train hopping figured as an inevitable or preferred means of transportation for both tramps and hoboes. Sometimes, I thought of hoboes as an earlier version of highly mobile migrant workers because of the accounts of them that emphasized 'casual manual

labour' and seasonal work when drawing on their life experiences. Other times, I succumbed to 'romanticized' contentions that portrayed them as a marginal group of mobile 'heroes' with a distinct lifestyle who despite episodic homelessness and precarious work conditions contributed to 'build the nation' through their hard work, perseverance and all that jazz. On the other side of the coin, I learned that tramps emerged as mobile homeless or vagabond peoples attracted to a life of wandering and drifting on the rails. I also learned that tramps were the professional experts in regards to train hopping travels. Reference to traits associated with idleness, debauchery and street smartness were meant to provide a supposedly realistic rather than fuzzy portrayal and understanding of tramps and their view on the world.

At the turn of the twentieth century, popular representations of both tramps and hoboes, through newspapers, novels, movies, poems and song lyrics, managed to occupy a considerable space in North American collective consciousness. However, as a reader interested in the historical incarnations associated with train hopping travels, I still found myself grappling with a recurring problem of coming up with a precise definition or rather accurate representation of the tramp and the hobo in late nineteenth century and beyond. Their voice was somehow 'muted' in most literary and historical accounts about tramping or hoboing.

Tramping & Hoboing in the First Third of the Twentieth Century

Towards the end of the 1930s, several accounts evoked and circulated the idea that practices of tramping and hoboing in the sense of looking for casual work were doomed to extinction (Adler, 1985:352). By extension, train hopping practices were no longer perceived as a practical or a convenient method of travel to seek casual work elsewhere. Hence, descriptions of tramping or hoboing gradually shifted from highlighting trips as driven by work to romanticizing them as solely motivated by adventure and a form of drifting or vagabondage on the rails (Adler, 1985:345). Prior to such pronouncements however, several aspects of the hobo and tramp way of life including train hopping travels were still manifested well into the first few decades of the twentieth century. For instance, observers remarked that tramps and hoboes continued traveling via freight trains despite persisting efforts to officially control and regulate their movements. When not drifting on the rails, tramps and hoboes continued to gather at hobo 'jungles' or in specific urban districts that attracted a larger population of homeless or transient peoples.

On Schemes to Abolish Train Hopping: Action

During the last third of the nineteenth century, US authorities tolerated the practice of train hopping as long as it was embedded in a form of ‘moving labor from one place to another’ (Adler, 1985:343). The same practice was no longer tolerated from the first third of the twentieth century onward partly because it was increasingly perceived as a form of ‘illicit’ tourism and described by several literary accounts as a kind of ‘juvenile delinquency’ (Adler, 1985:341). American working class youth in particular were encouraged to be autonomous at a certain age and ‘leave home upon maturity’ or even at times provide financial support to the rest of their family members (Adler, 1985:351). Such a rite of passage to adulthood involved displacement and separation from home and family not only in search of work or as an expression of autonomy but also in pursuit of opportunities likely to combine ‘sightseeing, adventure and education’ considered once as exclusive privileges pertaining to middle or bourgeois classes (Adler, 1985:337). Hence train hopping travels were no longer perceived only as a means of looking for work but also as a pretext or excuse to embark in touristic journeys while hopefully fulfilling inner desires for freedom and wanderlust. ‘‘Just seeing the country!’—thus boy and girl tramps interviewed in the United States during the early 1930s summed up their activity’ (Adler, 1985:344).

In addition, train hopping travels were no longer tolerated as certain casual or seasonal employments began to fade away in certain industries or particular regions. For instance, completion of railroad construction alongside widespread use of machinery and other technological advances in most industries including mining, agriculture, harvesting and logging may have lessened the need for ‘hired hands’ in various locations. Casual and seasonal forms of employment never disappeared completely though. Despite their scarcity and transience, they continued to attract the flow of those ready to work as hired hands who did not only use freight trains to travel but also used automobiles as a means of transportation to reach their destination. ‘Western railroads refused to carry harvest labor for free [as they used to], and by 1926 an estimated sixty-five percent of harvest hands were traveling by automobile’ (Spence, 1971:18).

Accordingly, the movements of tramps and hoboes on the rails became increasingly problematized and subjected to surveillance and strict mechanisms of control. With the emergence of the auto-mobility system and the rapid mushrooming of roads and highways, major railroad companies sought to recruit railroad police to inspect railyards and arrest potential trespassers or train hoppers. At times, railroad police used to beat train hopping travelers violently, simply

because they were trespassing or intending to ride a freight train. ‘If the train itself didn’t get [kill] you, train crews and railroad agents might. And some were brutal. A few didn’t hesitate to use train jumpers as rifle targets’ (Bruns, 1980:42). Movement of tramps and hoboes inside towns or major cities was also considered problematic. Local authorities, not so surprisingly though, chased them outside their jurisdiction. In other words, both had to deal with ubiquitous vagrancy laws that shifted from jailing vagrants, as in the 1870s, to simply chasing them out of town to avoid the financial charges incurred or associated with their incarceration (Bruns, 1980:57).

In short, tramps and hoboes, when unemployed and homeless, were constantly harassed by local authorities that perceived them as intruders or outsiders not deserving to share public space with locals and others. Their very existence must have been felt as out of place. ‘But the effort through the vagrancy laws to rid the country of the tramp invasion was generally a failure. The numbers of men roaming the country in boxcars berths and on the rods continued to grow’ (Bruns, 1980:55).

On Peripheral Modes of Temporary Dwellings: Reaction

Several aspects of modernity shaped both rural and urban ways of life. Transport and labour became increasingly mechanized and regulated. Such manifestations of industrial progress among others affected both the physical movements and social arrangements of tramps and hoboes. It must have been difficult for both categories of travelers to move around without obstruction due to the gradual prohibitions of train hopping practices and vigorous implementations of vagrancy laws. Both tramps and hoboes then had little choice but to avoid areas under strict surveillance. Both had to canalise their travels in ways that specific routes and destinations were more favourable than others. At times, they had to base their decisions to move around on particular rumours or assumptions conveying that certain towns or regions will be more accommodating of their mobile lifestyle than others.

During the great economic depression, additional transients joined the road in search of openings to start their lives from scratch. Scarcity of employment in this period obliged the majority to embrace the already beaten paths associated with the livelihoods of tramps and hoboes. While some followed in the footsteps of hoboes as a proof of their determination to find work when and wherever available, others succumbed to a sedentary lifestyle of homelessness in major

urban cities of the US which usually involved tactics of panhandling, begging and other means of getting by.

‘In the city every vocation, even that of a beggar, tends to assume the character of a profession and the discipline which success in any vocation imposes, together with the associations that it enforces, emphasizes this tendency—the tendency, namely, not merely to specialize, but to rationalize one’s occupation and to develop a specific and conscious technique for carrying it on’ (Park, 1925:14).

Accordingly, most major cities in the US for instance attracted a significant number of ‘depression-era transients’. Most found refuge in specific open public spaces or district squares referred to as hoboemia where they spent time idling, socializing or bargaining with employment sharks [employment brokers] for distant jobs (Anderson, 1923:4). Hoboemias provided cheap dormitories and barber shops for the quite well off among transients. But a hoboemia locale should not be confused with other transit campgrounds referred to as hobo ‘jungles’ usually located near railroad tracks or on the way to urban areas. Nels Anderson explained in another work entitled ‘Men on the move’ that Chicago’s hoboemia, for example, was referred to as the ‘main stem’ or the ‘slave market’ because it was a main hub or mecca for ‘depression-era transients’, sedentary homeless people and other tramp or hobo travelers (Anderson, 1940:13). Anderson distinguished as well between the previous generation of hoboes in search of work and the ‘depression-era transients’ in search of home. ‘The former type was a seasonal or casual worker who went from job to job in agriculture, industry, or construction, but the modern depression migrant is going somewhere to find a home’ (Anderson, 1940:28).

DePastino also problematized existing assumptions about the notion of home in modern America. He argued that transient and homeless peoples of the depression years were part and parcel of a form of counterculture that challenged mainstream ‘beliefs in private nuclear families, moderate domestic consumption, and steady work’ (DePastino, 2003:91). Hoboemia districts and other hobo ‘jungles’ must have acted as temporary homes for transients when they were not ‘on the move’. To ensure a smooth cohabitation in such locales, it was mandatory to respect certain rules that focused on maintaining cooperation and generating an ‘ethic of reciprocity and mutualism’ among transient dwellers (DePastino, 2003:70). In addition, organizations such as the Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W) encouraged collective sentiments of belonging to the

‘class’ of migratory workers and promoted a kind of social consciousness regarding their struggles. ‘Their [in reference to migrants] songs about the job and the boss were collected by the Industrial Workers of the World in that little “red book,” I.W.W. Songs. They were songs of struggle, not of despair’ (Anderson, 1940:37). Accordingly, because of the fast paced frequency of their travels, a fraction of transient workers sought to organize themselves institutionally, namely through the I.W.W, to preserve their lifestyle and maintain their difference. Perhaps they sought to resist existing understandings of the notion of home in an attempt to affirm their distinct mobile lifestyle. In a sense, they saw the necessity to advocate against their precarious living conditions and systemic or systematic repression of their lifestyle as marginal people.

Before addressing contemporary train hopping travels, I attempted to identify and briefly explain the salient historical circumstances or material conditions that rendered train hopping an attractive mode of travel for both tramps and hoboes. Several labour history and social history materials provided a context for train hopping practices between the few decades of the nineteenth century and the 1930s. These accounts, however, did not focus on articulating or explaining tactics and techniques associated with the actual practices of train hopping in this period. In addition, train hopping journeys were briefly mentioned now and then only to evoke or explain rather broader historical processes or systems of mobility such as tramping and hoboeing or social conditions of poverty and marginality such as homelessness. Historians of this epoch probably did not see any value or interest in researching mundane and by extension sidelined stories about practices of train hopping travels. A glimpse of these stories however can be found in literary materials including movies, novels and songs that romanticized train hopping journeys and mythologized the historical figures of the hobo and the tramp.

Contemporary Train Hopping Travels

Train hopping in North America is an ongoing mode of travel likely to attract a certain set of thrill seeking travelers. Train hopping travels are still carried out nowadays by certain travelers despite the various forms and mechanisms of surveillance and control of people’s movement and circulation of commodities. Train hopping travels are still happening and persevering despite the risk and danger involved in the act of hopping freight railcars. As long as there are freight trains that keep rolling from one place to another, train hopping travelers will still be around, every now

and then, hiding somewhere nearby rail tracks, observing and waiting for the right time or opportunity to catch a train ride (hop onto a freight railcar).

Accordingly, my initial interest in contemporary train hopping travels shifted from a focus on the practice of hopping freight trains in and of itself to a growing preoccupation with the material conditions that fashion aspects of its continuity today. I realised that focusing merely on the practice itself is likely to produce another manual guide on how to hop freight trains rather than an ethnography about contemporary train hopping travelers. In addition, prior to carrying out my fieldwork research, I was advised to try to push back for a while a set of assumptions about contemporary train hopping travelers as ‘nonconformist’ heroes with a unique perspective on the world or as postmodern drifters incarnating a sort of ontological difference. I have to admit that I was naïve to hastily pursue such lines of thought or assumptions that risk portraying the culture of train hopping as bounded or self-contained. My subsequent fieldwork suggested that train hopping was more about tactics and pragmatic calculations to avoid paying for the service of railroad transportation. With more experience, train hoppers are capable of traveling across the country free of charge. The following section though seeks to provide a context for contemporary train hopping while attempting to situate it as a form of travel within a larger framework of literature on mobility.

Implications of Train Hopping Mode of Travel

Contemporary train hoppers tend to travel in physical proximity to other specific commodities arranged for transportation by freight trains. To travel free of charge, train hoppers venture to occupy a tiny space in a freight railcar amid larger commodities scheduled for delivery in various locations across North America. Train hoppers often travel via paths or itineraries primarily designed or constructed for the circulation of commodities. In the absence of passenger seats, the traveling situation of train hoppers can be fun and adventurous yet far from being comfortable. Train hoppers tend to sneak onto railcars through openings or walkways to find an available space likely to host their bodies. Given the surreptitious nature of such a mode of travel, one may think of train hoppers as adventurers or ‘out of place’ travelers immersed in a rather non-regulated form of movement. One may also think of the traveling situation of contemporary train hoppers as a space likely to loosen separation between the transportation of freights as commodities and the transportation of humans as travelers or passengers. Yet a simple dichotomy between movement

of objects as commodities and movement of human beings as travelers in the railroad transportation system begs further inquiry.

Paths & Commodities

In the introduction to the book, 'The Social Life of Things' Arjun Appadurai examined the value and the significance that human species attach to 'economic objects' or commodities existing in space. He examined the impact exerted by the extension of commodities into everyday social life. In reference to capitalist societies, he suggested that commodities circulate at various levels within 'regimes of value' mostly 'governed by the laws of supplement and demand' (Appadurai, 1986:16). Most importantly, he argued that circulation of commodities in most situations undergoes 'a shifting compromise between socially regulated paths and competitively inspired diversions' (Appadurai, 1986:17). Appadurai argued that diversions take place out of existing paths and lay the ground for other ones to emerge and flow (Appadurai, 1986:29). Within such a trend of thought, Appadurai suggested that we think of commodities as having a life course of their own. He maintained that it should be useful to think about the fact that commodities pass through several phases that can be broadly perceived as what he termed a 'total trajectory from production, through exchange/distribution, to consumption' (Appadurai, 1986:13).

In the context of railroad transportation, engagement with contemporary train hopping requires travelers to divert from established networks or pathways of passenger trains and embark on journeys sustained primarily by freight lines or routes dedicated to the circulation of commodities. Most train hopping travelers however do not divert from the regular paths of passenger train transportation to merely travel with transported commodities or 'economic objects' but rather to indulge in touristic experiences involving thrill, adventure and sightseeing. In other words, the transported commodity in and of itself is likely to be of no value or significance to most train hopping travelers because it does not 'exist in the space between pure desire and immediate enjoyment' (Appadurai, 1986:3). For train hopping travelers, what may oscillate between 'desire and immediate enjoyment' in such an unusual in-between space may be willingness to create meaningful experiences while consuming or simply enjoying the existing pathways' affordances, namely landscapes, sceneries, panoramic views and other aspects of adventure associated with train hopping travels.

Adventure & Sceneries

Schivelbusch for instance referred to earlier railroad travel experiences of viewing sights via passenger or freight railcars in motion as effecting a feeling of ‘shrinking of space’ or rather ‘annihilation of space and time’ that were characteristic of early nineteenth century steam driven forms of locomotion (Schivelbusch, 1979: 49). More recently, John Urry alluded to the railroad as a salient transportation system that not only mechanized movement but also ‘dramatically reorganized times, spaces and sociabilities’ (Urry, 2007:95). Urry also regarded the generalized phenomenon of ‘shrinking of space’ as intrinsically linked to the mechanization of movement and described it as a powerful and intense feeling likely to ‘generate a compulsion to travel, often at specific times along particular routeways’ (Urry, 2007:49). Accordingly, by paying for the service of railroad transportation passengers are entitled to a ticket number and perhaps an assigned seat in the restrained space of a carriage or a compartment from where they may witness or even indulge in capturing sights of ‘annihilation of space and time’. In passenger trains, most railroad experiences of travel take place with other fellow passengers or strangers who may or may not break the ice to initiate a conversation about the weather or the landscape as a means of socializing. Train passengers are expected to be in the carriage prior to the time of departure. Most are punctual and expect to arrive at their destination on the scheduled time as shown in the train ticket.

In contrast to passenger train clientele, train hopping travelers do not consider themselves as clients or recipients of a particular railroad transportation service. They do not need to adhere to the logic of ‘supply and demand’. They do not have to purchase a one-way ticket or an entire vacation package to travel. ‘The money economy brings along with it the necessity for continuous mathematical operations in everyday life...Thus much greater accuracy and sharper demarcations had to enter into the elements of life through monetary valuation’ (Simmel, 1997:253). By traveling with commodities however, train hoppers temporarily avoid or divert from both the regular paths and the regulating experiences of traveling via passenger trains. They may find themselves squatting on the floor in the tiny space of a railcar machine or hastily sneaking through a train opening to dodge railroad police or other railyard workers. Train hoppers are generally attracted to railyards with openings that sometimes escape the gaze of regulatory systems of surveillance. To take advantage of these openings, they need not shy away from the adventure of trespassing railroad properties. At times, they have to take the risk of instantaneously deciding about a course of action in case they end up stranded in a railyard. Yet most times, they are more concerned to identify and access the types of freight machine cars that offer a possibility of a train

hopping ride. In short, train hoppers while ‘on the move’ may seem to intrude into or interfere with the world of commodities transported by freight trains. But they are also embarking on an adventurous journey far away from the routines of their engagement with mundane affairs.

Accordingly, some travelers may occasionally embark on train hopping journeys to break away from the routines of everyday life. They hope to experience a pleasurable or a well-remembered adventure likely to confront them with unfamiliar or unexpected situations. An adventure as a trope of experimentation can stimulate the brain in different ways. Georg Simmel for instance thought of adventure as a process of indulging in a particular ‘dreamlike’ path deemed to momentarily liberate the adventurer from a certain self-disciplining and commitment to an existing lifestyle or its progression. ‘Because of its place in our psychic life, a remembered adventure tends to take on the quality of a dream’ (Simmel, 1997:222). Simmel specified also that adventure usually occurs in a way that interrupts the continuity of a prevailing hectic routine or temperament mostly associated with modern ways of dwelling and moving about on a daily basis. ‘An adventure is certainly a part of our existence, directly contiguous with other parts which precede and follow it; at the same time, however, in its deeper meaning, it occurs outside the usual continuity of this life’ (Simmel, 1997:222). By extension, some travelers may experience traveling alongside other commodities in a freight machine car as a form of ‘dreamlike’ adventure or at least an unusual activity occurring outside the context of the mundane. For others, traveling via freight trains alongside other commodities is no longer necessarily an adventure per se but rather an appropriated mode of travel they are used to and familiar with as a means of facilitating their movement or capacity to be elsewhere.

Train Hopping as an Irregular Mode of Travel

Examination of Urry’s classification of different forms of mobilities begs the question of whether it will be acceptable to discuss train hopping as a practice embedded in a ‘mobility system’. Urry pinpointed five interdependent modes of mobility likely to have instituted the social fabric of our contemporary mobile existence. He listed them as follows: ‘corporeal travel’, ‘physical movement of objects’, ‘imaginative travel’, ‘virtual travel’, and ‘communicative travel’ (Urry, 2007:47). Urry suggested examination of the interconnections occurring between these five different mobilities as constitutive of a (new) mobility paradigm. Vered Amit examined the list of these classificatory forms of mobility from an anthropological perspective and interrogated the nature of the ‘overlaps

or divergences' likely to emanate from an empirical and comparative analysis of different forms of mobilities and 'travelling cultures' (Amit, 2012:511). In addition, Amit noted that Urry's suggestion was likely to highlight a tendency among scholars to focus more on certain forms of transnational mobility while neglecting other regional forms of mobility that occur within countries or in and out of their respective cities (Amit, 2012:513). Amit maintained that such a segregation in studying different forms of mobility renders it difficult to organize all forms of mobilities into specific systems and analyse them horizontally in relationship to each other (Amit, 2012:514).

Hence, beyond the regulatory systems that Urry identified, train hopping as a mode of travel appears to be neither visible nor necessarily institutional. Yet it continues to attract a small-scale segment of able-bodied 'travelers moving in different circumstances' (Amit, 2012:514). By using this quotation, I am not referring here to particular traveling circumstances that may involve contemporary 'stateless' refugees, asylum seekers or undocumented migrants. Indeed, some of these travelers may hop a freight train once or twice in a lifetime to cross borders in contexts of necessity or emergency. However, they remain beyond the scope of this research because of the political implications and peculiar circumstances behind their forced displacements. Rather, I seek to hopefully understand the contemporary culture of train hopping within national borders in North America from the perspective of mobile peoples who repeatedly practice train hopping and may identify at times as tramps, hoboes and dirty kids travelers.

Therefore, the train hopping travelers that this research is concerned with not only require familiarity with a set of skills and tactics necessary to navigate freight railcar trajectories but also the willingness to temporarily abandon the comforts and luxuries of 'home' mostly promoted by mainstream modern capitalist society. Train hopping travelers are likely to spend most of the time of their (train hopping) journey outdoors. Sometimes the freight train stops for days in the middle of nowhere and leave them with no options but to improvise a solution or an opening to the way out. In short, train hopping travelers do not depend on the railroad infrastructure the way passenger train travelers do. Both categories adhere to different rules and have different expectations and experiences of travels.

Space & Place Implications

Train hopping as a non-regulated pattern of movement presupposes both ‘muscular powered’ and ‘machine powered’ modes of travel to facilitate train hoppers’ intermittent (physical) change of locations. Urry distinguished between ‘muscular powered’ modes of travel that rely on an expenditure of body energy such as walking, running, cycling or riding a horse and ‘machine powered’ modes of travel generally propelled by the engine of an automobile, an aeroplane, a railroad train and so on (Urry, 2007). Sometimes travelers can use the pedestrian system so they simply walk to move around. Other times, as passengers or conductors, they use a particular machine as means of transportation for the purposes of traveling elsewhere. ‘In a way all movement involves intermittent walking’ (Urry, 2007:63). Whether travelers are using a pedestrian, an automobile, an aeroplane or a railroad system of mobility, all of them depend on a specific path or a regular pattern to facilitate their movement. ‘what is crucial is that people are travelling further and faster, if not more often or spending more time actually “on the road”’ (Urry, 2007:4).

Walking

Accordingly, the majority of travelers depend on regular patterns of movement that are constitutive of roads, paved roads, highways, sidewalks, alleys, railroad tracks, aeroplane lines or itineraries and so on. These patterns are both established and regulated through an array of mechanisms that both control and organize traffic in the sense of orienting various modes of movement towards their respective infrastructure. For instance, the process of walking for pedestrians becomes easier and seems more natural when performed on sidewalks. Circulation of automobiles is more efficient on paved roads or highways and the same principle could be applied to trains in relation to railroad tracks. Therefore, movement in this context can be understood as partly regulated because it is organized into and intertwined with a corresponding ‘immobile infrastructure’ that not only facilitates movement but also ‘make possible the socialities of everyday life’ (Urry, 2007:19). Likewise, potential train hopping travelers depend in part on the ‘pedestrian system’ of mobility to walk around prior to trespassing railyard premises. Before embarking on a much anticipated journey on a freight train, most take the time to walk along the paved streets and sidewalks of the city or town from which they intend to hop a train. They may stop by particular locations to observe the coming and going of freight trains in and out of town. They may also gather and squat in specific areas in proximity to railyards waiting for the right time to begin their train hopping journey.

Michel de Certeau, for instance, wrote a book entitled 'The Practice of Everyday Life' where he examined in chapter vii the process of 'Walking in the City' as a manifestation of one aspect of spatial practices among others that shape the spatial character of a city (de Certeau, 1988:94). De Certeau examines urban walking as a mundane behaviour mostly characterized by employment of a set of tactical practices performed by ordinary people in ordinary situations to resist existing 'institutional imperatives' and evade physical obstructions in the environment around them. 'These practitioners [walkers] make use of spaces that cannot be seen; their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other's arms' (de Certeau, 1988:93). Accordingly, de Certeau assumes that mundane practices such as taking shortcuts, detours or jaywalking and so on could be understood as 'tactics rather than strategies' shaped as 'manipulations of the basic elements of a constructed order' as well as 'deviations relative to a sort of "literal meaning" defined by the urbanistic system' (de Certeau, 1988:100). In other words, walking when performed tactically as a form of spatial practice bestows the walker with a sense of autonomy and independence from total adherence to regular and regulated patterns of movement. At any moment, the walker is free to invent shortcuts or improvise new convenient paths. Walking is never a passive activity. But walking tactically may be performed at times against normalised or mainstream ways of 'constituting the city'. Walking tactically as a spatial practice is 'characterised by its ruses, its fragmentation (the result of circumstances), its poaching, its clandestine nature, its tireless but quiet activity, in short by its quasi-invisibility' (de Certeau, 1988:31). Thus, one may entertain the idea that train hopping travelers proceed towards freight railyards and other nearby locations of interest by walking tactically.

The Landscape & its Paths

Far away from the context of the mundane and its tactical moves, Simmel noted in another register that the historical event of building paths on the surface of the earth to connect between separate places and people remains 'one of the greatest human achievements' (Simmel, 1997:171). Simmel also observed that the objective connection between two places might be realized through the repetitive usage of the same path through acts of walking that render it (the path) visible and identifiable with the passage of time. In other words, the act of constantly treading on the surface of the earth using the same path leaves a visible trace, a line, an itinerary endowed with the potential of 'freezing movement into a solid structure that commences from it and in which it terminates' (Simmel, 1997:171). In a broad sense, Simmel had in mind the kind of physical

movements that, unlike waves in a sea or an ocean, are not spread all over space but rather confined and concentrated in fixed visible paths or lines namely railroad tracks, roads, shortcuts and so on. Hence, Simmel understood the physical movement of people in relation to a particular path as a will to connect to places often associated with a linear perspective starting from a fixed point to reach another particular point or destination. Paved roads presumably resist barefoot or footwear prints. Traces of other paths may simply emerge occasionally, right after a snowstorm for instance, persist for a while and eventually disappear. Likewise, several paths and shortcuts usually undertaken by some train hopping travelers to navigate their way towards railyards or railcars become inaccessible at times. Other shortcuts persist for some time before they completely vanish mostly because of surveillance mechanisms. Others emerge most frequently and exclusively during spring and summer seasons. Train hopping travels are perhaps more enjoyable and fun when the weather is good, and school is over.

But it is difficult to think about the movement of people as a linear path fixed between a point of commencement and another one signalling its termination. Humans as finite species living and moving about an apparently infinite universe embark on multiple journeys and trajectories using miscellaneous paths. Unlike the average lifespans of human species, paths may be endowed with a lifetime likely to persist on the surface of the earth for several centuries. Tim Ingold for instance reflected on the passage of time in relation to the existential ‘history’ of the landscape from what he termed a ‘dwelling perspective’ (Ingold, 1993: 152). He argued that mere conceptions of the landscape as a ‘neutral, external backdrop to human activities’ or as a ‘particular cognitive or symbolic ordering of space’ may further be enhanced by regarding the landscape and its affordances as ‘an enduring record of—and testimony to—the lives and work of past generations’ (Ingold, 1993: 152). Indeed the landscape may be tingling with life all the time. Various living organisms and forms of life of different kinds including human species may be constitutive of the landscape where the ‘natural will’ to survive and procreate manifests itself. With all the processes and activities that may take place at the same time involving different historical modes of subsistence or production, the landscape may be seen as a natural habitat as long as it provides the material conditions of living.

However, Ingold’s suggestion to think about the landscape in terms of a ‘dwelling perspective’ may risk approaching it as a detached place of its own likely to serve as a ‘permanent’

home for living species. A 'dwelling perspective' connotes a kind of sedentary thinking that favours an unfathomable tendency to attach oneself to a specific location in a particular environment. It is about reducing the sentiment of being alive to a comfort zone location. It disregards the implications of change and the existence of other routes and challenges leading to other new and stimulating environments or ways of being and moving about the world. Accordingly, the landscape in this context may not be the distant piece of land that captures the sight of a traveler in a moving train. The landscape is not a container of some natural or ecological world likely to separate the world of humans and machines from the world of non-human forms of life. 'The landscape, in short, is not a totality that you or anyone else can look at, it is rather the world in which we stand in taking up a point of view on our surrounding' (Ingold, 1993: 171). Humans may not be dwelling and traveling in a world of their own presumably separate from the rest. 'it is that the life of human being, even when configured by the institutions of society, is not carried on in a world of its own, beyond the edge of another world of nature (Ingold 1997) wherein the lives of all non-humans are contained.' (Ingold, 2005: 503).

In addition to hosting living species, the surface of the earth may also be tingling with friction as a result of the movement of transportation machines including railcars or automobiles. These transportation machines seem to be moving all the time; often navigating their respective networks of flattened roads or railroad tracks. Most importantly, 'these machines are typically confined to specific and highly regulated sites residing outside everyday life' (Urry, 2007:93). The moving machines take part in the 'paysage' of the landscape that Ingold encouraged perceiving as a potential rear view mirror of the past. Hence, the moving machines may reflect historical achievements, forms of production and ways of dwelling or traveling of previous generations of humans. Some travelers in these moving machines may experience the traveling situation as a space of enclosure likely to restrain the movement of their bodies to the available space inside. But the majority of travelers orient the experience of travel and by extension their sense of sight towards the open space of the outside environment. 'Increasingly, through inhabiting machines, humans come to 'life' and especially to a life intermittently lived on the move in the company of various machines of movement' (Urry, 2007:92). Accordingly, most humans in the contemporary era become increasingly dependent on such machines for their travels. Perhaps, the existence of these machines around us becomes a necessary ingredient that characterizes the mobile human condition of this era.

In short, dwelling is charged with metaphysical meanings. It conveys a sense of belonging to the universe or the physical environment that we take part in and perceive through our senses. Dwelling can be manifested in occupying the space of a building that one can call home. Perhaps, understandings of dwelling may be extended to train hopping travels when occupying the transient space of a boxcar or a gondola railcar. Therefore one may entertain the idea that dwelling may be manifested in the confined spaces of transportation machines. Heidegger conveys an interesting example about ‘the truck driver [who] is at home on the highway, but he does not have his shelter there’ (Heidegger, 1971). It is precisely the act of conceiving of the truck driver as lacking a shelter on the highway that proves Heidegger’s sedentary way of thinking about existence.

Train Hopping as a ‘Travelling Culture(s)’

This section seeks to introduce contemporary train hopping as a potential traveling culture among others. More specifically, it seeks to present aspects of my ethnographic fieldwork on train hopping as a form of travel involving a series of encounters with travelers and places or rather ‘contact zones’ for the purposes of understanding ‘the culture’ of train hopping. In previous sections, I sought to convey a few fragments of thought regarding selective notions of space, place and other mundane practices likely to be associated with train hopping. This last section of the literature review continues to grapple with spatial themes while emphasising notions of movement and mobility beyond sedentary perspectives on dwelling. James Clifford in the prologue of his publication ‘Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Nineteenth Century’ explains that ‘dwelling was understood to be the local ground of collective life, travel a supplement; roots always precede routes’ (Clifford, 1997: 3). Perhaps, he wrote the sentence in the past tense to convey that a priori generalizations about the concept of dwelling should no longer be localised or confined to particular environments. In other words, Clifford suggests that forms of travel and movement may no longer be considered secondary but rather of primary importance to the principle or idea of dwelling. The following paragraphs seek to understand the implications of aspects of such a trend of thought in the context of train hopping as a potential traveling culture.

James Clifford explains concepts of ‘dwelling and traveling’ or ‘sedentarism and nomadism’ through the dialectical metaphors of ‘roots’ and ‘routes’ in an attempt to dislodge the concept of travel from localised notions of place or territory (Clifford, 1997:6). The idea of dwelling for instance presupposes having roots that attach living species to a particular geographical location.

For example, plants and trees may be considered as sedentary living entities because of the roots that attach them to the ground. The idea of traveling however may presuppose intermittent detachment from roots to engage with routes that may lead to new and unfamiliar environments. Clifford maintains that these environments should not necessarily be represented as bounded destinations affixed to particular places but rather as ‘contact zones’ or sites of circulation and movement. ‘Thinking historically is a process of locating oneself in space and time. And a location, in the perspective of this book, is an itinerary rather than a bounded site—a series of encounters and translations’ (Clifford, 1997:11). To better understand the dialectical metaphors of roots and routes in the context of ‘traveling cultures’, Clifford suggests that ‘specific dynamics of dwelling/travelling be understood comparatively’ (Clifford, 1997:24).

Accordingly, Vered Amit argues that in a world of ‘global connectedness’ different modes of travel keep overlapping and bifurcating into multi-non-linear paths that keep flowing (Amit, 2012:512). She elaborates on the challenging difficulties to categorize (travelling cultures) independently and the necessity to explore spaces of disjuncture that characterize closely related forms of travel (Amit, 2012:514). Hence, the analytical concept of disjuncture may be regarded as a useful space for the effort of studying ubiquitous ‘traveling cultures’ as relational rather than self-contained ontologies. Yet there is something about train hopping travels that resists analytical interpretation when attempting to compare aspects of its specificities to other closely related traveling cultures. Train hopping sounds more like an adventurous game that involves a sort of ‘hit and miss’ stubbornness to catch a train ride. Probably, the need to understand the perseverance of the culture of train hopping should take into consideration the meanings derived from travelers’ willingness to navigate (train hopping) routes despite prevailing efforts to restrict them through policing and surveillance.

In a more recent study, Amit and Knowles pursued such preoccupations while emphasising travelers’ capacity for resilience and readjustment especially when encountering challenging spaces likely to hinder their movement or unexpected circumstances likely to alter the process of navigating their envisaged journeys and trajectories (Amit; Knowles, 2017:165-166). Amit and Knowles suggested that the notion of tacking will be more convenient to ‘think with’ in exploring processes of navigation and improvisation and dealing with unexpected situations instead of a priori conceptualisations of trajectories as smooth itineraries devoid of gaps and obstacles.

‘[T]acking suggests processes of ongoing adjustment and modification. To keep moving, a person may have to shift away their original destination rather than continue to navigate in a direct line’ (Amit; Knowles, 2017:166).

On a closely related register, historically the experiences of conducting ethnographic fieldwork in an effort to represent a culture were rarely perceived as a form of travel or a traveling culture in and of itself. Most anthropologists had to physically travel to ‘the field’ to do ethnographic fieldwork. Most engaged with a set of methodological practices that involved physical travel away from home towards a geographical area conceived of as the field. ‘[W]hen one speaks of working in the field, or going into the field, one draws on mental images of a distinct place with an inside and an outside, reached by practices of physical movement’ (Clifford, 1997: 54). This very process of displacement involved a succession of plans and decisions about a set of practices or a series of encounters in places of transit prior to reaching ‘the field’ that often presupposes temporary co-residence with research participants. ‘After Malinowski, fieldwork among natives tended to be construed as a practice of co-residence rather than travel, or even of visiting’ (Clifford, 1997:21).

According to Clifford, such ‘localizing strategies’ of conducting fieldwork were likely to be dismissive of certain useful clues or insights that could be manifested prior or outside the parameters of the localised ‘field’. In other words, the tendency to think about the fieldwork experience merely from the point of view of a place inhabited by its people may result in essentialist representations likely to confine and freeze people in time and space (Clifford, 1997:24). Hence, Clifford suggested that representations of a ‘cultural experience’ should be concerned with two orientations: ‘to rethink cultures as sites of dwelling and travel, [and] to take travel knowledge(s) seriously’ (Clifford, 1997:31). The following ethnographic chapters may reveal an effort to commit to both orientations while writing up ethnographic data.

Chapter 2: Britt Venue

This chapter is about my field trip to the national hobo convention. It takes place every second week of August in the small town of Britt, Iowa. A number of undertakings had to be fulfilled before getting there. An ethical review and approval of my research proposal had to be completed by the requisite authorities at Concordia University. A US visa had to be issued. A Graduate Student Mobility Award had to be obtained. A couple of letters of recommendation had to be written on my behalf. I had all the support I needed from my academic supervisor and other faculty members in the Department of sociology and anthropology at Concordia University. A flight ticket to Des Moines was booked for July 31st. My backpack, alongside a small blue tent, was ready to take off.

I used to be a flight attendant a couple of years ago, so Trudeau airport, like most international airports, was a familiar standardized site. Scattered scenes of farewells appeared to be the only interesting thing to observe amid the orchestrated routines of passport and luggage registrations. Once at the pre-boarding gate, a US customs and border protection officer took a photo of me, screened and scrutinized my Moroccan passport and asked me the usual questions regarding the purpose and the duration of my trip and my arrangements for accommodation. 'Safe travels' were his last words to me. I reached Des Moines airport on the same day in the evening.

The following day, after a good night of sleep in a motel, I got myself lost in the beautiful trail system of the city. It was a hot summer day. The urban character of Des Moines city started to fade away while hiking an informal trail by a river with a strong current. I took immense pleasure in walking amidst such a natural site by myself. As I kept moving, annoying insects began to target my skin aggressively. They seemed to be everywhere, and there was no place to hide from them. For no reason, I kept walking despite the discomfort caused by the ceaseless buzz of the mosquitoes and their intermittent bites all around my sweaty skin. All of a sudden, I realized that I had company. At the sound of my boots treading on the almost-muddy path, a startled deer hopped a few steps back nearby a short tree, stood still and stared at me. My feet immediately froze at this pleasing, yet unfamiliar, encounter. I felt out of place. I did not want to intrude further. At that particular moment, I decided it was time to go back to the urban premises of paved roads and corporate buildings.

The Intercity Bus Terminal marked the end of my sojourn in Des Moines. Direct public transportation to Britt was not available. I had to take the Greyhound bus to Mason City first, then get a lift from someone who lives in Britt. A few other travelers were also waiting for their bus to show up. In the waiting area, the silence was challenged by the monologue of a woman talking to herself, or at least to no one in particular. There were no farewells to observe this time. The bus driver finally showed up. With an air of authority, he asked us, the passengers, to stand in line with our ticket in hand. It was my turn to let him see the bus ticket. For some reason, he looked at me and said 'this bus is going to take you to Mason City whether you like it or not'. We arrived at the Mason City Municipal Airport. The bus driver announced that it was time for me to get off the bus. I inquired about how to get to Britt from there. He said that I had two options. The first one was to go down the road and try to hitchhike. The second option was to go inside the municipal airport and ask the people working there for a lift. Before taking off, he told me that a young woman in the last office on my right lives in Britt. The second option was more appealing to me.

On my way to the Mason City Municipal Airport, I was thinking of a tactic to maximize my chance of getting a lift from the young woman who lives in Britt. Once inside the airport, I pulled out the Mobility Award document and the plane ticket from my backpack. I went all the way to the last office on my right and, with a smile, said hello to the woman sitting there. Then, I asked her politely if I could use the photocopy machine. I explained right after that I was a student from Montreal, and that I needed to fill out a document and send it back to Concordia University in Montreal. I specified that I had to photocopy only two pages: The plane ticket and the Mobility Award document. The young woman voluntarily agreed to let me use the photocopy machine and asked me what brought me to Mason City. At that particular moment, I replied, with an enthusiastic tone, that I was on my way to Britt specifically to attend the annual hobo convention. I added that, as a student, I was also hoping to conduct part of my fieldwork research there. After a brief talk, the young woman told me that she lives in Britt and that she would be happy to give me a lift after her work shift. I had to wait for her outside in the parking lot. Once in Britt, she offered me a beer at her place and introduced me to her little daughter and partner. She insisted that I come back again to borrow the bicycle in their home garage for the purposes of sightseeing.

The Hobo Town: Britt

One does not need a bicycle to explore what Britt has to offer to its visitors. Like a thoracic skeleton, Britt consists of one main road crisscrossed horizontally by several streets. A vast

cornfield delimits the paved roads at the northern periphery of this small town. The Main Avenue consists of several attractions including the Hobo Queen Garden, the Engraved Walkway, the Hobo Museum, the Hob-Nob tavern, the Hobo Cemetery, Mary Jo's Hobo House (a restaurant) and two gift shops. These tourist attractions are accessible within a very short walking distance. Portraits of former hobo kings and hobo queens¹ decorate the interior walls of the tavern, the restaurant and the two gift shops. Hobo miniature dolls fill the space of the gift shop windows. Several objects referring to the historical figure of the hobo seem to be displayed, framed and engraved everywhere. As a tourist, I enjoyed walking while sightseeing around the Main Avenue area.

The Hobo Queen Garden

The Hobo Queen Garden hosts a couple of trees and a wide variety of flowers of different, and mostly bright, colors. As the name suggests, the space of the Hobo Queen Garden is dedicated specifically to the women who were previously crowned to serve as hobo queens. The nicknames (road names) of former hobo queens are inscribed on a black marble board. An obituary notice is carved next to several nicknames of deceased hobo queens. The black marble board is surrounded by flowers. It is positioned underneath a tree adjacent to a bench. The following statement is written on its background: 'All the Queens are like Flowers in a Garden'. Perhaps, the nicknames (road names) of former hobo queens are inscribed to show appreciation of their involvement in the hobo community. One has to pass through the Hobo Queen Garden to reach The Engraved Walkway.

The Engraved Walkway

The Engraved Walkway is designed as a semi-circular path consisting of interlocking pavers of different sizes. The nicknames (road names) of former hobo kings are carved on the relatively small pavers of the walkway. Some other larger pavers display epitaphs on the form of verses or simple sayings dedicated to the memory of a particular historical figure of a hobo traveler. The word freedom is inscribed on a lone paver. A medium-size brick stone underneath a tree located at the corner of the pathway simply displays the following: 'Unknown Hobo 1919'. As I kept

¹ The election of the hobo king and the hobo queen takes place annually before the conclusion of the events of the national hobo convention in Britt. To qualify, candidates must be approved by a committee of former hobo kings, must have attended the convention at least three times and must not have served as hobo kings or hobo queens in the past three years. In order to win the crown, potential candidates should attract the loudest applause from the attendees.

walking, I had the feeling that the conspicuous hobo nickname prints on the pavers transformed both the place and the experience of walking. The promenade was enjoyable and felt somehow more alive. Yet the Engraved Walkway should not be confused with the Hobo Cemetery per se that is located adjacent to the Evergreen cemetery in Britt. One has just to cross the Main Avenue to reach the Hobo Museum.

The Hobo Museum

The Hobo Museum is another locale that showcases tangible materials associated with the hobo culture and its history. It is open to visitors during the day between June and September. For the rest of the year, it can only be visited by appointment.² The reception desk is decorated with pamphlets, postcards, photographs and flyers that promote part of the proceedings of the National Hobo Convention such as the parade through the Main Avenue, the coronation of a newly elected hobo king and hobo queen, the car show and craft fair etc.³. In addition, in the limited reception area, saleable items are strategically placed for visitors interested in buying a gift or a souvenir such as train whistles, walking sticks, t-shirts, caps, maps, CDs, mugs and travel books and so on. In short, the front desk of the Hobo Museum offers a seasonal gift shop that encourages visitors to step inside to learn more about hobo culture and history.

The hobo museum's main area is loosely organized into three sections. The first one resembles library corridors due to the horizontal and vertical clusters of its shelves and racks. It features a collection of original items that once belonged to some hoboes such as old manuscripts, poems, journals, photographs, hobo dolls, used clothes, food cans, used packs of cigarettes, historical postcards, utensils, toothbrush, hobo crafts etc. The walls of that space are also decorated with paintings of trains and railroad tracks, signs and maps. All the original collections are strategically organized into a few exhibits such as the hobo miniature doll, the hobo writer and poet, the hobo kings and queens etc. Each exhibit features tangible materials that best denote the lifestyle of hoboes from a particular standpoint.

The second section is a simulation of a campfire setting. It is situated at the center of the hobo museum's main area. It is composed of a few metal and plastic buckets that encircle the campfire. The buckets are placed in an upside-down position in case one feels like sitting down

² Information regarding the museum's opening hours are displayed at the entrance desk.

³ More information on such scheduled events are briefly described in the flyers designed specifically for the promotion of the national hobo convention.

and joining in the display. Pieces of stones compose another circle within the larger one. Empty cans of beans, rusty 'kitchen' utensils and pieces of firewood complement the décor. The campfire setting is likely to convey vivid images depicting the circumstances in which tramps and hoboes gathered around campfires during their intermittent travels across North America.

The third section is a cinema seating. After being exposed to the various tangible materials that represent the hobo lifestyle and their travels on the railway lines, visitors may finally stop by the cinema seating next to the campfire setting. In this section, visitors can address more of their curiosity about hoboes by sitting down and watching a black and white documentary about these travelers and their past lives as transients. Accordingly, the museum's physical space is filled with miscellaneous objects, symbols and static or animated images that plunge the visitor's mind and imagination into the life experiences and livelihoods of the historical figure of the hobo.

The Hobo Campsite

The hobo campsite is located at the edge of Britt in proximity to the operational Soo line tracks. Prior to my trip to Britt, the Hobo Museum's curator informed me via email that the campsite, also known as the hobo 'jungle'⁴, is the place where most attendees sojourn and socialize during the entire hobo convention. Hence, for the purposes of conducting fieldwork, I planned to spend most of my time in this particular venue. Accordingly, on my way to the campsite, I passed by three children who were playing by themselves in a street, and to my surprise I heard one of them saying: 'he is a hobo'! Probably in an attempt to do me a favor, the youngster pointed at a narrow street leading to the campsite and said 'a short cut to the hobo jungle is that way; you will find other hoboes there'. I resumed walking to the campsite while thinking about hoboes.

Grass covered most of the campground. The campsite consisted of an outdoors kitchen and a public restroom with shower facilities. The covered area of the kitchen was composed of a few tables, chairs and a small whiteboard. The latter indicated the times when breakfast and dinner would be served as well as the names of volunteers who chose to get involved in preparing and serving food. A wire-mesh fence indicating a no-trespassing sign separated the campsite from the operating railroad tracks. Not far from the fence, a number of tents and tarpaulins occupied the peripheries of the campsite. Several recreational vehicles were randomly parked either in

⁴ It is worth noting that, historically, the term hobo jungle referred to scattered campsites established on public properties or lands owned by railroad companies to temporarily host tramps and hoboes during their intermittent travels. Extensive discussion of the hobo jungle is provided in the introduction.

proximity to the fence or a few meters away from the restroom facility. Towards the middle of the camp, I perceived a pile of wood, a campfire setting and seating waiting for the début of the hobo convention events. Not too far from the campfire, a red boxcar standing on rail tracks appeared to be out of place; condemned to stand still. The old non-operational red boxcar was randomly covered on both sides with inscribed tags that referred to the train hopping lifestyle. It accommodated young adult transients for the duration of the hobo convention and served as a place for storing mattresses and other camping gears for the subsequent hobo convention.

The Hobo Cemetery

Prior to my visit to Britt, I had several phone conversations with the current hobo king that I would like to refer to as 'Brother'. He was seventy years old at that time. He told me over the phone that he had been elected a hobo king twice and that he had been attending the annual hobo gathering in Britt for more than three decades. 'Brother' is a respectful gentleman and a venerable member of the hobo collectivity. Once in Britt, I heard him deliver an eloquent speech during the event of the hobo cemetery tour. As a hobo king, he proceeded to the burial of the cremated ashes of three hoboies that he referred to as friends and members of the hobo family. He alluded to their passing away using the phrase 'hoboies who caught the westbound [passed away]'. The sense of loss and mourning added to the omnipresent intensity of the event. I saw several people crying. Some people with a uniform played up the national anthem and some other songs before proceeding to fire bullets in the air as in a celebratory gunfire. Towards the end of the event, the attendees formed a circle around the hobo graves, then proceeded to walk and stop by each grave to touch its headstone with a walking stick. Some stopped in front of a particular grave to briefly talk to a deceased hobo or may be whisper a form of prayer. It was a windy summer day. An elderly attendee gave me a walking stick and encouraged me to join them in their circle of grievance. Prior to my arrival to Britt, I remember that I had tried over the phone to ascertain whether the hobo collectivity was a kind of secret society. I asked 'Brother' directly about his standpoint regarding the practice of train hopping. Rather than receiving an outright answer on the phone, I had to wait until our meeting face to face at the hobo 'jungle'.

"Brother": You see Hicham we are a hobo community, not a secret society. We are not afraid to show our true colors since we are not trying to hide anything. Some of us are more brusque than others, and I am okay with that. I chose to be more diplomatic about it. I know them as brothers. There are other ones that I cannot stand but I put up with that. I think that riding [freight] trains is going to stay forever; there are still going to be hoboies and tramps as brothers no matter what they are going to call themselves. But there are some rules, there is a code of conduct that we basically understand and know the bottom line rules. If I trust you, you trust me. We just have to take each other for each other's words, and you develop a friendship

The Elderly ‘Hoboes’ Camping at the Hobo ‘Jungle’

The elderly ‘hoboes’ who were camping at the hobo ‘jungle’ seemed to have free abundant time to use and enjoy their home away from ‘home’. Some of them had been attending the annual hobo convention on a regular basis for more than a decade. They knew each other well enough and seemed to be keen on maintaining the tradition of celebrating the memory of the historical hobo. In addition to passing time socializing among themselves, they were manifestly eager to welcome and interact with curious residents of Britt and other transient travelers at the campsite. Most of them were involved in a variety of activities depending on their respective abilities and/or qualifications. The most actively involved among them were in charge of carrying out the primary scheduled events and activities at the campsite including, but not limited to, hobo activities for children, hobo cemetery tour, official fire lightening, four winds ceremony, vagabond craft show, hobo poetry etc.⁵ While some (hoboes) were contented with simply providing help as and when needed, others opted to substantially engage in organizing the hobo convention in pursuit of strategic aims ranging from maintaining a good reputation to seizing the opportunity, or rather the honor, to be elected the hobo king or queen of the year. In spite of the extent of their voluntary involvement in maintaining such an annual tradition, and as ongoing members of Tourist Union #63⁶, they seemed all particularly compelled to ‘lead by example’ in hopes of implementing, or at least persuading everybody to adhere to, the primary ‘ethical code’⁷ of the road while passing time at the hobo ‘jungle’.

Accordingly, some of the people staying in the hobo ‘jungle’ had previously served as hobo kings and hobo queens. Others were still working on demonstrating their ‘absolute’ commitment and allegiance to the hobo collectivity. Some were descendants of actual historical hobo figures. Others were simply attracted to such a lifestyle and considered themselves as friends of hoboes. Yet all of them had nicknames (road names). They had the tendency to call each other by their

⁵ For a list of all the scheduled activities in 2017 please visit the following link: <http://brittiowa.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/2017-Hobo-Day-Schedule.pdf>

⁶ “Due to vagrancy laws, hobos were routinely arrested, booted out of town, and generally abused. But in a clever display of cultural prowess, they exploited a legal loophole. If you were a member of a union, you were not subject to vagrancy laws because it was assumed you were traveling for work. So hobos established their own union, Tourist Union#63.” (Mack, 2011:7).

⁷ For a list of the fifteen codes prescribed by Tourist union#63 please visit the following webpage: <http://www.openculture.com/2016/11/the-hobo-ethical-code-of-1889.html>

nicknames rather than real names. Also, when referring to their collectivity as transient travelers and members of Tourist Union#63, some preferred to use the term hobo brotherhood and/or fraternity while others insisted on using other phrases such as hobo family and/or community. In short, most of the elderly hoboes participating in the convention were well organized, ambitious, and friendly. They were keen on maintaining an atmosphere of camaraderie at the campsite while continuously staging and verbally expressing their sense and sentiment of belonging to the world of hoboes.

However, a specific category of elderly ‘hoboes’ seemed less inclined to pursue the prevailing ambitions or possibilities of reigning at higher hierarchies of the hobo collectivity. In spite of their affiliation to the hobo collectivity and Tourist Union#63, they manifested a rather laidback attitude in terms of their involvement in the organized events and activities at the campsite. They were content with volunteering only as backups as and when needed. They seemed to be specifically attracted to opportunities for socializing, and spent most of their time hanging out with the few youthful train hoppers who showed up to the campsite for the ‘hobo days’. Most importantly, this category of elderly ‘hoboes’ appeared to have a somewhat urgent need for updated information on current circumstances of tramping and train hopping. Hence, it is worth noting that unlike many of the other convention goers, this particular category of elderly attendees had actually traveled on freight trains extensively at some point or another in their previous lives⁸. They were particularly good raconteurs. As they reminisced, they proudly emphasized their sense of being free, adventurous, autonomous and resilient while embarking on such journeys. Their talk oscillated between pride in being a wit, the capacity to transgress some laws and the courage to hop on freight trains. Most of them preferred to be identified as tramps, hobo-tramps, recreational (train) riders or simply fans of the rails. It was evident from their tactfulness that they had acquired a sort of ‘street smartness’. Some of these elderly ‘hoboes’ highlighted the kindness of strangers who helped them in many ways during their journeys of tramping and travelling on freight trains. Their stories, in short, revealed an amalgam of standpoints regarding the practice of train hopping while tramping and a variety of encounters with strangers on the road.

In addition, younger train hopping attendees shared stories about the present circumstances and the experiences of navigating the freight lines. At times, they addressed their involvement in

⁸ Only a few of the elderly attendees who were actively involved in managing the events of the hobo convention had actually hopped on a freight train at some point in their life course.

certain activities or behavioral issues as a result of their lifestyle. For example, some younger train hopping travelers talked openly about the event of their temporary incarceration as a result of minor crimes or petty transgressions such as train hopping, drinking in public, loitering, trespassing, flying a sign (panhandling) etc. Others were not reluctant to acknowledge their addiction to alcohol or other drug substances. Older train hoppers were most of the time attentive to the details of such stories without any judgmental attitude. Moreover, they were eager to hear updated information vis-à-vis the current state of affair of train hopping in relation to popular routes and destinations. However, at times, such intergenerational interactions were also pretexts to remind the younger train hoppers that they were welcome to stay at the campsite as long as they respected the ethical code of the road. The following accounts seek to shed light on the nature of such conversations while attempting to introduce some train hopping attendees to the reader.

Whitebeard's Account: Tramping in Relation to Train Hopping

'Whitebeard' is a man in his early sixties who self-identifies as a tramp. He travelled on freight trains extensively when he was single. He had to stop the adventurous journeys on freight trains for over twenty-five years when he got married and had children. Yet he resumed train hopping at times for short distances, in a careful way, when he retired from his job. 'Whitebeard' was hanging out near the boxcar with his hunting dog when I first walked into the hobo 'jungle'. Three young adult train hopping travelers were gathering in a semi-circle nearby his tarpaulin. I approached 'Whitebeard' and introduced myself. I explained, right after, that I was a student visiting Britt for field research purposes. Then I conveyed to him my intention to hang out, and spend most time, at the hobo 'jungle' until the conclusion of the events. I added that the current hobo king invited me to the hobo convention and that I was hoping to conduct informal interviews for the purposes of my research. As expected, I had to answer questions regarding the nature of my fieldwork research. At first, the young adult rail riders seemed distant and reserved. I had the feeling or the impression that they were suspicious of my presence at the hobo 'jungle'. Their 'reserved' attitude faded away the following day as more people showed up at the 'jungle'. 'Whitebeard', however, was very welcoming on my first day at the campsite and took the lead in talking about his previous journeys on freight trains. He informed me that he also felt welcomed by other hoboes when he first showed up at the hobo 'jungle' back in the late eighties. He invited me to put up my small tent anywhere nearby the boxcar 'before it gets dark'. Other elderly attendees joined the gathering to say hello in the evening. It was a long night.

Hicham: Thank you all for your hospitality. You are very welcoming...

'Whitebeard': ...Britt is really the cemetery of what is all about...remembering the ones before you. I just like the idea of having outsiders at the hobo convention like people like you. You had no idea who you are going to meet here. You came here and I saw that you were hesitant. Probably you were saying to yourself, now that I am here in Britt, so what is next? What should I do? In the late eighties, when I first came here to Britt I was welcomed in the same way. Now you really want to know what is going to happen for the rest of the week. You gonna [going to] meet a lot of interesting people

'Whitebeard' explained to me how he was first introduced to the world of hopping freight trains. His brother influenced his decision to embark on such a journey with a group of eleven young adults. They were seeking to experience the thrills of freedom and adventure. 'Whitebeard' highlighted the fact that one had to be waiting at a 'catch out spot'⁹ for relatively long periods of time before being able to hop on a freight train. The tendency was to pass time drinking beers while gossiping and/or debating various, random topics of interest including adventurous travels on the rails. 'Whitebeard' chose to situate his decision to experiment with such a form of travel in the context of 'free will' rather than the ubiquitous circumstances of young adults having to flee away 'home'.

Hicham: Tell me about your first ride [train hopping journey] on the freight train?

'Whitebeard': In my first ride [train hopping journey] I wasn't running from anything, my brother was hitchhiking to California with some other guys and they were in Roseville. This hobo told them that they can ride a freight train instead of hitchhiking, a thing that they never heard of before. So they grabbed the [freight] train, and when my brother came back [home] he was talking about it all the time and this intrigued me. I told myself that I should try it myself. I was not twenty-first yet at that time, just graduated from high school. When I took off I remember I had fourteen dollars in my pocket, but I went for adventure, it sounded cool. We had to split up because we were eleven

'Whitebeard' recalled his journeys on freight trains as enjoyable, adventurous and carefree. He admitted that he was addicted to such a way of traveling. As a young adult, he recalled being tempted to continue experimenting with the journeys of tramping and train hopping despite the hardships that he had to deal with. Sometimes he had to spend up to three days in a town trying to seize the chance to hop on a freight train without being successful. When I asked him for more possible details or an anecdote regarding one of his freight train travels he resumed his account with a reminiscent tone:

'Whitebeard': After riding with my brother and the others, nothing would have stopped me from riding again and again. I was a heavy drinker, and when I first was ready to go man...we were at first trying to figure out how much booze to bring you know [laughing] we were more concerned about how much we are going to drink and what booze

⁹ The term 'catch out spot' refers to the place that train-hopping travelers occupy temporarily while waiting for the right time to jump on the right freight train.

to bring...it takes a lot of patience waiting for the train and sometimes you don't want to be there, especially when there is no shade and it's a hot spot. There is always something wrong [with train hopping journeys]...it's a hard life let me tell you, it is spooky sometimes and you get to see a lot of hardships

'Whitebeard' had to stop his adventures on freight trains when he got married and had kids, due to his new responsibilities. According to his explanations his desire to continue experimenting with such a form of mobility did not fade away completely. Hence, as a way of alleviating the temptation of train hopping he resorted to attending hobo and tramp gatherings to socialize with other 'like-minded' travelers. However, both the events of his retirement and his divorce affected his decision to reconsider train hopping again to a moderate extent. After his retirement, he decided to embark on a train hopping journey with his eldest son just for pleasure. In short, he had a romantic understanding of the tramping lifestyle and particularly viewed train hopping as an admired way of travelling the country and meeting 'interesting' people while on the road.

'Whitebeard': once you ride the [freight] train, it's always there, you may quit riding [freight trains] but it stays in you. When I got married and had kids, I didn't ride you know, but it's always there. Now because of the people I know, I feel like to ride again. One of the first things I did after I retired was to ride a freight train again. I had a ride with my son and that was the first in twenty-five years. It was really good

Hicham: Wow, riding a freight train with your son seems like an inter-generational activity, tell me more about it

'Whitebeard': The big thing is that my son want [wanted] to ride a [freight] train because he knew that I rode [freight] trains before, when he was little I used to take him to train museums you know, we went and rode a train up in Duluth you know. He has the passion of the train, and I would rather ride [freight trains] with him and show him the different tracks and what is going on than him picking it up on his own or from somebody else. But in the end he is going to ride [freight trains] on his own anyhow...I'm sixty-two and I imagine that my son feels pretty safe when he rides a [freight] train with me. I told him that if some shit [trouble] happens don't blame yourself because we were both taking that risk

'Whitebeard' resumed his talk about meeting, and receiving help from, good people while on the road. He recalled being fed and given shelter for the night by total strangers. He even ventured to seek help at times from railroad workers during his surreptitious journeys to figure out his way 'out of town' at times. Accordingly, he was convinced that his tramping journeys endowed him with the required interpersonal skills that enabled him to handle certain unpleasant situations during his travels such as being simply stranded and/or 'stuck' somewhere. He seemed particularly keen on transmitting the values and skills of tramping to his eldest son. Then in reference to the younger train hopping travelers who were sitting nearby he continued:

'Whitebeard': The young [train] riders like these guys are the ones who ought to carry on the hobo tradition. Some of them ride [freight] trains really hard. They belong to a different era. My son for example, if he chooses to keep on riding [freight] trains, if he likes it, then it's ok with me, because I know that it's there in his blood and he is going to

ride on and on. But I'm not saying that he's going to be a professional, he will just ride on and off. We both think alike and we know each other's moves, I don't need to explain anything to him; he knows exactly what's going on, we do kind of look at each other more if we are just riding [a freight train] with somebody else...

'Whitebeard's intermittent journeys of tramping and traveling on freight trains, during the course of his life, partially shaped his 'self-understanding' as a tramp rather than a hobo. He identified himself as a tramp who will not hesitate to hop on a freight train as a mode of transportation when necessary. He enjoyed more tramping and/or train hopping with the company of other travelers rather than on his own. In an attempt to situate the hobo persona within the context of the hobo convention I asked 'Whitebeard' for more clarifications regarding the use of the term 'hobo' among the attendees.

'Whitebeard': The hobo thing for me is just a term; cemeteries are a hobo thing. Yes hoboes hopped trains and lived off the land, but I'm not like that. When a buddy called me in to go ride a [freight] train he will say: hey do you wanna [want to] go tramping? So I call myself a tramp. If you are walking down the street you can tell who is a train rider and who is not. Another train rider can tell who is a train rider. You can tell by the clothes. I usually ride with blue jeans; they don't clean up...well I am a tramp you know, but if you talk to tramps and tell you that they never ride a grainer [freight train machine car], they are not a tramp. There are times you get stranded you know

Beardfree & Freesteam's Understandings of Train Hopping

'Beardfree' is an elderly regular attendee of the hobo convention. He is a man in his mid-sixties from Salt Lake City. 'Beardfree' self-identifies as a recreational freight train rider. He recalled having started his first journey on freight trains at the age of twelve years old. 'Beardfree' stated his preference for solitary journeys on freight trains. He avoided embarking on train hopping journeys with other travelers. He explained that while surreptitiously navigating the freight trajectories, one may encounter several train hopping travelers likely to be dangerous, aggressive or even potential criminals. He told me that he had heard stories about train hopping travelers being thrown out of a moving freight train because of a fight over a beer, a cigarette and so on. He added that a few train hopping travelers may be members of a criminal organization known as the Freight Train Riders of America (FTRA). According to the media, members of the (FTRA) were suspected to be involved in some train derailments and other unresolved crimes including homicides. Yet there is no evidence to back up such speculations. On another matter, 'Beardfree' reiterated the point that he traveled on freight trains solely for the purposes of pleasure rather than necessity. For instance, he disclosed that he had never traveled on a freight train to look for work elsewhere. He had the tendency to relate his previous freight train adventures with a humorous slant. He referred to the circumstances involved regarding one of his train hopping journeys in the following account:

'Beardfree': it is peaceful, really peaceful and there is nobody to talk to. It feels great when nobody is around. I do not ride with [any] nobody, I don't know what their problem is. I ride [freight] trains for the love of it. I rode up to Minneapolis once and there were five hoboes in the same flat car in 1960. It is a lot harder to ride [freight trains] these days than back in the days, and it can be a felony conviction...I rode [traveled on a freight train] for four days once, and I had to get off and change the train. It took me one day to get to Denver and another day to get to Lynn in Massachusetts. Do you remember nine-eleven? I did not know anything about it because I was riding a train at that time. I got off in Ohio coz [because] it was raining and I walked down towards the East. I saw these people watching this show [on television] over and over again which was weird. I thought it was a show [laughing]. And because of this it took me three days to get out of Ohio because of the bulls [the police of train yards].

'Beardfree' emphasized the variable and substantial amount of time required before he could manage to hop on a freight train. It varied from one to four days depending on the local circumstances he would encounter prior to the act of hopping on a freight train. He evoked the necessity of being patient and flexible due to the impossibility of foreseeing or calculating an exact 'time schedule' for such a form of travel. He contended that one just had to be careful not to subject his or her body to the risk of potential injuries at the very moment of jumping on a freight train. 'Beardfree' appeared to be more concerned with the fact that train hopping became a difficult activity to engage with in the post nine-eleven era due to the heightened security measures in railyards and tracks. In addition, he conveyed with regret that the possibility of 'landing in jail' with a felony conviction became the primary risk assumed when traveling on freight trains. In spite of his awareness of all the incurred implications, he decided one day to take his adolescent son on a short freight train trip. Unlike 'Whitebeard', 'Beardfree' had no plans to take his son again on such journeys but confided that he will probably hop a freight train by himself in the near future. When I inquired whether he self-identified as a hobo, he pointed out first his overlapping use of various means of transportation for the purposes of traveling before providing me with his standpoint:

'Beardfree': I am a traveler by nature, I rode horses, bicycles, motorcycles, hitchhiking across the US and riding [freight] trains, whenever I have karma I win. When I started riding [freight trains] it was on a time schedule but it cannot be precise...being a hobo is no part of my identity. I am a recreational rider and I ride [freight trains] only when I feel like to ride, not because I have to ride...I ride [freight trains] only when I feel like to; I will be sitting at home relaxed and boom the idea of riding [a freight train] will come to me, and I just do it: 'see you later Jerry, I'm gone!'

As mentioned earlier, 'Beardfree' decided one day to take his adolescent son on a short freight train trip. The way he talked about such an experience sounded like he intended to embark his son on this kind of 'rite of initiation' to travel on a freight train. However, his son did not enjoy his first night camping outside and insisted on getting a room in a hotel the following day. 'Beardfree' probably brought up this example to convey the idea that his son at first was excited to embark on such a journey with his father but he was not mentally prepared to handle the

hardships of the road while being away from the comfort zone of ‘home’. ‘Beardfree’ alluded to this particular trip as an adventure, but he outlined it more specifically as a game in which both himself and his adolescent son emerged as winners. The idea that both of them managed to return back home safe and sound without even having to face charges for trespassing and/or any other potential misfortunes accounted for the sentiment of success that both ‘Beardfree’ and his son indulged in and verbalized.

‘Beardfree’: ...my kid rode with me up to Minneapolis, we spent a night and camped out in the open, and he was like no let us get a room. And we got a room finally, but the next day we rode back. It takes a lot of patience [to be able to travel on freight trains], and I remember that night it was raining where we were. His mom was worried about him, but he told her that he won. But now, I don’t want him to ride trains, back when I started you might get a night in jail, but now you get class c felony conviction which is the lowest. In Nebraska and Lincoln it’s one night before the judge. One year I was in front of the same judge three times in three days, I was like yeah they caught me again...

‘Freesteam’ is a man in his mid-seventies. He supervised the progression of the hobo convention events. He made sure the ethical code of the road was respected. He was a ‘Bridger’ since he experimented with traveling on both steam and diesel freight trains. He approached us and introduced himself as the current ‘Head Supreme Court of Justice of Hoboes’. He mentioned that he had been holding such a position for one decade. I told him that I was recording the conversation with ‘Beardfree’.

‘Freesteam’: I do not want to interrupt the conversation. But do you know my title?

Hicham: No, probably a past hobo king?

‘Freesteam’: Yes, but I do have another title, I am the Head Supreme Court of Justice of Hoboes.

‘Beardfree’: He is the Chief police, the Mayor, the Judge and the Great Grand Duke of Hoboes. He is everything.

‘Freesteam’: And I have a last say on this: there is no place to go! that is the way it is. I take the blame and also take the crap. Bo [hobo], I gotta [have got to] take my car to the election of coronation, but here in the [‘hobo’] jungle I won’t walk and stop before a gathering unless I ask for the permission to do so. I have been doing this [in reference to his engagement with the hobo lifestyle] since 1952, I first started with the steam [train] and I moved to diesel [train]. You have to be old to do that. I will be seventy-six pretty soon. For the election of the king, [and queen] I am punctual. But tomorrow when it comes to the cemetery burial we are all serious about that.

‘Beardfree’: My mom said she found me in a dumpster, and somebody mentioned ‘so why you left the dumpster?’

‘Freesteam’: last year I rode a [freight] train for two days. The sound of the train put me to sleep for a while and I woke up when it started to slow down. And don’t you think ever that you can hear a train coming, it can kill you, for you will be on a [train] track and you will never hear the train coming behind you and kill you. The trains will not forgive you at all...the train is dirty, dangerous and illegal. When I started [hopping steam freight trains] it was really dirty because of the steam engine, and the diesel ones are dirty as well. But not as much as they used to. Plus it can be cold in the woods. That is why they call young [train] riders: Dirty kids.

Freesteam mentioned that he traveled on both steam trains and diesel trains. He reigned at the highest rung of the hierarchy of the hobo transient collectivity at the time in which this

fieldwork was conducted. He proudly proclaimed his title as the ‘supreme court of justice of hoboes’. Given his rank, he launched some of the major proceedings that were taking place during the hobo days: the official fire lightening, the four winds ceremony and the hobo coronation. He was also physically present at the hobo cemetery event that coincided with the burial of two hoboes. He conveyed his tendency to ask people for their permission before joining their scattered gatherings at the campsite. When I inquired about the rationale behind this reservation, he immediately responded that in reference to the place of the gathering ‘it could be somebody’s home for the night’. But the atmosphere at the camp, especially in physical proximity to the boxcar, was convivial enough that both hosts and guests (younger and older train hopping travelers) did not bother adopting such a formality for the purposes of their social interactions. What mattered the most was that everybody behaved in a decent/respectful way towards others.

In addition, ‘Freesteam’ briefly explained the rationale behind referring to youthful train hoppers as ‘dirty kids’. He reasoned that the ones who use freight trains as a means of transportation, among others, tend to be exposed to the outdoors for relatively long periods of time without necessarily having access to basic indoor facilities such as having a shower etc. But most importantly, according to him, youthful train hoppers were likely to ‘look dirty’ because they tend to spend a significant amount of their time hidden in the restrained spaces of the freight train machine cars during their surreptitious travels. He added that the railroad cars, such as gondolas and grainers, are designed to transport specific types of freight only. The space in these cars is usually left dirty in the sense of being covered with dust. Hence it is obvious that when train hopping travelers intermittently squat in these ‘dirty’ spaces, their hands and faces and clothes and backpacks appear covered in dust as well. On my second night at the hobo ‘jungle’, I woke up in the middle of the night to the sound of a moving freight train whistling on the other side of the fence. One could feel the ground vibrating majestically. Some attendees, including younger train hoppers, could not resist such a spectacle and walked towards the fence to enjoy the view. They were probably wondering about its ‘final’ destination.

‘Dirty Kids’ Travelers Attending the Hobo ‘Jungle’

Young adult rail riders usually gathered nearby the opened boxcar positioned at the hobo ‘jungle’. Some of them already managed to find a place inside the boxcar to sleep at night. Others used their sleeping bags to spend their nights in the open air on the non-trimmed grass in proximity to the boxcar. Most of the young adult train riders I met and talked to at the campsite had a weathered

look. Some showed up to Britt in groups of two or three. Others walked into the campsite by themselves or escorted by their road dog. Most of them were clad in black or blue-patched jeans and dark colored shabby t-shirts. All of them were wearing worn out yet good quality walking boots. A couple of them preferred to keep a bandana loosely hung around their neck as well as a small knife attached to the belt around their waist throughout their entire stay at the ‘hobo’ jungle. Some informed me later that they usually refer to the bandana as a ‘skunk’ and that it is useful to cover their nose and mouths while traveling on freight trains. The younger train hoppers had a typical hairstyle: almost all of them had a mix of a few dreadlocks, long and short, randomly mushroomed all over their heads. A minority of these youthful travelers had tattoos on their legs, arms, and faces as well. Some of the tattoos displayed drawings of railroad tracks and trains while others took the form of inscribed letterings pertaining to the world of train hopping. The marks of travelling in a rough way, while being exposed to the outdoors for so much time, were clearly visible on their physical appearance. They looked exhausted.

Yvaan’s Lived Train Hopping Experiences

‘Yvaan’ is a train hopping traveler in his early twenties. He has been traveling on freight trains for almost six years. Train hopping tattoos were visible on his arms and forehead. He conveyed that he had vague memories of his biological father and has not seen his mother for several years. He confided that he did not want to risk being in jail again. ‘Yvaan’ was one of the three youthful rail riders who were gathering in a semi-circle next to ‘Whitebeard’s tarpaulin. He showed up to the hobo ‘jungle’ with the company of his road dog ‘Bidding’. The following is her short story as conveyed verbatim by her owner.

‘Yvaan’: when I got this dog, man her leg was broken, she was a dog bid; people that made dogs fight for money. They will put a weak dog in a circle, and then they put the fighting dogs in there to f** [beat] that dog so that they will learn how to do it better. On her front right leg there is a big scar; her bone was sticking out of her leg...she was only four months, I had to carry her for three months, and we are taking care of each other ever since

Although ‘Yvaan’ was physically included in the semi-circle, he appeared to be taciturn and socially distant. At times, he kept himself busy playing with, and talking to, his road dog ‘Bidding’, shouting at her at times, or even aggressively pushing her. It was amusing to observe him pulling her back eventually to hug her and let her lick his face. He was very close to his dog. Life on the road made him resilient and pragmatic. Because of his extensive travels, he would make sure that his backpack was always half empty so that he could walk faster, run and jump with ease when necessary. Dog food was always placed near the top of his backpack for easy access. ‘Yvaan’ self-

identifies as a ‘dirty kid’. He had been convicted a few of times of misdemeanors such as drinking in public, dumpster diving, flying a sign¹⁰ etc. He explained that whenever he showed up in a new town, his primary reflex was to walk towards the backyard of a nearby convenience store to look for cardboards. He used the small ones for the purposes of flying a sign, and kept the larger ones to be used as support material to sleep on wherever he chose to momentarily call home. His dog, which he referred to as his daughter and sole acquaintance on the road, became well trained and used to the circumstances of traveling on freight trains with him.

‘Yvaan’: me and my dog have been on fourteen trains together in ten different states. This dog right here has seen more states than most people will, checking all across the west coast, mid-west and the south...she always got my back and I always got hers...this dog never miss a meal. I will miss a meal often but my dog will never miss a meal...I definitely had my days of riding [freight trains] when there is nobody with me; no dog just me and my pack, and I had no purpose. So I will just bring my booze, get on the [freight] train and I’m gone; I didn’t have anything else to do. Now with ‘Bidding’ it is different. I will ask her what direction she wanted us to go and she points with her head at a direction and we start walking through that direction

‘Yvaan’ grew up in the state of Colorado, more specifically in a small town where it was a familiar scene to watch freight trains stopping by and passing through. As an adolescent, he ran away from home repeatedly due to difficult, even abusive, family circumstances. At the time of my conversation with him, he said he had not seen his mother for almost three years and was not planning to see her any time soon. He reiterated the idea that he could no longer stand being in the company of people for lengthy durations of time. He referred to his favorite alcoholic drink as a ‘sidewalk slam’. He described it as a mix of energy drinks and alcohol that renders one (wasted) in an altered state of consciousness in a short amount of time. When I inquired about his first time experience of traveling on a freight train, he evoked feeling paranoid and anxious when he was sitting in a (grainer) railcar machine next to a girl he hardly knew. He remembered her telling him ‘it [the freight train] will be rolling out pretty soon, drink your beer!’

‘Yvaan’ had been trying to hitchhike away from town for two days with no avail. The event of striking a conversation with a random girl he met by chance in the street compelled him to consider hopping a freight train with her to California. At that time, ‘Yvaan’ was still inexperienced with the out-of-doors world, away from home, yet he was readily disposed to embark on any form of adventure in hopes of traveling far away from his hometown. ‘It was when I was walking down the street running away from home and I started a conversation with this girl. I was trying to

¹⁰ ‘Fly a sign’ is an insider term often used by ‘dirty kids’ travelers that refers to the ability to ‘make money’ while on the road. Through the medium of a written down note on a cardboard, dirty kids aspire to attract the attention of people passing by in hopes of receiving donations. It is similar to the activity of panhandling.

hitchhike for two days, and she was like you know what I am f** hopping [a freight train] to California...' 'Yvaan' invoked the circumstance of running away from home when he first experimented with train hopping. He saw the necessity of socializing with a random girl he met in the street who was also considering the idea of traveling away from town. He referred to this girl later on as his 'ex old lady' which insinuated that they were involved in a relationship afterwards. 'Yvaan' did not clarify whether they both managed to travel to California on his first train hopping experience, but he recalled managing to hop out of a California railroad three years ago with the help of a train conductor. The event of stumbling upon the chance of being 'invited' to travel on a freight train by a railroad worker rarely occurred according to other youthful freight train travelers. They referred to such an impromptu event as 'luck of the road'. Overall, some of them inferred that it was relatively easy to hop on a freight train in certain US states more than others. Of course, such an incident stood against the overall circulating statements regarding the increasing constraints and difficulties associated with train hopping.

'Yvaan': I do not remember where was that [exactly] but we started out of town me and my ex old lady bullshitting in there, waiting for the [freight train's] air to back up and roll out. There was no way we gonna [were going to] be seen, and these guys [railroad workers] walked by didn't see us, walked all the way down I assume, they stopped right where it [freight train] sided off because they switched trucks there. And one of them came back and saw us and he said: 'what are you guys doing here?' and we said that we were heading out of town, and he said 'we are too, now do you mind if you get off?' which we did and we went to that bridge and watch it roll off which was pretty cool. It was three years ago on a California railroad sitting there in the hardtop, and the conductor pulls up and started riding [the freight train] in front of us, he was like 'where are you guys heading?' and we were like do we tell him, do we tell him, and he was like 'let me guess, that way?' I nodded and he said 'there are a couple of boxcars in the back I will pull them [the doors] for you', and I said 'nah we'll run to it, I don't want you to seem suspicious'. So we were getting invited into the train, I thought that was the coolest thing ever.

In an attempt to redirect the conversation beyond the rare circumstance of 'getting invited into the train', I sought to learn more about the tactics involved in relation to the prior process of jumping on a freight train. So far, the general idea that such a form of movement required a flexible approach to time and an indifference to reach a specific destination as well as patience and resilience of character remained abstract verbalizations that did not address the inevitable set of skills and tactics required to embark on the train hopping journey. Hence, in response to more grounded questions on the usage of time prior to the moment of catching out, 'Yvaan' managed to clarify for me some of the procedures that experienced train hopping travelers should carefully observe before the act of jumping on a freight train.

Accordingly, train hopping travelers had to first identify the operational tracks from which freight trains usually roll out of town. In general, trains do not necessarily carry one type of

merchandise destined for delivery at a specific destination. Most trains are intermodals. They carry several locomotive units scheduled to split up or attach to other trains during layovers. Therefore a panoramic view on any railyard would indicate the existence of several tracks on which railroad workers execute various operations such as switching tracks, (un)loading freights, (dis)assembling units and (dis)connecting them from other railway car machines etc. Usually, conductors of the freight train collaborate with the brakemen and other railroad workers to redirect, or side off, railway cars. They dispatch railcar machines, whether loaded or unloaded, with the help of the locomotive unit on some specific operational tracks. The task of train hopping travelers is to identify the freight trains that are ready to roll. It can be a difficult process. 'Yvaan' explained that 'it is always a hit and miss with trains before you get to know what is going on, it takes patience and common sense'. He added that some of these operations of detaching and assembling trains often take place in physical proximity to the railyard to circumvent traffic congestion. Hence it is extremely important for 'experienced' train hopping travelers to pass a significant amount of time observing, and thinking about the logic behind the execution of these operations before the act of catching out. '...when you are catching from a new spot you better sit and watch what is happening first before you jump on any train, look at what they are doing and figure out how it is working first'. Overall, according to 'Yvaan', the freight train is ready to roll out of town when it is equipped with a rectangular box with flashing lights that indicate the end of the train. The box that he referred to as the 'Freddy' may be connected to more than one locomotive unit. The hissing sound of the train could be helpful in the sense that it signals termination of the procedures of inspecting the air brakes. The train whistle often signals that the freight train is about to move anytime soon.

'Yvaan': going back to your previous question, usually when I get on the train it is already connected and that is ready to roll. So either I will sit and watch it [the freight train] get built, or it is already built by the time I show up. Once you are already on your [freight train] ride you sit in there while it is airing up, and for each car you are in, you can see a knuckle that connects it to another car, and down below where the air holes hand so you can hear pshshsh and that means you are about to roll out

However, train hopping travelers have to engage with other tactics as well besides the ability to identify the right freight train on the right track from which to hop on. They have to locate a strategic catch out spot from which they can conduct their observations while remaining out of sight. 'Yvaan' warned that some railroad workers are more likely to report the presence of suspicious intruders to the (bulls) railyard police officers. 'I don't trust [railroad] workers because sometimes all it takes is a one radio call and you are busted'. Accordingly, it is essential to watch closely the different operations that are taking place while hiding at the catch out spot. At times, train hopping

travelers are able to identify the perfect spots from which to hide easily due to the remnants that other train hoppers previously left, when squatting there, such as cardboards and empty cans of beers etc. Hence, the effort of locating spaces that were already used previously for the sake of catching out, especially in the less trodden territories closer to railroad tracks, can be a good strategy to save time and allow a fuller focus on observing the undertaken operations during the day. On other occasions, train hopping travelers have to rely on their wit and capacity to improvise for solutions in order to locate new catch out spots. They have to be alert to the environment surrounding their bodies. The ability to develop a feel for the untrodden ground and the necessity to synchronize their senses with the outer space visually and aurally can render the hunt for a catch out spot more easily attainable.

Madar's Account on the Dark Side of Train hopping

'Madar' is a train hopping traveler in his mid-twenties. He grew up in South Dakota. He has been traveling on freight trains for almost six years. He quit his full time job in a security administration at an airport and left everything behind to join the open road. He travels on freight trains, and panhandles and dumpster dives when necessary. 'Madar' showed up to the hobo 'jungle' by himself two days prior to the conclusion of the events of the hobo convention. During his earlier experimentations with train hopping travels, some 'gangsters' in the street stole his backpack and accordion which he referred to as his only assets. Afterwards, he developed a proclivity for prudence when interacting with strangers without necessarily trusting them. He always had his small backpack next to him during his entire stay at the hobo 'jungle'.

On his way to Britt, a railroad police officer arrested him when he was about to jump off a freight train passing by Mason City. He had to appear before a judge after his incarceration for twenty-eight hours. The judge released him without pressing any charges. 'Madar' suggested that 'it wasn't a big deal, just a warning'. Yet, he reasoned that his arrest could have had serious consequences if it happened in other states than Iowa. Overall, he had been arrested only twice because of train hopping. He acknowledged his averseness to hanging around in a city or a town for more than a few days. His rationale stemmed partly from the judgmental perceptions that some pedestrians verbalized in regards to his tramping and train hopping way of life. 'some people will tell you, you piece of shit get a job! But I know they are having the life that I ran away from. I didn't like myself having a miserable [fulltime] job, at least now I have my freedom'. Nevertheless, 'Madar' quickly countered his aforementioned observation when he recalled earlier periodic circumstances in which he had to do

‘the kind of work that people don’t want to do’ to carry on his train hopping travels. He mentioned having been involved occasionally in ‘migrant workers’ jobs during harvest seasons mainly picking fruits and vegetables in addition to experimenting with seasonal ‘survival’ jobs involving menial tasks such as painting, washing and cleaning materials. ‘Madar’ explained that the time assigned for such occasional jobs, which ranged from a few hours to a maximum day or two, was convenient for him and enabled him to keep on traveling. When I asked him about the circumstances that led him to consider embarking on such a lifestyle in the first place he stated the following:

‘Madar’: I used to work in security administration at the airport; I was doing the same thing every day over and over again, and it’s mundane; a lot of effort for not a lot of pleasure. And when you work like this for forty-six hours a week you wanna [want to] kill yourself. One day I was walking down the streets and someone asked me to spare some money. He had tattoos all over his face; railroad [tattoo] tracks on his face. We started talking and he explained his life of train hopping to me. He put the idea in my head and after three weeks, I was on my first train...[Sketch] took me on my first [freight train] ride to New York, and here I am almost six years later still on the road hopping [freight] trains.

‘Madar’ explained that the event of his traveling on a freight train for the first time was a life transforming experience. He was not running away from home. He was rather running away from his fulltime monotonous job. He voluntarily took the decision to embrace the train hopping lifestyle, and was fully aware of the risks and consequences of his detachment from his previous ‘mundane’ life. Accordingly, like other ‘fulltime’ fellow travelers, ‘Madar’s’ continuous involvement with the precarious conditions of travels on freight trains slowly ‘detached’ him from mainstream society and exposed him to the inevitable subsistence practices such as panhandling, flying a sign and dumpster diving. Unlike ‘home bums’¹¹, who tend to practice panhandling at the same place for lengthy periods of time, ‘Madar’ claimed having recourse to such practices only when necessary and for short durations of time to be able to get out of town. He resisted the idea of associating his lifestyle with homelessness. According to him, ‘a homeless person is someone who has given up’.

Over time, ‘Madar’ developed a sort of compulsion for wanderlust. He explained that he could no longer stand dwelling indoors for lengthy durations. The last time he went back to stay at his parent’s place did not exceed three months. He felt the impulse to resume straying onto the open roads. ‘I can’t stay inside all day; I need to move around’. He referred to the idea of ‘going anywhere you want anytime you want’ as ‘pure freedom’. At the time in which ‘Madar’ and I were engaged in this

¹¹ ‘Home bum’ is an appellation that tramps and train hopping travelers use specifically to refer to the sedentary homeless population that is visible in the urban spaces of any city.

conversation, he expressed his unwillingness to give up his ‘nomadic’ lifestyle despite his awareness of its dark side on both personal and relational levels. In other words, ‘Madar’s exposure to train hopping travels aggravated his anxiety and deprived him of the ability to sleep the necessary number of hours on a daily basis. Far away from urban spaces, the restrained space of the railcar machine provided him with the opportunity to sleep at times despite the loud noise produced by the freight train when in motion. ‘when you start riding [freight] trains it becomes almost an addiction, sometimes you do have some qualms while on the road like talking to yourself too much’. ‘Madar’ recalled experiencing episodic yet prolonged days of solitude while on the road partly because of his anxiety and intense desire to be elsewhere.

Hence, in the midst of his persistent and surreptitious dislocations, ‘Madar’ witnessed sporadic scenes of sociability which he referred to as ‘insanity done in an artistic way’. He conceived of the world of train hopping as a contained jungle in which inexperienced travelers’ lives do not really count. ‘you hear many stories about kids dying on the train as well, especially the inexperienced ones who happen to be running from home’. He conveyed that murders have been committed on the railways and that some of them were still unresolved. He referred to a green as a young adult who shows up on the road for the first time and has no experience of train hopping travels. He described a green as an honest person who will soon adapt to the arbitrary rules of the ‘jungle’. ‘Madar’ asserted that it takes so much time for a green to become a ‘dirty kid’ traveler. He seemed to have a problem with some groups of ‘gangster’ freight hopping travelers who have always been competing and fighting for the ‘supremacy’ of their group within the niche of train hopping travels. ‘There [are] some dirty kids out there who are ready to fight and kill for anything’.

Intriguingly, in order to overcome the danger of the train hopping ‘jungle’ and the concomitant feelings of anxiety and insecurity, ‘Madar’ stressed the importance of seeking protection from other fellow ‘dirty kids’ who have been travelling on the railways for years. It was a crucial tactic for him to create such bonds while on the road. However, he reflected that adherence to one particular group rather than another, often resulted in stretching the circle of enemies that one had to deal with eventually. ‘Once on the road you develop enemies as well, and anxiety. You need true [train hopping] kids who will have your back, and it is not a matter of do I like you or not. It is for protection’. Accordingly, ‘Madar’ explained that violent fistfights occurred at times among train hopping travelers due to behavioral issues or random conflicts over a catch out spot. He stressed that circulating stories or rumors involving particular behaviors of certain ‘dirty kids’ travelers are

likely to aggravate violence in unexpected circumstances associated with train hopping travels. ‘Madar’ added that ‘dirty kids’ travelers can be easily identified by their nicknames (road names). Then, in reference to train hopping, he maintained that ‘it’s a small world’. Therefore, it was always in the best interests of the insiders of the train hopping culture to maintain a good reputation and abstain from transgressing the tacit rules of the road to avoid a set of repercussions including continuing the journey, or not, as castaways. ‘once you are on the road for a long time you develop an anxiety because other kids on the road tell stories about other kids, and if you did something bad sometimes other kids you don’t know will know and tell you “oh you are that guy...” in some cases this can lead to violence. The problem is that you give up all ambitions in life; you don’t really care if you will end up being dead’

Spoo & Slumber’s Versions of Train Hopping Journeys

‘Spoo’ is a ‘fulltime’ train hopping traveler in his mid-thirties. He has been traveling intermittently on freight trains for over twenty years. ‘Spoo’ self-identifies as a tramp. He has a good reputation among train hopping travelers and volunteered as a cook several times at the hobo ‘jungle’. ‘Slumber’, on the other hand, is a young adult train hopping traveler in his mid-twenties. He comes from a mainstream middle class environment from California. ‘Slumber’ has been traveling on freight trains for almost a year and passed most of his time sleeping at the hobo ‘jungle’. Both of them showed up at the hobo ‘jungle’ prior to the launching of the events of the convention. On their way to Britt, both hopped out of the freight train in Des Moines city to hitchhike from there. ‘Spoo’ was outspoken and seemed experienced in tramping and traveling on freight trains in comparison to ‘Slumber’ who seemed to be still dwelling at the exploratory stage of apprenticeship. Both their standpoints on freight train journeys diverged and converged intermittently in relation to their aptitudes and experiences as railroad travelers.

‘Spoo’ appeared to have gradually developed a pragmatic approach to tramping and a train hopping lifestyle. He mentioned that he used to travel on freight trains mainly to experience the excitement of embarking on freight hopping journeys to end up in unknown destinations. The thrill of experiencing adventure and serendipitous encounters with strangers on the open road was all part of the fun that he used to seek and cherish. ‘It used to be for f** riding [freight trains] across the country and getting thrilled about realizing the idea, but now it is f** natural to me; it is not a big deal’. ‘Spoo’ drew attention to the idea that over the course of his travels his inclination towards thrill and adventure faded away in favor of a more instrumental approach to his displacements. He viewed his journeys of concealed traveling on freight trains ‘across the country’ as having endowed him with a

particular set of practices that shaped his self-understanding as a traveler. In an attempt to clarify his worldview for me, he pinned down his recourse to distinct survival tactics while traveling in relation to subsistence requirements for instance. ‘It is like if you are hungry, then I am gonna walk to Casey (convenience store) and get some food in the dumpster; your instinct would be to go and buy food but my instinct would be to walk in to Casey and go to the dumpster, I mean it is whole different. That is what I do!’ ‘Spoo’ emphasized the discrepancy in orientation, between him and more sedentary people, in carrying out a set of mundane activities. He proudly alluded to his distinct, or rather alternative approach in reference to performing his voluntary displacements and subsistence strategies. He accounted for his alternative way of proceeding by bringing the notion of instinct into play. ‘Spoo’ was probably trying to explain that his precarious living conditions had shaped his particular ways of doing things. The ability to ‘get there’, to accomplish things regardless of any consideration of the conventional, or ‘proper’ modes of how to proceed seemed to be at the heart of his mundane preoccupations.

‘Spoo’: People will go to the store, they will go to visit a family, everybody gets in a car and get there; it’s routine for them. That is what they know. For me, when I feel like to go to another state, I am gonna [going to] get on a [freight] train and go because that’s what I know. My first instinct will not be oh I am gonna [going to] call and make a reservation. The way I do it is to get on this [freight] train and get off on that yard, and get on that other train and get off near that yard and so on

It was hardly surprising to hear ‘Spoo’ insinuating the point that he was no longer interested in the thrill and adventure associated with his travels on the rails. Over the course of his displacements, he acquired the know-how necessary to reach his destinations in a faster way. ‘I don’t do it for fun anymore [in reference to freight train travels]; I just do it because this is what I know’. Accordingly, he became familiar with the backstage trajectories and the most salient catching out spots. He developed an attraction to the idea of having a scheduled mission in regards to his surreptitious travels. He explained that he increasingly redirected his late travels towards a clearly defined schedule. In spite of the intermittent events of having been arrested by railroad police for train hopping, he continued to claim that he was efficient in the ‘art of getting a good ride’. In short, his intimate knowledge of the proceedings of freight rail lines, in addition to the network of acquaintances he had built over the years, enabled him to have a plan for some of his departures. He was fond of attending the ubiquitous gatherings all over the US.

‘Spoo’: Right now me and ‘Slumber’ [pseudonym] are on a schedule because we made this trip specifically for a reason, which is to go to Richmond, Virginia and be there by the 14th of August. But yeah other than that sometimes I have a schedule and other times I don’t, it’s just flexible, but when I have a schedule, I know how to do it.

‘Spoo’ stressed that his style of illicit traveling on freight trains was particular and distinct from other forms of movement. He reiterated the idea that he was knowledgeable in regards to his specific domain of tramping and freight hopping. When I asked him whether he was still in touch with his family his reply was: ‘I haven’t been talking to my brother for so many years, he got my phone number and he has been in more prisons than I have’ Then he changed the subject and muttered that ‘Britt is easy; it’s like heaven. It is the rest of my life that sucks’. He did not feel like talking any more about his family situation except when he recalled that he was constantly mad at his mother at a younger age which resulted in his recurrent short ‘fugues’ from home. He reminisced on not knowing anything about the world of trains as a young child except ‘throwing stones at trains’ which were passing by. Unlike other young adult train hopping travelers, ‘Spoo’ maintained that nobody initiated him into the world of train hopping. He recalled he was scared when he first hopped on a freight train by himself.

Hicham: Did you know at first where the train was heading?

‘Spoo’: Nah, I did not. I mean I knew that it was heading towards Battle Creek because that is the next city over. It is actually a crew change spot. I grew up there and I knew which way it was heading. We did not know anything about trains at that time except that we threw rocks at them, the same thing that all kids do. I climbed on the train when it stopped and that was fine, but once it started moving, I started thinking about where am I moving and about where it gonna [was going to] stop and all this. I do not know about my exact feelings at that time, but I got outside of East Chicago finally, well it is actually in Indiana I believe. Being a 12-year-old kid, I called my mom right away and got home, and I stayed there for another couple of years.

‘Spoo’ informed me that the phase prior to the act of hopping a freight train each time involved a significant amount of stress, patience and perseverance. He described the number of times he had had the unpleasant sense of having no control over what could happen next. Yet he had to remain calm and patient. He explained that the phase prior to hopping a freight train necessitated a different approach to the passage of time. ‘Spoo’ looked proud to having passed on some of the train hopping knowledge he had acquired to his road companion ‘Slumber’. However, in reference to ‘Slumber’s impatience at this specific phase of travel, he jokingly stated the following account:

‘Spoo’: After this [national hobo] convention is done, we are heading to the East Coast, probably about four trains to get there with any luck, and I have more patience than most people have. I will never ride a [freight] train with ‘Slumber’ [pseudonym]. Five seconds after we get to the yard, he will be where the f** is the train [laughing], and I will be like sit down, relax and drink some beers. This is what you do. You sit and drink. Drink and hang out. Trains do not have a schedule. You wait and wait. That is part of the traveling thing.

The time dedicated for catching out is a critical process. It involved the ritual of swapping stories and drinking beers while waiting for a train to show up, or not. The right freight train could pass

by unexpectedly during the day or at night. Hence, it was useful to tidy up the backpack and be ready to run at any moment. This particular phase was an important component, and a recurring characteristic of such a form of travel. When I asked him for more information about the lapse of time prior to catching out he resumed soberly:

'Spoo': But sometimes this type of [rail] yard is not the one that you want to be in, so you have to focus. After being doing it for a long time, you can tell just by looking and the sounds which train is actually breaking and slowing down or speeding up. You can tell when it is about to stop, you realize it is slowing down, you look at your ride [freight train] and you know for example that is a fourteen [rail] cars up, we can make it no problem. You can actually do the math and be like that one is a good ride up there, and it is slowing down so you start walking up for it, sometimes you gotta run...

'Slumbers' account of his journeys of train hopping had a rather 'romantic' approach. 'Slumber' conceived of such a lifestyle as an opening to exercise his autonomy and freedom from responsibilities. He claimed that he embarked on such journeys to be 'control free' and to disconnect himself from the rest of society. 'when it comes to riding [freight] trains for me it's just to disconnect myself from one more sort of things. You do not have to have a house, you do not have to have a wife or kids or even a girlfriend, just be yourself for how f** long you want to'. He said that he never felt homeless and that he was trying to learn how to be a 'worlder' by experiencing different situations each day. He reasoned that the idea of waiting for a freight train for approximately sixteen hours stood out as a 'life lesson' on patience, chance and perseverance. 'Slumber' acknowledged that he was embarking into an uncertain world, far away from the comfort zone of his parent's place in California. He confided being exposed to rough circumstances in which he had to dumpster dive and other situations when police officers in the street 'bothered' him. He openly talked about his compulsion to hide from the public. 'it's cool to be here in Britt, nobody bothers you...but in other places you can't get around; you sit by yourself or with somebody else hiding in a bush somewhere, or near a gas station sleeping in the dirt like trash. It is different than here.

Hicham: Is riding trains a means of achieving freedom for you?

'Slumber': yeah for me more or less. For everybody else I am a homeless bum, but I never feel homeless. I make sure to take care of myself as far as I could. I plan stuff before I leave. Before I started riding freight trains, I finished high school to be a worlder...

My sojourn in Britt was over. I managed to get to Des Moines airport on time for my scheduled departure. Des Moines airport, like any other airport, was studded with security cameras. I felt strange. People were wearing uniforms, playing their conventional roles and performing their

duties. Strangers were passing by hastily, hurriedly heading towards their destinations in the most polite and indifferent manner possible. I felt lost in the midst of a staged, yet organized order. Security announcements flooded in asking passengers to report any suspicious activity at the airport. Passengers were condemned to full scrutiny. I was just passing through; I belonged nowhere.

Chapter 3: Montreal Venue

Before my short trip to Britt to attend the hobo convention, I managed to conduct some face-to-face interviews with some youths in Montreal who agreed to talk about their previous journeys on freight trains. Unlike the majority of youthful train hopping travelers that I met and talked to in Britt, the interviewees in Montreal referred to their past involvement in train hopping travels as experimental and occasional. All of them were engaged in ongoing projects related to their personal fulfilments and professional trajectories. Most recalled their past surreptitious train hopping travels on North American railways as an enjoyable phase of their lives that mirrored their sense of adventure and carefreeness. In addition, they emphasized being attracted to train hopping as a free of charge means of transportation for short distances. Some of them enthusiastically conveyed their willingness to seize the opportunity to travel on freight trains again whenever possible. Others decided that their present circumstances and responsibilities required them to abstain from the temptations of ‘adventurous’ travels. Overall, the interviewees in Montreal did not associate their lifestyle either with the subculture of ‘dirty kids’ travelers nor with the historical hobo phenomenon. They did not consider train hopping as a central component of their travels since they enjoyed experimenting with it the way they enjoyed other means of free of charge traveling and squatting.

Youth Hostels and the Process of Seeking out Contacts

During the earlier phase of ‘doing fieldwork’ in Montreal, I attended specific venues likely to attract different types of travelers. Youth hostels among others, as my thesis supervisor Vered Amit suggested, could be promising locales from which to start my fieldwork journey. My plan, then, was to visit a couple of youth hostels downtown Montreal with the aim of informing their administrators about my research and asking them for permission to spend some time at their respective business premises. Youth travelers, including backpackers, were likely to have recourse to the services of youth hostels during their sojourn in Montreal. Therefore, the idea of spending time there was appealing in hopes of striking a conversation or two with a backpacker traveler who may have previously traveled via freight trains. I hoped to be able to initiate some casual contacts with travelers that could lead to their agreement to participate in my research on train hopping

travels. I had to invest partly in serendipity and flexibility as a key orientation to carry out my initial ‘investigation’ of train hopping in Montreal.

Accordingly, I wrote a brief statement in both English and French that succinctly introduced my research project and myself as a student in an anthropology program at Concordia University. I printed out extra copies of the statement and the consent form and had a cursory review of the lines of questioning that I previously prepared for future interviews. I chose to visit the youth hostels in mind before noon to enhance my chances of meeting the managers. Hence, on my way to the first youth hostel located in downtown Montreal, I was already visualizing the scenario of talking to an administrator while focusing on the two main points that I wanted to convey upfront. First, I had to focus on introducing my research project and myself. Second, I had to ask for the opportunity to post the written statement as well as to spend some time inside the premises in hopes of reaching out to the travelers/clientele of the establishment. In view of that, I arrived at my destination and stood before the locked door. The intercom system was at the left side of the entrance. An employee opened the door and met me halfway down the stairs leading to a hall that encompassed a tiny reception desk adjacent to an office. After a brief exchange, the employee pointed out that the manager was in his office and invited me to speak directly to him. I introduced myself to the manager who was sitting in the office. I mentioned the purpose of my visit in relation to my research and handed him the written statement. He glanced at it and returned it back with a nod indicating his approval to place it on the designated board in the alley. Unfortunately, he declined my request to spend additional time inside the hostel. He maintained that travelers who might be interested in the project could contact me by phone or email.

Serendipity subsequently played a major role in actually conducting my first face-to-face interview. On a sunny Friday morning, I had to double check the business doorplate before walking into another youth hostel located in downtown Montreal. The architectural style of its reddish brick building must have attracted the attention of urban history connoisseurs among other passersby. Visible columns of different shapes and forms embellished the old façade of the building. Its relatively large dome-shaped door and beautifully designed windows gave the impression that one was about to walk into a historical church in Montreal. A triangular frame at the end of the building framed the windows in the last floor. Once inside, simple yet eclectic objects of decoration filled the space of the main floor. Two clients were still having breakfast in the dining area. Some other

youth travelers were sitting comfortably on the couches in the lounge area. I walked towards the reception desk situated at the end of the main hallway and started a conversation with ‘Aventurier’¹². He first introduced himself as the manager and later disclosed his other status as an associate owner of the youth hostel. He listened carefully to the purpose of my visit, and without any reservations, he immediately allowed me first to place the written statement on the main hallway column and second to proceed with talking to the group of youth travelers who were ‘chilling’ at the lounge area.

I walked into the lounge area determined to make a brief announcement to the young adult travelers congregating there. In a polite way, I managed to get their attention away from their laptops and/or cellphones and I introduced my research project and myself. I explained that I was seeking out the prospect of conducting interviews with youth backpackers who had previously traveled on freight trains. I concluded my brief talk by asking them if, by any chance, they had traveled themselves on freight trains or knew other travelers who did. There was an awkward moment of silence. I felt uneasy realizing that they did not seem to fathom my question, or perhaps my use of certain terminologies. For instance, a young woman inquired about the meaning of the term backpacker. Another demanded an explanation of the word freight. My reaction was to reformulate my brief talk instantly while using the generalized term traveler instead of backpacker. The phrase ‘freight train’ did not sound comprehensible, so I had to replace it with the sentence ‘trains that transport merchandise’. In addition, I mentioned that a particular set of travelers known as hoboes used to travel on freight trains during the depression years in North American locale. Unfortunately, the youthful group of travelers showed no interest in my announcement; they hardly knew anything about train hopping travels. During that time, ‘Aventurier’ had been observing and listening to the awkward ‘interaction’ that had been taking place.

Aventurier’s Reflections on his Past Travels

The idea that ‘Aventurier’ could be a potential research participant never crossed my mind during our initial encounter. At the very moment when I was thinking about the most effective tactics to employ in addressing potential interviewees in the future, ‘Aventurier’ approached me and asked

¹² Aventurier is a young Francophone in his mid-thirties. He migrated from his village in France to Montreal in 2010. He traveled across the US and Latin America for four and three months respectively. He eventually returned to Montreal for the purposes of settling down and starting a youth hostel business.

me to remind him of my first name. Then, with a remarkable tactfulness, he inquired about my general background, and more specifically my personal interest in train hopping travels among others. During such an exchange, and to my astonishment, he revealed that he had previously experimented with train hopping travels in his early twenties. Then, he voluntarily agreed to spare some time for an interview at the dining area. I thanked him for taking the initiative to participate in my research study. As soon as we sat around a table, ‘Aventurier’ informed me that he might have to interrupt the interview for a short time if someone needed him at the reception desk or in the kitchen. Then in reference to his current professional responsibilities, he evoked the idea that starting any business project involves a great deal of resilience and perseverance. ‘Quand tu montes un business ce n’est plus la même chose, t’as des responsabilités, [il] faut tout gérer pour que ça marche; avoir l’air détendu et être tendu en même temps derrière pour que ton business marche très bien¹³. With a sense of pride and accomplishment, ‘Aventurier’ pointed out that his past involvement in long-term travels indirectly prepared him for the career of managing his own youth hostel in Montreal.

‘Aventurier’ grew up in a village northwest of France. He evoked having been brought up in a family that fosters liberal views such as self-reliance, individuality and freedom. As a teenager, he recalled embarking on occasional hikes with his twin brother to explore the surrounding neighborhoods of their house. Over the course of their high school years, both started considering faraway excursions to nearby towns and cities on weekends or during school holidays. Their favorite, and readily accessible, means of transportation was the passenger train since they did not bother to pay for the train fare every time. ‘Ce qu’on fait dans notre petit village c’était de sauter des trains [de passagers] sans payer pour arriver à la ville prochaine, on laisse la porte ouverte et on esquivé le contrôleur.’¹⁴ ‘Aventurier’ observed that the short regional trips that they had embarked on as young adults in France, afforded a space in which they strengthened their kinship bond as twin brothers. In addition, he referred to these trips as an opportunity to assert their adventurous personalities and predispositions to take risks and leadership roles when necessary. These expeditions helped them as well to develop a sort of ‘street smartness’, but most importantly charged them with a yearning for ‘discovering’ the world. ‘J’ai tendance à [ne] suivre absolument rien, pour moi c’est juste la découverte du

¹³ ‘When you start a business it is not the same thing, you have responsibilities, you have to manage everything to make it work; looking relaxed and tense at the same time so that your business works very well’.

¹⁴ ‘What we used to do in our little village was to skip passenger trains without paying to get to the next town. We leave the door opened and we dodge the controller’.

monde qui dirige mes pas envers l'aventure. Ce qui est cool chez nous en France, j'aimerais bien le voir ailleurs; voir comment ça se passe. Si ça me plaît ou si ça ne me plaît pas c'est autre chose'¹⁵.

Accordingly, in 2010, the twin brothers moved out of their village in France with the intention to study management at a business school in Montreal. However, both decided to postpone their commitment to resume their studies at the business school when the idea of traveling across the American continent started to resonate for them. Hence, over the course of one year, they first traveled across the US from East to West for four months and second across Latin America for three months. 'Aventurier' explained that their limited budget did not dissuade them from venturing on such relatively long journeys. They were primarily on the lookout for adventure, sightseeing and anticipated interactions with strangers while on the road. '...On est parti pendant quatre mois à traverser les USA d'Est en Ouest. C'était par tous les moyens qu'on trouvait; en bus, en stop et en trains de fret. Tu vois des gens qu'on rencontrait et ça durait un bon moment quand même, jusqu'à ce qu'on s'est trouvé à l'Ouest, à San Diego. On est remonté à San Francisco par la route numéro un'¹⁶. The twin brothers embarked on a second journey across Latin America after a brief sojourn in Montreal. They took advantage of the available group travel discounts to visit some touristic sites by ferry such as Machu Picchu, Petit Cacao etc. Overall, they had recourse to buses, bikes, boats, passenger trains and hitchhiking at times as means of transportation in Latin America. '...et le plus gros trip qu'on a fait était de partir de Montréal jusqu'à Buenos-Aires en Argentine, et pour nous c'était cool car on a traversé tous le continent Américain par la route, donc, le Mexique, Nicaragua, Salvador, Panama, Équateur en Bolivie, et c'était par tous les moyens qu'on trouvait'¹⁷. Then in reference to his train hopping experimentations in the US, 'Aventurier' mentioned that the city of Flagstaff in Arizona was a major hub that attracts travelers caught in 'Le délire de sauter des trains de fret'¹⁸.

When I asked 'Aventurier' about more specific memories regarding his train hopping journeys, he stated that there was a phase during his first trip to the US when he felt completely

¹⁵ 'I tend to follow absolutely nothing, for me it is just the discovery of the world that directs my steps towards adventure. What is cool in France, I would like to see it elsewhere; see how it goes. Whether I like it or not is a different story'.

¹⁶ 'We left for four months to cross the USA from East to West. It was by all means of transportation that we found; by bus, hitchhiking and freight trains. You see, we met people and it lasted for a long time anyway until we arrived to the West, San Diego'.

¹⁷ '...and the biggest trip we did was from Montreal to Buenos-Aires in Argentina, and for us it was cool because we crossed all the American continent by road, so, Mexico, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Panama, Ecuador in Bolivia, and it was by all means [of transportation] available'.

¹⁸ 'the delirium of jumping freight trains'.

‘dematerialized’ and ‘detached’ from mundane life. He explained that during this phase both he and his twin brother were exhausted as a result of their continuous dislocations and ongoing tactics of survival. ‘...mais le voyage est épuisant, le fait de bouger tout le temps, t’as l’impression que c’est comme une job; tu te raccroches aux trucs primordiaux : il faut bouffer, dormir, boire et se déplacer, et ça demande tellement de temps’¹⁹. Hence, both brothers were ready to experiment with any available means of transportation to keep on traveling without prior assessment of the repercussions of their decisions. ‘Il y a des moments où tu t’en fou; il n’y a rien à perdre’²⁰. Accordingly, ‘Aventurier’ clarified that within such a context of alienation and exhaustion, a ‘dirty kid’ traveler, they met by chance, agreed to take them on a freight train journey. ‘Aventurier’ described the experience in general as devoid of any major risk. However, he pinpointed the unpleasant smell and the bossy attitude of the ‘dirty kid’ traveler who required them to follow his instructions to the letter. ‘Aventurier’ recalled the volume of stress he felt whenever the freight train slowed down, or was about to stop.

‘Dans les trains [de fret] c’est vrai que à chaque arrêt il y a un peu le stress qui monte, il y a l’odeur aussi ; ça pue. Moi j’étais avec un gars qui nous a embarqué à l’époque, il avait vingt-neuf ans et moi j’avais vingt-trois ans. C’était le genre des gars qui nous disait de se cacher et qui voulait qu’on suit ses instructions. Moi je ne parlais pas anglais à l’époque. Il peut paraître agressif. Il te donne des petits coups de pieds quand il le faut genre : les gars cachez-vous! Moi je sortais de mon petit village français à l’époque, et je me trouvais là avec des gars qui font ça depuis longtemps. Au début, tu te demandes pour de vrai : mais qu’est ce qui se passe la ? Avec qui je suis ? Qu’est ce qu’on fait la ? Mais au final tu te rends compte que c’est comme ça comment ça marche. Il fallait juste le suivre car il connaît tout.’²¹

‘Aventurier’ described his first experience of traveling via a freight train as particularly uneasy, tiresome and uncomfortable. The series of introspective questions he verbalized in his description echoed a sense of uneasiness with the attitude of the experienced train hopping traveler as well as a general sense of being ‘out of place’. ‘Aventurier’ related the hardships of exhaustion and disorientation to the difficulty of immediately fulfilling basic biological needs such as adequate sleep, food and water. Moreover, he pointed out that the tiny space of the machine car was smelly and uninviting. ‘Mais c’est sûr qu’après ce n’est pas le confort du tout, ni pour aller aux toilettes, ni pour boire. Quand ça s’arrête [le train de fret] et t’as soif, tu sors pour chercher de l’eau, la bouffe, et tu ramènes ton

¹⁹ ‘...but the trip is exhausting, moving all the time, it is like having a job; you cling to the essential stuff: you have to eat, sleep, drink and keep on traveling, and it takes so much time’.

²⁰ ‘there are times when you do not care; there is nothing to lose’.

²¹ ‘In the [freight] train, it is true that at every stop there is a bit of stress going up, there is the smell too; it stinks. I was with a guy who took us in [the freight train] at that time. He was twenty-nine years old and I was twenty-three. He was the kind of guy who told us to hide and wanted us to follow his instructions. I did not speak English back then. He can seem aggressive. He gives you little kicks when necessary, like: you guys hide! I left my little French village at the time, and I was there with guys who have been doing this for a long time. At first, you ask yourself for real: but what is happening? With whom am I? What are we doing here? But in the end you realize that’s how it works. We just had to follow him because he knew everything’.

sac à dos avec toi'²². 'Aventurier' mentioned the rule that the traveler had to bring his backpack with him when engaged in an exploratory mission to look for water so as to avoid the risk of losing it in case the freight train started to move away unexpectedly. Hence, the freight train journey required both a level of group coordination and individualism in the sense of 'everyman for himself'. However, 'Aventurier' did not dwell merely on the constraints they had experienced during their trips on freight trains. He also brought to my attention some positive values that characterize the 'community' of travelers who hop on freight trains. '...c'était cool pour nous les gamins qui sont à la quête de l'aventure quoi; l'insouciance peut être parfaite, on n'est vraiment pas les rois de l'organisation. Il y a la bouffe, mais aussi la culture de partage dans ces milieux-là, et ça change un peu de tout'²³.

The enthusiastic tone with which 'Aventurier' was reminiscing about his train hopping journey pushed me to ask him whether he had considered the idea of traveling on a freight train again. He responded that his travels on freight trains belonged to his past life when he was single and in his early twenties and that he will not embark on such journeys again. He maintained that he would definitely continue to travel, but in a rather more 'mainstream', comfortable and conventional manner especially that he was engaged to be married. He added that his current professional and marital responsibilities were now 'guiding' his present life. 'Je vais continuer à voyager moi aussi, mais pas de la même manière, tu sais j'étais libre à l'époque, je n'avais pas de copine, maintenant il faut des conditions pour que ça soit parfait, la présence de quelqu'un maintenant dans ma vie a tout changé, maintenant je fais attention, ce n'est plus la même chose'²⁴.

In contrast to 'Aventuriers' decision to 'settle down' due to his responsibilities, his twin brother continued on his own with a quest for adventure in Asia. 'Aventurier' mentioned that his twin brother had an absolute need to resume 'le délire du voyage' after he contributed to set up their family youth hostel business in Montreal. As a reaction to my open-ended question regarding solitary travelers, and in reference to his twin brother, 'Aventurier' pondered the likelihood that solitary travelers tend to be strong mentally because they have to accept their solitude during their

²² 'But for sure that afterwards, it is not comfortable at all, neither to go to the washroom, nor to drink. When it [freight train] stops, and you are thirsty, you jump out to get water and food, and you bring your backpack with you'

²³ '...it was cool for us kids who were on the quest for adventure. Carelessness can be perfect; we were not very organized in our travels. There was food, but also the culture of sharing in those [train hopping] circles, and it changes a little bit of everything'

²⁴ 'I will continue to travel too, but not in the same way. You see, I was free at that time; I did not have a girlfriend. Now, it [traveling] required conditions for it to be perfect; the presence of someone in my life has changed everything, now I'm careful; it's not the same anymore'.

travels despite the occasional interactions with strangers. He added that solitary travelers tend to experience enhanced feelings of intense freedom when they are detached from the context of their cultural and social upbringing, and that the fact that there is no image that they had to constantly polish for others made their journey more liberating. 'Tu peux te permettre des choses que tu ne fais pas normalement chez toi, parce que t'es détaché, ce n'est pas ta propre culture, et t'es en découverte permanente, et tu te comportes différemment aussi, tu es plus libre. Tu t'en fou de tout, il n'y a pas cette image de toi qui va te gêner...'²⁵. In addition, he contended that the professional experience he gained in managing a youth hostel business and interacting with its clientele on a daily basis enabled him to identify long-term solitary travelers. He said that they tend to be more open minded, flexible and tolerant vis-à-vis difference and otherness.

'Aventurier' : Je travaille ici, et je peux repérer les gens qui ont beaucoup voyagé, il y a un feeling particulier, tu ressens qu'il y a une ouverture d'esprit plus que les autres, et plus de tolérance envers tout le monde. Il y a une culture d'accepter volontiers la différence d'autrui. Ils ont vu pas mal de choses dans leurs voyages et ils se sont amenés à se poser des questions, des meilleures visions par rapport à la vie. Ce feeling dont je te parle ne se voit dès le premier abord non plus²⁶.

The flow of the conversation with 'Aventurier' was enriching. At times, he managed to produce vivid images in my mind in relation to his travels with his twin brother. He compared the magical colors and natural beauty of the landscapes they were exposed to, during their train hopping travels in the west of the US, to the metaphor of 'living in a poem'. He was attracted to these vast landscapes. However, he acknowledged that his forthcoming travels would have to be short and more organised, hence less fun and adventurous in comparison to the style of traveling employed by his brother and other backpackers. Despite the apparent shift in his approach to traveling, 'Aventurier' maintained that he would always be an adventurer in spirit. He conveyed that he continued to travel 'virtually' through the memories of his past travels as well as the stories and anecdotes that some of his clientele shared with him. One of his favourite memories was when he climbed, with his twin brother, on the top of a bus and clung to the spare tire for the purposes of traveling. He referred to such a tactic of traveling as 'Chinga la vista'. It provided both brothers

²⁵ 'You can afford to do things you normally do not do at home, because you are detached. It is not your own culture, and you are constantly discovering, and you behave differently too; you are more free. You do not care at all. There is no image [of your self] that will annoy you'.

²⁶ 'I work here [at the youth hostel], and I can spot people [clientele travelers] who have traveled a lot; there is a special feeling, you feel that there is an open-mindedness [they are open-minded] more than others, and more tolerance towards everyone. There is a willingness to accept voluntarily the difference of others. They saw many things in their travels and they came to ask questions, better visions about life. This feeling of which I speak to you cannot be seen at first sight either'.

with an immense feeling of joy and freedom. 'On appelait ça chinga la vista; tu vois des petits bus, tu montes sur la galerie en haut, là où il y a les gros pneus de secours, et tu te cales là. Parfois ça te conduit n'importe comment, t'as aucune sécurité, et bizarrement t'as une sensation de liberté que tu ne trouves pas ailleurs'²⁷.

Towards the end of the interview, I thanked him for his time and the stories he shared with me and asked him directly not to hesitate to refer me to other potential research participants. Then I inquired about the motives behind taking the time and the initiative to participate in my research on train hopping travelers. He mentioned that he did not look like somebody who previously hopped on freight trains and that it was a pleasure to share some of his memories about traveling in the American continent.

'Aventurier' : Ça ne me dérange pas du tout. Tout le monde a besoin de l'information. Tu poses la question à dix personnes par rapport au 'hoboes' et 'backpackers'...ce sont des termes que les gars [les jeunes voyageurs] ne connaissent pas. Ce sont des gens qui voyagent en groupe, et je me disais que je vais faire cette entrevue vu le fait que je n'ai pas l'apparence ni le discours d'un mec qui a déjà sauté un train et qui a voyagé pour longtemps²⁸.

Misleading Perceptions at the Anarchist Bookfair

In hopes of identifying and approaching additional potential train hopping travelers, I sought to attend the Annual Anarchist Bookfair event that takes place every last weekend of the month of May in the metropolitan city of Montreal. Accordingly, I intended to spend some time at the auditorium of Georges-Vanier cultural center (CCGV) that hosted a large section of the event. The auditorium space at the CCGV facilitated a large display space that showcased publications pertaining to several co-op booksellers, anarchy-inspired groups of activists and other political groupings based in Montreal and abroad. The CCGV also opened its doors to a number of scheduled workshops and presentations on larger anarchy related themes and issues of interest to the general public, more particularly to those likely to be attracted to anarchist principles. It is worth noting that I perceived no themes associated directly or even indirectly with the phenomenon of train hopping in the flyer that displayed the rubrics of the scheduled workshops and

²⁷ 'It's called 'chinga la vista'. You see, small buses, you climb on the gallery at the top, where are the big spare tires, and you hold it. Sometimes it drives you no matter how, you have no security, and oddly, you have a feeling of freedom that you do not find elsewhere'.

²⁸ 'It does not bother me at all. Everyone needs information. You asked ten people about 'hoboes' and 'backpackers'...these are terms that guys [in reference to the group of youth travelers at the lounge area] do not know. Those people travel in a group. So I told myself that I will do this interview given the fact that I do not have the appearance or the speech of a guy who had previously hopped a [freight] train and who traveled for a long time'

presentations. Nonetheless, I considered the idea of attending the Anarchist Book fair event with the prospect that I could manage to build a rapport with the specific set of youth attendees who associate their lifestyle with the punk movement. In some online digital spaces, I have noticed repetitive references to a category of youths labelled ‘nomadic punks’ as the primary youth population likely to be engaged in train hopping travels. Thus, I took the decision to attend the anarchist gathering in the hope of identifying and interacting with this particular category of youth punks.

Accordingly, on my first visit to the Anarchist Bookfair Event, I had not expected the high volume of both moving and stationary bodies inside and outside the premises of the CCGV building. Some of the event’s organisers and other volunteers stood at the entrance of the building to respond to the attendee’s questions while ensuring an effective circulation of their bodies. The auditorium inside was full of other organizers, visitors, vendors, volunteers etc. People moved ceaselessly in and out of the building. Some volunteers had to monitor the relatively long line-up leading to the unisex washroom in the hallway. The indoors atmosphere was characterized by a background noise of ubiquitous and unremitting conversations. For some reason, the indoor staging of this event reminded me of the ambiance of outdoors souks back home in Casablanca.

Young adult attendees of the Anarchist Bookfair were hanging out as well on the grass-covered area across from the main entrance of the CCGV building. Most of them were busy talking and sipping their alcoholic drinks while enjoying the warm air and sunshine of Montreal’s spring season. Police patrol cars were noticeably absent from the scene. The majority of the youthful attendees were clad in uniformly black punk outfits. Yet, the dress appearance of a handful of these youths was distinct in the sense that they were (intentionally) wearing ragged and overly stitched clothes. Dense patches symbolic of punk lifestyle and music decorated their clothes. In other words, their dress code closely corresponded to the usual outfit of the train hopping travelers that I had previously remarked when viewing some documentaries and online videos on train hopping. In addition, it was interesting to observe that these particular youths showed up to the event with their dogs wearing a bandana around their neck. In short, every detail of their clothing and appearance alluded to the possibility of their involvement in train hopping travels based on online digital and cyberspace sources of information i.e. online photos, videos and textual descriptions pertaining to forums and websites on train hopping travels.

Henceforth, I was therefore persuaded that I should strike up a conversation with this specific category of attendees. I refrained from directly addressing them in any brusque statement or announcement this time. I just approached their gathering, said hello, and asked them if I could join the conversation. Then, I immediately conveyed a word of compliment to their dogs, and referred to the originality of the idea of putting a bandana around their necks, and that it reminded me of some train hopping videos that I had viewed online. As a result, an informal conversation about train hopping videos on YouTube flowed smoothly. Some of them enthusiastically verbalised their attraction to the lifestyle of ‘dirty kids’ travelers. However, to my astonishment, I realized after a while that these youths had never actually hopped freight trains. I had too hastily attributed their over stitched and ragged clothes to the phenomenon of train hopping travels. In brief, during such an improvised encounter, and based on my interaction with the ‘owners’ of the two dogs, I realised that this particular set of youth attendees were neither amateur travelers nor involved in train hopping practices. Their understanding of the subculture of train hopping travels was rather broad and likely based on online discourses and generalisations about train hopping. In other words, despite their awareness of the existence of the subculture of train hopping through online platforms, they neither demonstrated nor articulated a glimpse of the specificities of a personal experience of traveling on freight trains. Overall, during such casual interactions, I realized that I had mistakenly assumed that these young adults were indeed involved in train hopping travels in Canada based on their dress code, haircut and the bandana hanged around the neck of their dogs.

Snowowl’s Free of Charge Journeys

‘Snowowl’ is a Quebecois youth in his early thirties. He grew up in St-Henri neighborhood in Montreal. As a child, he used to play with other children near abandoned factories and train tracks. ‘Snowowl’ recalled that he ventured a few times to hop on and off a standstill railcar machine with other children while they were playing outdoors. Yet he did not specify that he actually traveled on a freight train when he was a child. ‘Snowowl’ disclosed that he traveled on freight trains a few times back in the year 2005. He specified that he was involved in train hopping travels a few times across Canada with a group of four friends. In addition, ‘Snowowl’ recounted his involvement in long-term travels on a very low budget in the US, Western Europe, North Africa and Latin America.

This section seeks to address first some of the circumstances in which ‘Snowowl’ carried on his long-term travels abroad.

I first met ‘Snowowl’ on the following day (Sunday, May 25th) during my second visit to the Annual Anarchist Bookfair. ‘Snowowl’ was a high school acquaintance and an old friend of my roommate who played an intermediary role in arranging for our face-to-face meeting. ‘Snowowl’ was sojourning in Brazil (for two months) when I first sent him an email regarding my research project and my wish to interview him. He preferred that we postponed any initial online communication between us until his return to Montreal. When my roommate informed me that his friend ‘Snowowl’ was back in Montreal, I proceeded to send him an email as a reminder of our previous online interaction. Accordingly, as per his demand, we scheduled an initial meeting at the Anarchist Bookfair to talk and get to know each other. He introduced himself as an anarchist, a squatter and a traveler. He specified that in Canada, he had only traveled on freight trains on a few of occasions. Surprisingly, he did not ask me any further details about my general interest in researching train hopping travels. He remarked that I had an accent and inquired about my background. Our conversation then veered towards a general talk about the adventures and the difficulties of his relatively long sojourns in Paris, Lausanne, and Casablanca among others. In addition, he added that it had been eleven years since he had been delaying the process of resuming his B.A in film studies due to his intermittent long-term travels and sojourns abroad. Eventually, he agreed to schedule a second meeting at the flat where I lived at that time, for a formal interview regarding his train hopping travels.

‘Snowowl’ showed up at my place as per our agreement for a scheduled interview. In reference to the circumstances that triggered his overall interest in long-term travels abroad, he explained that he suffered from a severe depression after graduating from high school (CEGEP). He referred to his life situation back then as a sort of forced stability (*stabilité forcée*) that he could no longer endure. ‘Snowowl’ experienced a strong desire to travel abroad especially to Europe. At that time he was still obsessed with the vague idea of ‘Vivre autrement’. Progressively, he began to consider interrupting the course of his mundane life in Montreal and travel abroad for an extended time. He acknowledged that he was not psychologically prepared to overcome his depression and mainstream society’s expectations of him. Somehow, he was convinced that he was capable of living an alternative life outside mainstream capitalist society. ‘Snowowl’

pinpointed that he took the hasty decision to travel to Paris despite his scarce financial resources. 'Il y a des moments de ruptures tu sais; je suis parti de chez ma mère, j'ai lâché ma job [mon travail], les groupes militants, ma blonde, j'étais en plein dépression! Au milieu de la dépression je suis parti avec un billet d'avion et presque pas d'argent. Je devais me lancer là-dedans, bouger ailleurs, partir loin; si je restais, j'allais me tirer une balle dans la tête'²⁹. Accordingly, 'Snowowl' explained that his decision to detach himself from the 'rootedness' of his previous life in Montreal gradually helped him to recover from depression and stimulated his capacity to survive and to reach out to others. However, the abrupt separation from a mundane life in Montreal, as described by 'Snowowl', remained a puzzle to me especially when he specified that all he had when he left was a one-way airline ticket to Charles-de-Gaulle Airport and two hundred Canadian dollars. Therefore, in an attempt to understand his expectations at the moment of taking this sudden decision to leave, I asked him directly about the things he was looking for the most, and whether he was on a quest for meaning or simply felt a desire to be elsewhere. 'Snowowl' immediately responded that it was a mix of different things without further elaboration. Then, he described the relative ease with which he managed to meet new people as a foreigner and to expand his circle of new friends in the context of his travels.

'Snowowl' : '...a force de beaucoup voyager tu rencontres beaucoup de gens rapidement, ça n'a rien à voir avec ta petite vie à Montréal, l'école ou la job [le travail]. Dans ton milieu restreint t'as des attaches...je t'avoue que les attaches qu'on a dans la vie de tous les jours font que le temps passe plus rapidement sans qu'il y a autant de bouleversement dans ta vie. Du coup, tu ne rencontres pas tant de nouvelles personnes; pour un étranger voyageur c'est plus facile de rentrer en contact avec de nouvelles personnes; ça devient plus riche car justement tu n'es pas dans le gouffre de l'habitude'³⁰.

In addition, 'Snowowl' reasoned that his engagement in long-term sojourns and travels abroad arose from his past involvements in camping activities in the forests of Quebec. 'Snowowl' recalled that he used to disconnect himself from mundane life, what he termed 'le gouffre de l'habitude', during his youthful summer camping excursions to the forests. He referred to these trips to the forests with his friend as a series of first-hand experiences on learning how to survive in the bush without having recourse to the conveniences of modern society, or what he verbalised as 'the

²⁹ 'There are moments of ruptures you know; I left my mother's house, I dropped my job, militant groups, my girlfriend, I was in a depressive mood! In the middle of the depression, I left with a plane ticket and almost no money. I had to jump in there, move somewhere else, go far away; if I stayed, I would have shot myself in the head'.

³⁰ '...since you travel a lot, you rapidly meet many people; it has nothing to do with your little life in Montreal, the school or the job. In your restrained environment you have ties...I confess that the ties we have in our everyday life make time pass faster without much upheaval. So you do not meet so many people; for a foreign traveler it's easier to get in touch with new people; it gets richer because you are not in the abyss of habit'.

promises of occidental society'. He acknowledged that, as an adolescent, he was attracted to the idea of surmounting the challenges of living in a naturally hostile environment without depending on the luxuries of conventional camping equipment. Hence, he pointed out that after several excursions to the forests he managed to effectively deploy a number of technical skills that enabled him to survive the harsh environment of the forests. '...et pour nous ce qu'on a développé le plus à l'époque c'était comment faire un abri efficace et comment survivre, mettre le feu et être repéré dans le bois, et justement c'est cette période qui m'a donné la confiance qu'on peut vivre sans toutes les grandes promesses de la société [moderne] occidentale'³¹. Similarly, 'Snowowl' reminisced about his later long-term travels as a space that afforded him opportunities for self-reliance and mutual-aid during which he immersed himself in both agreeable and difficult situations. He asserted proudly that he used to live free of charge during his sojourn in France. '...en France c'était facile; je ne dépensai rien, je payerai rien pour le squat, et pour manger et pour me déplacer. Je me trouvai des rides [moyens de transport] dans des camions, oh tu vas la ! j'embarque avec toi!³² He attributed his recourse to such illegal practices to his acquaintance with a circle of mobile people who self-identified as squatters and anarchists. He denoted the values of solidarity and teamwork in this milieu despite the benign 'illegalities' of some of their actions. Hence, 'Snowowl' used to squat in abandoned buildings, hitch rides on trucks and travel at times on passenger trains without paying for train tickets. He acknowledged that he was not concerned about the consequences of transgressing certain local laws or getting involved in some non-harmful illegal practices such as loitering, opening and squatting in uninhabited flats, dumpster diving and asking for free food when necessary etc. He talked openly about moments when he had to ask for food in restaurants at different locations. At a certain point, he seemed to be trying to convince me that he did not need money to live and to resume his journeys of tramping. 'On a tendance à penser que quelqu'un qui n'a pas d'argent galère, mais non c'est tellement rendu abstrait l'argent; je pouvais me nourrir et j'avais tellement de reflexes, au début j'étais plus gêné d'aller demander de la bouffe. Une fois à Lausanne de demandai le restant de la bouffe au restaurant. Au Maroc j'étais dans un resto marocain pour demander le reste de la bouffe car j'avais faim...³³'.

³¹ '...and for us, what we developed the most at that time was to make an effective shelter and how to survive, set fire and be spotted in the woods. And it is precisely this period that had given me confidence that one can live without all the great promises of western society'.

³² '...In France it was easy; I did not spend anything. I would pay for neither squatting nor eating nor moving. I found rides [lifts] in trucks. Oh you go! I'm embarking with you!'

³³ 'One tends to think that someone who has no money suffers, but no, money became so an 'abstraction'; I could eat and I had so many reflexes. At first, I was more embarrassed to go ask for free food. Once in Lausanne, we

Accordingly, ‘Snowowl’ conveyed that he had to deal with delicate situations during his sojourn in Europe. He explained that his status as a ‘legal’ tourist in Europe was no longer valid and that he had to leave Schengen space (E.U). He maintained that Spanish customs at Algeciras in Spain overlooked the situation and cooperated with him eventually. ‘...A Algésiras [ou] je me suis engueule par les douanes espagnoles car je n’étais plus légal dans l’espace Schengen. Ils m’ont fait la morale mais ils m’ont laissé sortir sans menottes et sans tampons noirs sur mon passeport [Canadian]³⁴. ‘Snowowl’ added that the Algerian authorities imprisoned him because he didn’t have a valid visa to visit the country. He mentioned that other prisoners there made fun of him and jokingly asked him to exchange passports. ‘J’étais enfermé en Algérie en prison comme un immigrant clandestin, et là-bas les autres riaient de moi en me disant de changer le passeport Canadien contre celui de l’Algérie’³⁵. ‘Snowowl’ continued to compare the delicate experiences he was involved in as a traveler without any reservations. He focused mainly on comparing different official repercussions caused by extralegal practices or situations in the countries he visited. According to his estimations, he accumulated dozens of thousands of Euros worth of fines for free of charge traveling, squatting, and for being hospitalised twice without paying for these services. Basically, He was also attracted to train hopping travels in Canada because the freight train enabled him to travel free of charge.

Snowowl’s Reflections on his Train Hopping Journeys

To trace back ‘Snowowls’ earlier experimentations with train hopping, I asked him about the circumstances that encouraged him to hop his first freight train. ‘Snowowl’ pointed out that as a child he used to play with other children near the train tracks at St-Henri and that they sneaked in the railyard on a few occasions. ‘Snowowl’ had had vague memories about such childhood experiences of playing outdoors and could barely clarify whether he actually embarked on a trajectory via those freight trains during his childhood. However, he acknowledged that later, during his adolescence, he hopped on and off some standstill railcar machines to paint some graffiti with the company of some friends. This section seeks to address ‘Snowowls’ involvement in train

asked for the rest of food in a restaurant. In Morocco, I was in a Moroccan restaurant to ask for the rest of food because I was hungry...’

³⁴ ‘In Algeciras, Spanish customs bawled me out because I was no longer legal in Schengen space. They gave me verbal warning, but they let me out without handcuffs and black stamps on my [Canadian] passport.’

³⁵ ‘I was locked up in prison in Algeria as a ‘clandestine’ immigrant, and the others [other prisoners] there laughed at me telling me to change the Canadian passport to that of Algeria’.

hopping travels back in 2005 in addition to some of the contentions he verbalized regarding such a form of mobility in Canada.

‘Snowowl’ recalled his first accomplished travels on freight trains back in 2005 when he was in his early twenties. He specified that he embarked on such an experience with a group of four friends. He stressed that in general he is not a fearful person and that he likes to take risks at times. When I inquired about the possible perils of jumping and traveling on freight trains, he simply warned against the idea of running after a freight train in motion unless it was moving very slowly, at only three or four km per hour. Then, ‘Snowowl’ described the phase prior to jumping on a freight train as very stressful. He recollected that his major concern while trespassing the railroad’s property with the company of his friends was to avoid any situation that could lead to their arrest by CN police³⁶. ‘Tu te sens comme si tu es dans une espèce de guerre. Tu aperçois des brigades [La police CN] qui ne sont pas nécessairement entrain de te chercher. Ils font juste leur boulot...des fois je les entends marcher à côté de moi juste à quatre mètres, et ça passe, et je relève la tête et je rejoins mes amis’³⁷. ‘Snowowl’ compared the situation of sneaking inside the railyard while circumventing the railroad workers or the bulls (the railyard police) to the metaphor of being involved in an imagined war. His ‘mission’ of trespassing for the purposes of jumping on the freight train had to go unnoticed. He recalled feeling euphoric when their freight train started to move away. ‘On prend notre précaution, et une fois dans le train c’est la joie totale; je rêve toujours de ça! Mon rêve était justement au moment où j’ai passé la gare de la Chine à Montréal [en train de fret] et j’ai fait Dorval’³⁸.

‘Snowowl’ did not like the necessity of having to hide somewhere and wait for long hours before the moment of ‘catching out’. He explained that such a situation was likely to generate stressful feelings and needless ‘worrisome’ thoughts. He added that drinking some beers while talking to his friends usually helped to decompress the tension of waiting for the right freight train. ‘Snowowl’ remarked that his attempts to hop on freight trains were not successful every time. He acknowledged that he jumped mistakenly at times on freight trains that started to move in the opposite direction from the one he intended. When I asked him about specific preparations that

³⁶ CN police refers to the Canadian National Police officers whose job is to patrol and protect the property and rail infrastructure of the Canadian National Railway Company.

³⁷ ‘You feel like you are in a kind of war. You see brigades [CN police] who are not necessarily looking for you. They are just doing their job...sometimes, I hear them walking next to me just four meters away, and it is over, and I raise my head and I join my friends.

³⁸ ‘We take our precaution, and once in the [freight] train it’s total joy. I still dream of that! My dream was precisely when I passed La Chine in Montreal [on a freight train] and I did Dorval’

enabled him to have prior knowledge of the trajectories and the destinations of these freight trains, he brought up the existence of updated versions of a ‘manual book’ that contained instructions and tips on how to proceed in certain locales in the eventuality of getting stranded. In reference to his excursion on freight trains to the west of Canada back in 2005, he stated the following: ‘On savait qu’on va prendre l’intermodal [train de fret] jusqu’à Toronto, après Winnipeg, et qu’il y a deux lignes qui font Edmonton et Prince Georges, puis après il y a Calgary et Vancouver. En ce temps, on avait un itinéraire et on savait que ça devrait se faire en trois étapes’³⁹.

‘Snowowl’ insisted that familiarity with the content of the aforementioned ‘manual book’, more particularly its codes, messages and symbols, never guaranteed successful trips on freight trains all the way to the western coast of Canada. However, he emphasized that the directives from where to ‘catch out’ or ‘hop off’ differed from one major city to another. ‘[il] y a des updates aussi sur certains livres pour faciliter les mouvements des kids [train hopping travelers], on avise les autres par rapport à l’installation de nouvelles cameras, par ou prendre le bus etc.’⁴⁰ ‘Snowowl’ alluded to the value of solidarity among train hopping travelers in relation to exchanging useful information likely to make their travels more easier. Hence, according to ‘Snowowl’, the content of such a ‘manual book’ was neither available nor accessible to the public. He added that for various reasons only insiders exchanged the most relevant updated information among themselves in private offline spheres. On a parallel note, he explained that the milieu of train hopping travels is self-controlled in an informal manner, and that information circulates rapidly about new insiders who join such a restrained milieu. In reference to what he insinuated as his ‘loose’ association with the collectivity of experienced train hopping travelers, he observed the following.

Snowowl: ‘...Ça se fait d’une manière informelle, et dès que tu rentres dans le milieu [train hopping] tu te rends compte que le monde est petit. Par exemple, je suis arrivé à Vancouver, j’ai des contacts de mes amis des kids qui sautent des trains [de fret] qui connaissent d’autres personnes qui sautent des trains [de fret], tu finis par rencontrer ces gens-là pas nécessairement sur les trains mais chez eux... mais ce n’est pas un truc centralisé, pour certaines personnes c’est vraiment leurs trucs et tu finis par les trouver quand t’es dans le milieu, et l’information circule que t’es dans le milieu’⁴¹.

³⁹ ‘We knew we were going to take [freight train] intermodals to Toronto, and after to Winnipeg, and that there two [track] lines that go to Edmonton and Prince Georges, then Calgary and Vancouver. At that time, we had a route and we know that it had to be done in three phases.

⁴⁰ ‘There are updates also on some books to facilitate the movement of [train hopping] kids. We inform others [them] about the installation of new cameras, or from where to take the bus etc.’

⁴¹ ‘...it is done in an informal way, and as soon as you join [the circle of train hopping travelers] you realize that the world is small. For example, I arrived in Vancouver, I have contacts of train hopping friends who knew other train-hopping friends, and then you end up meeting these people not necessarily on [freight] trains but at their

'Snowowl' asserted that after his first experiences of train hopping travels back in 2005, he began to perceive moving freight trains differently. He contended that his fewer travel experiences on freight trains had a particular effect on him. He explained that he became attentive to whether railcar machines are rideable, or not, whenever he comes across a moving freight train. 'Après 2005, je ne voyais pas les trains passer de la même manière...même aujourd'hui quand je vois les trains [de fret] passer, je me demande si je peux les sauter.⁴² I found it difficult to get him to describe his feelings at the sight of a passing freight train. He merely verbalized the fleeting temptation to travel again on those tracks. When I inquired about the future of his travels in the context of train hopping, he did not dismiss the possibility of embarking on freight train journeys again providing that his body enabled him to do so. 'J'ai 32 ans. Je t'avoue que je vais continuer à sauter des trains [de fret] jusqu'à ce que mon corps me lâche, et que je vais trouver ça difficile et dangereux car mon corps ne me le permet pas [d'être rapide]'⁴³. However, 'Snowowl' cautioned that his life and travels did not revolve around the activity of train hopping. He observed that his lifestyle as an anarchist and a squatter and a traveler allowed him to nurture good friendship relations in Montreal and abroad. He articulated as well the kindness of strangers whom he had met on the road on different occasions. In respect of his physical appearance, he conveyed his preference for warm and black clothes when engaging occasionally in train hopping travels. Yet, he expressed his reluctance to adopt any particular style or appurtenance including distinct piercings, tattoos, haircuts and clothing that directly or indirectly denoted his engagement in train hopping travels. When I asked him if he managed to recognize and identify other train-hopping travelers, he mentioned that overall no specific outfit or physical appearance enabled one to pin down travelers with train hopping antecedents. He contended that : 'Il y a un style genre, un peu punk avec quelques dreadlocks, mais ce n'est pas comme style de Rastafari. C'est vraiment des piercings de nez, de bouche, des facial tattoos mais pas tout le temps.'⁴⁴

Towards the end of the interview, 'Snowowl' confessed that he experienced a kind of dilemma or malaise regarding his future life whenever he returned to Montreal after long sojourns

homes...but it's not a centralised thing, for some people it's really their stuff and you end up finding them only when you are in the milieu, and information circulates that you are in the milieu'

⁴² 'After 2005, I do not see passing by freight trains in the same manner...even today when I see [freight] trains passing by, I wonder if I can jump them'.

⁴³ 'I am thirty-two years old. I admit that I will continue to jump on [freight] trains until my body could no longer afford so, and that I will find it difficult and dangerous because my body does not allow it [to be fast]'.

⁴⁴ 'There is a genre, almost punk with few dreadlocks, but it's not like Rastafari style. It is really about nose and mouth piercings, and facial tattoos but not all the time'.

abroad. He explained that once in Montreal, he had to rebuild and navigate interpersonal relationships again on different terms. 'Ici à Montréal il faut que j'entretienne les amitiés d'une certaine manière, et là j'ai moins envie de voyager car quand je reviens à Montréal je dois tout recommencer à zéro'⁴⁵. Then in a rather self-reflexive tone, he observed that leaving abroad with nearly no money did not make sense to him anymore. He stressed his frustration to realise that most of his acquaintances, whether in Montreal or abroad, started to gradually embark on conventional commitments and life projects such as founding a family, embarking on a career, raising children etc. Then he insinuated his predisposition to start thinking about a rather more 'seriously' established way of life at his own pace and according to his own terms. He verbalised his desire to embark on conventional life projects as well by referring first to the necessity of committing to a time schedule. He was mindful of the requirement to adjust his construction of time for the purposes of securing a job that corresponded to his aspirations. 'Maintenant à Montréal, j'ai des projets moi aussi, du coup j'ai tendance à calculer mes dates, j'arrive plus ou moins à planifier mon temps'⁴⁶. 'Snowowl' did not convey the nature of his projects in Montreal except his intention to write a book, with the help of some of his anarchist friends, about the 2012 Quebec student strike. Then he mentioned that he had not held a full time job since 2003. 'Je voulais avoir un[e] job qui va correspondre avec ce que je fais comme projets, et je m'en fou d'avoir un rôle dans la société ou pas. Quand j'ai besoin de cash, je suis confronté à la question de devoir avoir un[e] job, [mais] je sais que si je m'engage dans un[e] job à temps plein ça va juste ruiner mes projets, et me faire renoncer a des attaches ou engagements que je me suis donné'⁴⁷

'Snowowl' mentioned that he would make sure to have enough money on the side for his future travels abroad.

Velo's Short Distance Train Hopping Travels

'Velo' is a Quebecois youth in his early twenties. He self-identifies as an anarchist. He was twenty-three years old at the time in which I conducted an interview with him. It took place at the backyard of the flat where he grew up. His friend, who used to be my colleague, talked about him as someone who had hopped freight trains before. 'Velo' expressed his contempt of surveillance mechanisms

⁴⁵ 'Here in Montreal, I have to maintain friendships in a certain way, so I have less desire to travel because when I come to Montreal I have to start all over again'.

⁴⁶ 'Now in Montreal, I have projects too, so I tend to calculate my dates, I get to more or less plan my time'

⁴⁷ 'I wanted to have a job that will match what I am doing as projects, and I do not care whether I have a role in society or not. When I need cash, the question of having to have a job confronts me, [but] I know that if I engage in a full-time job it will just ruin my projects, and makes me give up attachments or commitments that I gave myself.'

in both online and offline public spheres. He added that he never had a cellphone or a hand watch. ‘Velo’ conveyed as well his interest in small-scale farming and his intention to travel to the Gaspésie for such purposes. He conveyed that he likes to work with his hands. ‘Velo’ worked at a store that sells and repairs bikes. He indicated that travelling across Canada on a freight train had been an old fantasy that he never had the chance to realize in reality. With the exception of one trip on the freight train to New Brunswick, he framed all his actual train hopping experiences as short travels within the Island of Montreal. He clarified that such local trips were never a challenge to him since he was familiar with some ‘catching out’ spots. ‘A Outremont, il y a l’ancienne gare, on faisait du feu là-bas. Il y a aussi la voie ferrée entre Rosemont et Mont Royal; ça m’est arrivé de pogner le train [de fret] pour aller jusqu’au Vieux Port. C’est plus rapide qu’en autobus, c’est comme si tu prends un raccourci et tu chill dans le quartier’⁴⁸. When I inquired about his first time on a freight train, he mentioned that he was about twelve or thirteen years old and that it happened with the company of other children when they were ‘chilling’ in the neighborhood. He explained that they spontaneously embarked on the freight train when it stopped by. He attributed the motives behind such ‘risky’ experiences to their desire to push their adventures further afield.

‘Velo’ : ‘Je me limitai à des petites distances, on n’attendait pas souvent l’arrivé de train [de fret]. C’est juste sur un coup de tête quand ça passait qu’on décidait de le sauter pour se déplacer à l’autre bout de la ville, en espérant vivre des aventures intenses, rencontrer des filles, d’autres gangs [enfants], se battre un peu, se cacher parfois pour aller loin, voir rêver de pouvoir aller encore plus loin’⁴⁹

At a certain point, I could hardly picture or imagine the scene of several children surreptitiously traveling on a freight train in Montreal. Hence, I asked ‘Velo’ for additional details about his experiences of using the freight train as a local means of transportation. He explained that he grew up in Pointe-Saint-Charles knowing that it was not unusual for some to hop on the freight train on its way to the nearby neighborhood of Saint-Henri. He mentioned that his uncle at times did the same when he was a young adult and that he even went as far as Saint-Hyacinthe. He added that it was more practical to do so than asking somebody for a lift. ‘Velo’ recalled an incident when a CN worker perceived them (the children) alongside the rail track. ‘Une fois il y’avait un gros

⁴⁸ Velo: ‘At Ouremont, there is an old station, so we used to set up (fire) there. There is also the railway between Rosemont and Mont-royal. It happened to me to catch a [freight] train there to go to the Old Port. It is faster than by bus, it is like taking a shortcut, and you chill in the neighborhood.

⁴⁹ ‘I limited myself to small distances; we did not often wait for the arrival of the [freight] train. It is just on a whim when it happened that we decided to jump on it [freight train] to move to the other end of the city, hoping to live intense adventures, to meet girls, other [children] gangs, to fight a little, to hide at times to go far, to dream to be able to go even further’

gars de CN qui nous a aperçu le long de la voie ferrée au Plateau [Mont-royal]. Il nous a dit de sortir, et on lui a lancé des rochers genre f** l'autorité. Il était gros et imposable'⁵⁰. In reference to the possible dangers that could emanate from engaging with train hopping, 'Velo' mentioned that his high school friend passed away because he was pulled under the wheels of a freight train in motion due to a sudden shaking. He added that his high school friend was drawing graffiti signs on one of the machine cars when the incident happened. 'Ce qui me fait capoter, c'est que parfois le train est statique, tu montes dedans, tu te crois en équilibre, mais dès qu'il bouge, si tu touches à rien, tu tombes et tu petes ta gueule. Parfois il change soudainement le rail, ça fait [le son] chlik lik, et le mouvement brusque peut être catastrophique'⁵¹. I asked 'Velo' about his trip on the freight train to Edmundston in New Brunswick. He recalled that his mother chased him away from home when he was fifteen years old because he smoked weed a lot and often came back home during late hours at night. He said that he jumped on the freight train that night and decided not to hop off any time soon. He assumed that this particular 'forced' trip lasted between five and seven hours. He added that he did not have a hand watch and that he never had a watch or cell phone on him. The freight train finally stopped in Edmudston.

'Velo': 'Ma mère m'a fichu dehors. Je me suis trouvé là-bas [Edmundston], j'ai 'chile' dans le quartier, et j'ai trouvé d'autres punks, puis j'ai trouvé un squat pour la journée. Mais c'était dur et je suis revenu. J'avais quinze ans. La police est venue, me disait 'tu ne peux pas t'enfuir juste comme ça de chez tes parents...c'était mon baptême a moi. Vu qu'on m'a chassé dehors, ce n'était pas une fugue...'⁵²

I asked 'Velo' about his thoughts regarding the general experience of traveling via a freight train, and he pointed out an interesting observation. He contended that the traveler should be attentive to all the details of what is going on inside and outside the moving railcar machine. To avoid injury, he added, the traveler should maximise the use of his senses and remain focused during the entire journey. Then, he explained that a freight train rider should be vigilant and focused the same ways as a rider of a bicycle. He even talked about oneness in such a context

⁵⁰ 'Once, there was a big guy from CN who saw us along the railway line at the Plateau [Mont-Royal]. He told us to go out, and we threw rocks at him, like f** the authority. He was big and imposing'

⁵¹ 'what makes me (capoter) is that sometimes the train is static, you climb in, you think you are in balance, but as soon as it moves, if you do not touch anything [the side of the machine car] you fall and risk being injured. Sometimes it suddenly changes the rail, it makes [the sound] chlik lik, and the sudden movement can be catastrophic'.

⁵² Velo: 'My mother kicked me out. I arrived there [at Edmundston], I chilled in the neighborhood, and I found other punks, then I found a squat for the day. But it was hard and I came back. I was fifteen years old. The police came, told me 'you cannot run away just like that from your parent's home...it was my baptism (to me). Since they [in reference to his parents] chased me out, it was not a fugue'

alluding to a kind of ‘fusion’ between the rider and the means of transportation whether it is a freight train or bicycle.

‘Velo’ : ‘Pour la ride de train de fret, c’est comme la conduite de mon vélo. T’es toujours dans la visualisation. Tu dois être vraiment dans le senti, dans l’écoute, parce que si tu n’es pas vraiment là-dedans tu risques de te faire mal, même s’il y a le vent, la marée, la tempête! rien à foutre il faut que tu pédales. C’est comme si tu fais l’amour sexuellement physiquement avec la route ; tu vis comme un avec la route, comme un avec le train, c’est comme dans une espèce de bulle et tu ne vois rien mais t’es à l’écoute de ce qui se passe⁵³’.

It’s been a pleasure to hear these gentlemen reminisce on their occasional train hopping journeys. At times, I could see that they were proud to articulate details about the intensity of their train hopping experiences. Despite their fewer traveling experiences on freight lines, they talked about them in an energetic way using at times vivid images or metaphors to describe their feelings.

⁵³ ‘For the freight train ride, it’s like riding my bike. You’re always in the visualisation. You must be really in the feeling, in the listening, because if you are not really in there, you risk to hurt yourself, even if there is the wind, the tide, the storm! No matter what, you have to pedal. It’s like having sex with the road; you live like one with the road, like one with the train. It’s like you are in a kind of a bubble [in reference to being incarcerated inside the railcar machine] and you do not see anything but you are listening to what’s happening’.

Chapter 4: Online Venue

The third ‘ethnographic’ chapter is an attempt to outline the recurring online communications that may be encouraging the perseverance of train hopping practices in North America. Online venues such as train hopping forums, specific travel blogs, YouTube channels, Facebook groups, Instagram and Reddit accounts etc. host a variety of train hopping digital contents that are viewed, read, liked and shared, at times, among internet users. A common characteristic of these contents resides in displaying a combination of text, photo and video formats to attract a wide range of users deemed interested in train hopping travels. The most innovative and entertaining contents generate ongoing reactions or even debates among users. During the course of this study, I systematically examined some train hopping contents posted online and the overall comments that revolved around them. I realized that the majority of users who frequent the aforementioned venues are not necessarily train hopping travelers. Most visit these venues for the potential fun and entertainment that some train hopping contents are likely to spark. However, I have observed that several users seem to be navigating the online train hopping venues for more than mere entertainment. They are primarily seeking to connect with other train hopping travelers in hopes of exchanging updated information relevant to contemporary train hopping practices. This chapter attends to the dynamics of the online interactions associated with audiences who seem to be involved in train hopping travels.

Characteristics of Online Train Hopping Matters

In the first half of this chapter, I will start with a description of the various types of train hopping contents posted online and the salient interactions that circulate around them. The scope of the exercise will be limited to the reactions and controversies that actual train hopping travelers express online concerning the repercussions of divulging train hopping practices. The second half of this chapter looks at train hopping travels from the perspectives of three female internet users who embarked on train hopping journeys for several years. These female travelers agreed to chat online about their personal experiences, sentiments, contentions and apprehensions vis-à-vis train hopping travels. They were happy to be ‘dirty kids’ travelers at some point in their lives. Hence, for the purposes of respecting confidentiality, I will use pseudonyms when referring to specific websites, users and contents. In addition, I will avoid detailed descriptions of scenarios and tactics

that might inadvertently disclose sensitive information relative to hop out spots⁵⁴ which refer to specific locations from which to hop on and off freight trains. Based on my observations of certain websites, moderators of train hopping forums and chat rooms urge users to exchange specific information about hop out spots solely through private messaging. In principle, this strategy enables members of the online community to get to know each other and to protect ‘sensitive’ information from the gaze of outsiders. Yet compliance with such rules or principles, among others, is hard to implement in such digital spaces.

YouTube Train Hopping Videos

I first became aware of contemporary freight hopping phenomenon when I stumbled upon an online video on YouTube that comprised random scenes of jumping on and off freight trains somewhere in the United States. While watching the video, a strange sense of déjà vu connected me back to the summer of the year 2005 at Gent-Sint-Pieters railway station where I found myself running in parallel to a passenger train that just started to roll down the tracks leading to Brussels Airport. I did not miss that passenger train thanks to the railroad employee who indicated to me the railcar, with the door still opened, from which to hop in. Hence, the online video, I was watching, that focused mainly on practices of hopping several intermodal containers carried by moving trains, bizarrely reminded me of my experience of hopping that passenger train in Ghent. I learned later on that the online train hopping community refers to the activity of hopping a moving freight train as ‘catch on the fly’. When I finished viewing the video, YouTube listed other videos that differ in their style of depicting train hopping practices. While some highlighted the phase prior to the act of catching out, the overwhelming majority focused on filming intense experiences relative to entire journeys on freight trains across Canada or the United States.

Aside from train hopping videos, YouTube also provided recommendations for other vlogs or documentaries associated with a broad range of themes and activities concerning hobo history, homelessness, rubber tramping, squatting, hitchhiking, dumpster diving etc. I spent some time watching these YouTube videos and realized with the exception of the hobo history documentaries they were devoid of scenes of freight hopping. On the other hand, the majority of train hopping videos embraced concomitant scenes that may include a range of activities associated with

⁵⁴ Some users are convinced that a manual guide facilitates the task of identifying such locations.

squatting, loitering, hitchhiking, dumpster diving etc. Hence, to address the salient characteristics of the train hopping videos posted on YouTube, I sought to divide them into basic, intermediate and advanced groupings. By doing so, I hope to demonstrate that these videos went through a gradual shift in the style of depicting train hopping practices. While earlier (basic) videos—posted on YouTube prior to conducting this study—emphasized the context of trespassing to foreground the embodied act of freight hopping in and of itself, most recent videos move beyond such confines to immerse audiences in the specificities of intimate journeys on freight trains.

Basic Train Hopping Videos

This category of videos primarily highlights the ‘deviant’ behavior of trespassing railroad properties with the aim of hopping a freight train. Most of these videos are of short duration (approximately ten minutes) and are accompanied by some song associated with punk rock, country or hobo music genres. The videos in this category are not grouped under a particular vlog or channel. They rarely attract a considerable number of viewers and, hence, generate few significant comments. Most of these videos are filmed during daylight. They are noticeably devoid of extended scenic views. The characters or participants in such videos often lack the necessary gears to embark on extended journeys on freight trains. It is worth noting that to cope with some of the circumstances of traveling via freight trains, train hoppers should equip themselves at least with basic items such as boots, impermeable clothes, backpack, sleeping bag, food cans, water, flashlight etc. To keep viewers in suspense, creators of such videos stage scenes of ‘catch on the fly’ towards the end of the footage. In short, viewers get a glimpse of situations and behaviors that may include loitering under a bridge, trespassing a railroad property and drawing tags or painting graffiti on railcars prior to the exposition of the acts of freight hopping.

Intermediate Train Hopping Videos

Creators of and participants in the ‘intermediate’ train hopping videos aspire to attract a larger set of viewers. The duration of these videos varies between fifteen and fifty five minutes. Most commence with a compulsory disclaimer about the danger and illegality of train hopping. Instead of integrating music into the edited version of the film, the content creators add informative and descriptive subtitles to the footages in hopes of a better engagement with viewers. The train hopping characters or participants in the videos appear well prepared and equipped to carry out their surreptitious travels on the rails. In addition to bringing basic gear associated with train

hopping travels, they make a point to carry with them a go pro camera, GPS tracker, iPad, durable batteries, radio scanner, a compilation of maps and so on. Occasionally, participants find themselves stranded. Such situations, however, do not stop them from continuing to film their improvised maneuvers to get back on track. The technological devices they carry help them determine their locations to find a way out. Based on some comments posted below such videos, audiences are particularly attracted to the scenes that portray the participant (train hopping traveler) as a resourceful 'hero' capable of overcoming moments of vulnerability and dealing with situations involving serendipity. Hence, viewers interested in actual journeys on freight trains get a glimpse of the inevitable constraints involving train hopping travels through this category of videos. In addition to the thrill associated with these videos, whether filmed during daylight or at night, viewers may find openings to enjoy watching scenic views of landscapes and random encounters with animals in the open air. In short, creators of these intermediate videos maximize the use of technology devices such as go pro cameras to optimize an insider understanding of train hopping practices in action.

Advanced Train Hopping Videos

The videos in this category stand out from the 'intermediate' contenders. They are grouped in specific channels that denote a particular 'brand' or style of documenting and engaging with train hopping travels. Most attract thousands of viewers and subscribers including a set of relatively well-informed audiences. The videos in question not only generate ongoing reactions at the comment section relevant to each video but also trigger controversies regarding other train hopping websites and platforms. Most of these controversies concern the range of information that creators of the videos should or should not disclose to the public. For example, 'Hobnob' was a YouTube content creator and a train hopping traveler who documented his journeys across the US. He filmed and edited dozens of train hopping videos that he posted on YouTube. He was famous for conveying useful information about the underground specificities of the city or the neighborhood from which he intends to hop out. His camera gave a context to his travels. It zoomed in to show road signs, tags and graffiti under bridges or near hop out spots. His camera recorded random conversations with other travelers on the rails as well. 'Hobnob' addressed the type of audiences who are already engaged or willing to engage in train hopping travels. He acted as a virtual tourist guide for train hopping travelers with limited resources. He showed them the free or affordable

plans and the necessary procedures to realize them. In his videos, he indicated where to spend the night in X city, where to buy a cheap pizza or even dumpster dive and from where to hop out etc. In addition, the freight train he hopped enabled him to travel to under populated regions in the United States. He hopped off to film the vast landscape. He said a few words about the beauty of the place that surrounded him. He came across an abandoned house and showed the interior that was still devoid of train hopping tags. He enjoyed filming the unbeaten tracks and the deserted fields that were mainly accessible to travelers via freight trains. ‘Hobnob’ was concerned to explain his love and passion for train hopping travels. He died accidentally in obscure circumstances while he was traveling on those freight trains. His fans posted several tribute videos portraying him as a legendary hobo. Some even ventured to follow his example and visited some of his last hop out spots. ‘Hobnob’ was convinced he was a modern day hobo.

Other advanced styles of documenting train hopping travels continue to engender both admiration and controversies among the online train hopping community. Creators of such contents, despite all the circulating comments, continue to seek reputation and perhaps validation from ‘imagined’ insiders to train hopping practices. They compete as well to collect funds from fans and supporters for the purposes of filming and financing additional ‘missions’⁵⁵ on freight trains. The more monies they receive in their PayPal accounts, the greater the risk they undertake to shed light on less well travelled freight train paths and trajectories. Such tacit transactions, between content creators and the viewers who support them, result in producing distinct, inspiring and professional footages about train hopping travels in North America. Over the course of this study, I particularly enjoyed watching ‘advanced’ train hopping videos on YouTube⁵⁶. Each video conveys a unique story about a particular mission. Each highly charged scene or episode of trespassing stands as an explicit defiance of the mores that regulate conventional forms of physical movement. In short, these videos are windows from which one can steal a glance at the underground world of carrying out episodic train hopping travels. Towards the end of most of

⁵⁵ The term ‘mission’ in this context, as commonly referred to by the online community of train hoppers, refers to the process of traveling via freight trains from a point of departure in X city to a final destination in Y province or state.

⁵⁶ Some (advanced) YouTube videos managed to remind me as well of fragmented scenes of action on moving trains that characterized obsolete Western genre movies. During my elementary school years in Casablanca, I used to watch cowboy movies in the company of my father. Back then, the ‘nomadic’ lifestyle of the cowboy figure must have stretched my imagination about the existence of a different world out there, far beyond the Atlantic Ocean.

these videos, viewers are provided links to other websites, blogs and forums about train hopping practices and travels.

Train Hopping Blogs

In principle, train hopping bloggers target audiences likely to devote some of their spare time to reading about the diverse stories, experiences and circumstances of travels via freight trains. In practice, most bloggers with train hopping experience supplement their online diaries with a list of practical advice and guiding principles aimed at unpacking the range of activities necessary to the process of train hopping. Usually, train hopping bloggers share their travel stories on websites concerned with adventure travel, photography and vagabond or minimalist lifestyles. Such venues attract a network of travelers interested in practical advice regarding contemporary modes of rubber tramping, urban camping, train hopping, hitchhiking, van dwelling, bike touring, squatting and so on. The overwhelming majority of train hopping bloggers convey the process of planning and carrying out their journeys as well as the distance they travelled and the challenges they have to overcome. In some circumstances, they refer to other travel related situations or encounters involving railroad police officers and/or railyard workers. Train hopping bloggers emphasize the necessity to stay alert and undetected as well as the capacity to dodge railroad police officers whenever possible. At times, they dwell on describing scenic views and vast landscapes while evoking or dramatizing fleeting moments of liberation, joy and quiescence. For the purposes of illustrating the conditions of their travels, they upload photos that best represent their journeys on freight trains.

Over time, some train hopping bloggers start posting manual guides and resources deemed necessary to prepare potential users for surreptitious expeditions on the rails. After issuing a disclaimer of responsibility, the bloggers in question usually introduce safety tips and guidelines that railroad property trespassers should be aware of. For example, to navigate the terrain of freight trains, travelers must be vigilant about their surroundings all the time especially when they are walking down, or about to cross, the tracks. They should maintain the three points of contact when using the ladders and handholds of the machine cars and never touch the knuckle when crossing

over or moving around a train etc.⁵⁷. Such safety tips among others aim to lessen the risk of unnecessary accidents likely to cause injuries to traveling trespassers.

At this point—after introducing the safety implications—potential users (readers) can skip through the manual guides to focus on its main thematic sections. Most guides address a cluster of issues ranging from the ability to identify freight hopping affordances (infrastructure) such as the types of railyards, machine cars and tracks to the tactics of hiding in and moving through the surveilled railyards. Some manual guides expand as well on codes of conduct and survival skills necessary to the progression of train hopping travels. Theoretically, the range of information bloggers convey throughout such digital spaces may be useful for potential ‘rail’ travelers. For example, potential train hopping travelers should be able to distinguish between two sections of a railyard. The classification section is where railcar machines are classified and sorted out. In principle, train hopping travelers should avoid this section because it is strictly surveilled due to its proximity to the main tour and other office buildings. Moreover, the classification section can be dangerous for any trespasser oblivious to the logic of its internal operations in terms of parking railcars, un-loading freight, etc. Accidents are likely to occur in an area where railcar machines enter and exit without warning. On the other hand, the departure section is where railcars are already lined up and connected to a train that is ready to roll. Potential train hopping travelers should be capable of not only identifying the departure section but also the specific hop out spots, if any, within this section for an eventual departure. Hence, prior to planning a train hopping journey, potential travelers are advised to have a copy of a railroad atlas which is a compilation of maps that detail the existing train lines across North America. They are also encouraged to use Google maps that can help identify the main routes. Potential travelers may also find online descriptions and images of all the machine cars that are safe to hop in and what items to bring for the journey (water, food, backpack, cardboard, sleeping bag etc.). Yet learning such information is not sufficient to figure out the specific location of hop out spots as well as the direction and the destination of the freight train. Mere reliance on the apparently practical guided readings posted in train hopping blogs does not guarantee that one will carry out successful journeys on freight trains.

⁵⁷ Please note that a list of the complete railroad safety guidelines and training standards is available online and can be downloaded via the websites of governmental departments of transportation and other railroad companies.

Train Hopping Forum: Antennae

‘Antennae’ is a train hopping forum situated at a website concerned with misfit lifestyles and other nonconventional forms of travels. It provides users with opportunities to participate in discussions concerning train hopping journeys. Users can also explore openings to network with and learn from experienced train hopping travelers. The discussions are often organized in threads. Accordingly, ‘Antennae’ participants create various threads and respond to other posts that cover a wide range of themes and issues including—but not limited to—travel aspirations, train hopping routes, events, gatherings, black markets, seasonal work, layover accommodation, road code of conduct and so on. Occasionally, users express sentiments of belonging to the online train hopping community. Some users, including moderators, post comments at times about the necessity to protect the train hopping community from ‘outsiders’. Others argue that it is important to show potential train hoppers the proper manners to proceed with train hopping practices and teach them the road code of conduct. Overall, the majority of users tend to simply engage in casual conversations about certain popular train hopping contents that circulate online.

However, users are obliged to use private messaging when discussing exact places and specific track numbers that detail a forthcoming train hopping mission. Like any other online forum, Antennae experiences shifts in traffic flow and hence variations in the timing and the extent of interactions among users. For example, threads about unusual events, such as a train derailment or an arrest warrant against a popular train hopping figure, trigger ongoing reactions and debates. More particularly, traffic volume increases in both spring and summer seasons during which experimentations with train hopping travels start to occur. Yet there are times when modes of responding to and participating in the discussions decrease exponentially. There are times when some users barely stop by and log in to the forum. To deal with such situations, moderators start to highlight notions of camaraderie, interdependence and solidarity in hopes of generating sentiments of belonging to the Antennae community. Therefore, moderators seize opportunities to raise questions about safe travels and respect for the railroads as primary values that symbolize the common good for any online train hopping community.

This kind of commentary from moderators can elicit responses from participants that concern the constraints and obstacles that prevent train hopping travelers from carrying out their journeys on the rails. Voices advocating against online exposure of certain hop out spots start to surface.

Some condemn online circulations of certain train hopping videos and manual guides susceptible of revealing detailed aspects of train hopping practices. For example, a specific category of participants argue that enumeration of types of machine cars suitable for the act of catching on the fly gives the impression that train hopping is an easy process within the reach of any internet user. Others blame inexperienced train hopping travelers, whom they refer to as oogles, for their irresponsible behaviors within the vicinity of railroads. They maintain that oogles' unfamiliarity with the road code and propensity to manifest drunken behavior near railyards are not only disrespectful but make it hard for other 'responsible' train hoppers to proceed on good terms with their own surreptitious travels. It seems that oogles should 'learn the ropes' directly from other experienced train hopping travelers rather than from the internet. In short, most of these online voices complain about the unremitting measures railroad authorities undertake to strengthen surveillance and block access to a number of existing hop out spots. Hence, the notion of 'responsible' train hopping emerges as a substantial claim among others likely to strengthen both online and offline ties among train hopping travelers.

Another scenario likely to motivate users to spend extended time on 'Antennae' revolves around the idea that the 'crew change guide' CCG document circulates offline among 'veteran' train hopping travelers. According to several train hopping blogs, forums and rail fan websites, the CCG compiles updated information about where and when freight trains lay over to change crewmembers. In addition, it contains systematic instructions and specific directions on how to proceed to the hop out spots. Therefore, most novices who seem interested in train hopping travels show unusual excitement about the idea of acquiring an updated version of the CCG document. Some even tend to regard it as a rare commodity, a kind of visa that grants access to the underground culture of train hopping. Hence, most aspire to glean information on the specific tactics to obtain it or at least to put their hands on specific directives regarding the locations from which they intend to hop out. However, an omnipresent rule in online train hopping venues indicates that the only means to access the content of the CCG document is to photocopy it from another 'trustworthy' train hopping traveler. This condition implies that train hopping candidates should first navigate processes of initiating bonds with other 'veteran' members. Such processes not only require networking skills and imperatives but also a proven commitment to comply with the salient codes of conduct at 'Antennae' such as avoiding hate speech. It takes time to become a trustworthy train hopping traveler. The CCG document does not guarantee a successful 'train ride'.

Nothing guarantees existence its existence in the first place. Yet it has the power to fuel discussions and mark hierarchies among users of the forum.

Professional Mediated Representations of Train hopping

Several professionals in film, photography and digital journalism have carried out some projects about the phenomenon of train hopping in North America. In most cases, the final version of these projects is available free of charge to all internet users. Most are rapidly distributed via social and other electronic media. For example, 'Freeload' is a documentary movie about a set of young adult American travelers who chose to live on the fringe of society while hopping freight trains across the United States. 'Lost and Found' is an art collection of black and white portraits of American 'dirty kids' known for hitching rides and hopping trains across North America. Other digital materials in both narrative and photo formats contribute as well to the construction and circulation of additional perspectives on train hopping travels and practices. To some extent, professional journalists and photographers contribute to the mediatization of 'dirty kids' travelers and their lifestyle. This section explores some of the more professional media depictions of contemporary train hopping travels.

Online Train Hopping Articles

Most editorial articles about train hopping travels seek to convey an insider outlook on the lifestyle of contemporary 'dirty kids' travelers. Journalists have succeeded in conveying informative material associated with train hopping. They report on the festivals and the venues likely to attract train hopping travelers. They may provide brief yet informative narratives about the interviewees, their background and involvement in train hopping travels. They may evoke scenarios of thrill, serendipity and adventure. They may also raise questions about the danger and the illegality of train hopping. They may introduce their articles with reference to the hoboes of the great depression before tackling issues relative to contemporary train hopping travels. Some of the articles include straightforward descriptions of 'dirty kids' outfits and some allusions to their involvement in rough conditions of travels.

However, journalists rarely refer to the diversity of train hopping travelers. In addition to muting the underlying circumstances of collecting data and conducting interviews, some journalists seem more preoccupied with addressing the themes likely to interest their audience. Therefore, most of these articles tend to associate train hopping with freedom, wanderlust and

liberation from the mundane. Rather than endeavoring to make sense of the phenomenon of train hopping, some journalists settle for romanticized depictions of ‘dirty kids’ as contemporary versions of the historical figure of the hobo. In other words, travelers with train hopping experience emerge in the articles as heroic adventurers, drifters, nomad punks, minimalists, free spirits, lovers of nature, and so on. At first glance, such portrayals gave me the impression that train hopping travelers are one homogenous group constantly traveling across the country ‘from coast to coast’. In addition, this type of media depiction of train hopping provides a space of tension likely to reify the notion of drifting as an ideal that stands for detachment or rather withdrawal from mainstream, capitalist and technology-driven society. Millennials attracted to articles on ‘dirty kids’ and train hopping travels might fantasize about the existence of a ‘liberating’ world, out there, confined to navigating freight train trajectories.

Professional Train Hopping Photos

Some Facebook groups and Instagram accounts host and circulate a wide variety of professional photos associated with train hopping journeys. Such photos add a realistic dimension to the romanticized articulations of experiencing travels via freight trains. Several photos capture scenic views of sprawling landscapes, bridges, tunnels and tracks that support the movement of freight trains. Yet the majority either shed light on situations of encounter between a train hopping traveler and a freight train or capture a scene of enclosure that depicts a traveler’s body dwelling momentarily in the restrained space of a machine car on the move. Both enclosed and opened spaces of the railcar bear witness to the prevailing discomfort and inconvenience of traveling with commodities. Hence, in the photos in question, the bodies of travelers emerge as fragile organisms amid the thickness and the abundance of steel that surrounds them. The photos may show a graffiti painting or a tag in the background, but also freeze time and immortalize an expression on the face of a traveler. At times, a simple train hopping photo can be revealing of the complex thoughts and emotions that affect the traveler’s experience and fleeting sense of being out of place; incarcerated for a while in a machine car on the move. In contrast to such portrayals, other professional photos show black and white portraits of ‘dirty kids’ travelers posing against a neutral background. The weathered look, the long disheveled hair, the face tattoos and the ragged clothes may symbolize the possible association of the subjects with train hopping travels. The online conversations vis-à-vis such portraits and other train hopping photos continue to hover around themes of freedom and liberation from more sedentary ways of conceiving of one’s existence in society.

Female Train Hopping Travelers

Over the course of this study, I attempted to interview users online via skype or other electronic means, but to little avail. In general, users with train hopping credentials are reluctant to talk about their surreptitious travels online. Luckily, a research participant that I interviewed face-to-face in Britt helped me get in touch with three female users who agreed to participate in my research. These three interlocutors preferred to communicate solely via real time private messaging through Facebook. They informed me of some aspects of their train hopping travels and experiences of socializing with other ‘dirty kids’ travelers. None of these interlocutors considered herself a ‘full-time’ train hopping traveler. However, each one demonstrated a good knowledge of the existing routes and the best ways to navigate them. Each of these interlocutors referred to developing her own unique style of riding freight trains. In addition, as female travelers, they had to develop their own tactics of socializing with and/or evading other male ‘dirty kids’ travelers. At the time of carrying out these chats online, I was keen on understanding the positionality of train hopping travels in the lives of the three women as well as the extent to which they were invested in the lifestyle.

Amira: The Train Hopping Clown

‘Amira’ is a young adult in her mid-twenties. She was brought up in a rural area in Oklahoma. She self-identifies as an anarchist communist. She loves to talk about freedom. She aspires to embark on a career as a clown, yet she does not invest time in pursuing the required mentorship programs. In 2011, she was involved in the Occupy Wall Street movement as an activist. During the same year, she became acquainted with some ‘dirty kids’ travelers who convinced her to quit school and her job as a barista to join their lifestyle on the open road. When I asked her about her earlier adventures on the road involving hitching rides and more specifically hopping freight trains, she sought to warn me against romanticizing the train hopping lifestyle.

Amira: It’s hard discussing my travels over the web. I will say one thing though... Train riding isn't something to romanticize... It’s hard. Sometimes you’re so cold you can't feel your toes or fingers. Sometimes it’s so hot and you can't find any escape from the sun. Sometimes you are so lonely and have to fly [a sign] to get some. Sometimes you end up in a cell and lose your house. Boot rot can creep into your shoe after weeks of the southeast rain. It’s worth it [in reference to train hopping] if you can sacrifice comforts if any. In fact I hopped a train the wrong direction from Colton to the cold winter of Utah. Ugh. Snow everywhere. Luckily a lady bought me a bus ticket to Nola...New Orleans. I think the train lords are punishing me because the bus company lost my gear.

I found the way ‘Amira’ introduced the world of train hopping to me very interesting. I then asked her to explain to me the advantages that attracted her to a new lifestyle on the road. She emphasized the availability of abundant time that allows one spontaneous engagement in random activities without any restrictions. She added that her new lifestyle does not require her to abide by certain rules of conduct or societal obligations. ‘If you want to read a book all day you can. You feel like writing poetry and playing music you can. Feel like fishing and wrist rocketing cans you can. Feel like swimming and camping or spending all your money on a nice meal you can. No bills no schedules no bosses no rules.’ ‘Amira’ added that she loves this feel of freedom when she embarks on train hopping journeys. She mentioned that she is most happy when strumming on the banjo in the streets or finding good quality food in dumpsters for free. However, she maintained that she takes time off the road and rails for several months at a time to have some rest and take care of herself. At times, she works on farming and landscaping to support herself. In addition, she was proud to convey her attraction and appreciation of minimalism and DIY principles. In her words, she is a free spirit and a religious person who longs for simple things in life. ‘I love being a minimalist only taking what I need, nothing more. So many people in these 1rst worlds being glutinous and wasting all these resources. I love learning things by accident and asking the creator to put people and situations in my path’. When I asked Amira about the future, I expected her to talk about her career as a clown or her passion for playing banjo. Instead, she preferred to disclose pragmatic intentions such as saving money for tattoo Jujitsu classes. Regarding her long term plans, she hopes to be able to pay off the fines she accumulated as a result of her involvement in train hopping and other benign illegalities. In addition, she conveyed her intention to obtain a passport one day to be able to travel to Europe.

Prior to conducting the online chat session with Amira, I spotted her photo profile among the aforementioned black and white portraits of American ‘dirty kids’ travelers that circulate via social media. Halfway throughout our chat conversation I decided to inquire about her photo. She confirmed without hesitation that the photo was hers and that the professional photographer in question had already taken several photos of her and of her traveler friends. She explained that the photographer works on an ongoing art project aimed at portraying the lifestyle of transient people who hitch rides and hop freight trains across the US. She informed me that the photographer is well known in the community of train hopping travelers. She added that the photographer pays twenty dollars to take a profile photo of the travelers. ‘Most riders [train hopping travelers] including myself don't like giving people a price of our life for free... Because a lot of the time people make money off of us. [James the

photographer] would give 20 dollars for pictures... And photoshoot those who paid him too to support his art project'. In addition, 'Amira' brought up the name of another woman well known and respected by most 'dirty kids' travelers. She mentioned that this woman often houses and feeds train hopping travelers. She added that most 'kids' regard this woman as their mother. According to 'Amira', most 'dirty kids' travelers have beautiful souls despite the aggressive behaviors they manifest at times partially due to consumption of alcohol or mental illness. She mentioned as well some 'hop outs and shities [cities]' are likely to attract a large population of freight train travelers in the US such as Colton, Roseville, Fontana Portland, Seattle etc. Towards the end, I asked Amira about her general outlooks on life. She preferred to convey some of her political positions mainly derived from anarchist principles.

'[I am an] anarchist communist. I think it can only work in small groups... I've seen it done. People have the conception that anarchy is complete chaos... But they forget to realize just because you don't have a master doesn't mean you can't independently make good hearted decisions for yourself. No I am not voting. I am voting by not voting because I don't need a master. All these laws ... I still break them. I don't need the government to grant my rights... The amazon forest, the Pacific Ocean, all of this will die... All of it will cycle again, just like the dinosaurs'.

Radia: Train Hopping Memories

'Radia' is a young adult in her late twenties. She introduced herself as a person seeking to give up her association with train hopping travels. While chatting online, she spoke about her recent marriage with her Polish boyfriend and her intention to 'settle down' after several years of intermittent road trips across the US. She was also excited about a recent full time job she came across at a hardware store in a marijuana farm. 'Radia' was hoping to keep working at the farm for an extended time. She described her previous association with train hopping travels as a form of addiction; an ongoing temptation that she aspired to resist at many levels. I asked 'Radia' whether her marriage, alongside other concomitant responsibilities, was a turning point that marked an end to her tramping journeys including train hopping.

Radia: 'Well honestly there is no end, for you will always ride [freight trains] again. Rather it be by lifestyle choice, recreation or taking that west bound out of this world (death). Our feet will be itchy and we will always long for another ride. It's not about the freedom or the change or the working hobo or the scouring dirty kid bum...unless you are a wanderlust young buck. It is about who it makes you as a person. I cannot give you [help you with] your thesis for my experiences are my own. It could not possibly sum up the lifestyle for everyone's are their own. You ride [freight trains] and you live. What makes you do in between doesn't define you as a [freight train] rider. Riding and knowing your lines [tracks] makes you a rider'.

'Radia' mentioned several lines of thought and potential directions to the online chat. I remember that I did not know what to do with the typed words I was reading on the screen. I did not know

how to react for a while. To keep the flow of the chat, I simply asked her to tell me more about her experiences riding those rail lines.

Radia: 'The junk rattles and shakes, the intermodals are smooth sailing, but the shakiest ride could leave your smooth sailing ship sided for hours due to higher demand of whatever it is hauling. You could find the best ride possible on an intermodal with no pusher a 48 or a piggy back with wings (58) and still side out for a junk train full of grain. Knowing the priority of the area you are in is the best knowledge you could have while riding. In my experience I learned from sitting in the rain and freezing in the middle of nowhere waiting for my chance to depart. Every train has to crew change every 8 hours. Winding up sided for 2 days because your crew that's hauling you is bunkered up somewhere is the worst feeling possible. Better make that can of spaghetti last and ration your booze and smokes'.

Beyond such technicalities necessary to navigate the rail lines, 'Radia' reminisced about spending so much time in the woods camping, fishing or just watching a desolate yard. She did not particularly enjoy situations when she had nowhere to hide from the rain while riding a freight train. In addition, she disclosed that most of her solitary journeys were characterized by 'absurd fears' and ceaseless internal dialogues with her inner self. However, there were times when she had to get out of her bubble and seek the kindness of a town resident, for instance, to help her with basic necessities such as food and shelter. She emphasized as well the importance of accessing the internet in local libraries to reach out to other travelers and locals known for the support they provide to 'dirty kids' travelers. I was curious to know more about such forms of networking and solidarities that take place during such intermittent travels. 'Radia' already had an example in mind to convey regarding random acts of kindness involving hospitality. 'Finally reached Havre, Montana...where my cc rider lives. She is like a mother to me. [I] hiked about a mile into town and she pulled up in her blue Sedan car. Old train rider woman, strong in her convictions. So we ate hot apple pie and drank natural ice and [I] stayed with her for a few [days]'.

In contrast to some of the media representations I described earlier, 'Radia' does not consider train hopping travelers as a homogenous group or even as members of a community. 'Not every [train hopping] rider is family nor do we care for each other much'. Instead, she likes to think of them as small circles of acquaintances within larger ones. Given her intentions to 'settle down', her small circle of acquaintances became more restricted. At the time of conducting the online chat with her, she acknowledged that she barely kept in touch with other travelers. In addition, she expressed sadness over the outcome of some of her 'dirty kids' friends who either suffered physical and emotional

⁵⁸ Please note that there are several types of machine cars that train hopping travelers employ as a means of transportation. These include gondolas mostly used for hauling scrap metal, grainers for carrying grains, and 48/53 feet long wells for shipping containers and piggybacks that refer to semi-truck trailers usually placed on flatbed train cars.

injuries, succumbed to drug addictions or ended up in jail. Towards the end of our online chat, ‘Radia’ explained that she had other preoccupations in mind including the fact that her husband might risk deportation to Poland.

Kenza: The Train Hopping Tourist

‘Kenza’ was a young adult in her mid-thirties at the time of chatting with her online. She likes to think of herself as a tourist and a rail fan. She grew up somewhere in Chicago but moved later to a small town called Eau Claire, Wisconsin. She considers train hopping as a liberating experience. However, she enjoys other modes of travel such as kayaking, rubber tramping, hitchhiking, biking and walking trails. During her train hopping travels, she likes to tag the machine cars with a ‘medicine wheel’ that symbolizes four directions or dynamics of the life cycle within Nature. Also, she likes to collect photos of the freight train car models she used for the purposes of her travels. Before inquiring about Kenza’s first train hopping experience, I sought to have an idea about her background and upbringing.

Kenza: ‘I had a traumatizing childhood that resulted in mental illness, clinically diagnosed and have been medicated and treated since I was 11. I escaped the hell of my constant reality thru the Discovery Channel and national geographic magazines. I escaped there and didn't actually believe that the nature and serenity that I saw and felt and dreamt of was still real and available to experience. Grew up 15 miles south of city limits and it was ghetto and polluted and overpopulated. Everything was concrete and rivers were polluted and you couldn't see many stars and there was always this human of electricity in the air. My family was and is toxic. The environment was all toxic to me. I always wanted to run away to the country. And I did. And I am happier now than I have ever been with where I home base. Getting thru some shit but don't want to be anywhere else at the moment’.

‘Kenza’ clarified her preference for solo train hopping journeys. At times, she may allow the company of another train hopping traveler. She acknowledged that several incidents involving violent/drun kard behaviors rendered her very selective in choosing her traveler companions. During our online chat, ‘Kenza’ claimed to be a ‘ninja of the shadow’ freight train rider. When I inquired about the meaning of such an appellation, she evoked her commitment to responsible train hopping. She added that her ninja style of riding freight trains is distinct from the omnipresent ways of ‘catching out’. In other words, she explained that her ninja style emphasizes total vigilance and discreetness in addition to maximizing the time of rolling (riding a freight train) at the expense of waiting for a train. ‘My style of travel is pretty much non existent. I've never been pulled off and I never want to be. I'm rolling. Not camped out behind Walmart for days on end flying signs and getting wasted...’ ‘Kenza’ maintained that she learned the art of riding freight trains from fellow train hopping travelers she

met at a tramp festival in St-Paul, Minnesota. She spoke highly of these people whom she considered lifelong friends and extended family members. In addition on many occasions during our online chat, 'Kenza' referred to the freight train as a beautiful, powerful beast. When I inquired about her preference to attribute living characteristics to a machine, she explained that the freight train allows her to travel, experience and connect with Mother Nature that she respects and loves dearly. 'Eau Claire is native for "clear water" and here is author piece of heaven on earth compared to Chicago, I just fell in love simply for the fact that I always dreamed of nature and I never knew it really still existed'. In short, 'Kenza' continued to idealize Nature and her passion for riding freight trains. She asserted that the freight train enabled her to embark on non-intentional extended journeys in comparison with other modes of traveling.

I like to think of this exercise as a subjective review of the online communications that characterize train hopping practices in North America. The digital space was a difficult terrain of inquiry. I had to deal with materials and users in the absence of face-to-face contacts and concrete situations. At times, I felt as if I were spying on other users especially in the context of the train hopping forums. I even questioned my choice of deciding to study train hopping practices in the first place. Hence, on several occasions, I had to refrain from including certain information or details about users and their interactions. To review the digital space relative to train hopping practices, I started with a description of the visual and most accessible contents to general users (YouTube) and moved gradually to more restrictive and specific venues accessible to users that I qualified as insiders of the train hopping lifestyle. In addition, the review aimed at filling gaps and complementing the findings associated with my fieldwork in Britt and Montreal. In the second part of the review, I focused on conducting online chatting with female users specifically because their perspective on train hopping practices was largely absent from the scene in both venues: Montreal and Britt. But in spite of its limitations, I hope that this review of online and media venues and materials provides insights into aspects of the perseverance of train hopping practices across North America.

Conclusion: Fragments of Thought

Ideas about train hopping keep circulating and changing with the passage of time. At times, media representations emphasize notions of freedom, adventure and wanderlust. Other times, media contentions about train hopping journeys are reduced to both reified and romanticized articulations of the theme of drifting. This research acknowledged the possible role of such prevailing online discussions in enticing or attracting potential adventurers to the domain of train hopping. Stories and discussions about train hopping travels during offline gatherings such as the hobo convention in Britt may also contribute to the persistence of the train hopping phenomenon.

This research was also attentive to the variety of circumstances that first impelled or initiated research interlocutors to engage in train hopping journeys. Some approached train hopping as a form of play while reminiscing on their childhood experiences of playing outdoors in proximity to railroad tracks. Others brought to my attention the misfortune of running away from home because of some extenuating family circumstances. Quite a few provided the context of intentionally quitting their full time jobs to specifically embrace the train hopping traveling culture and follow in its insiders' footsteps. But none of the participants for instance conveyed the opposite circuit of first embarking on train hopping journeys specifically to look for casual or seasonal work opportunities. One may presume that current train hopping travelers are no longer primarily motivated by search of 'casual manual labor' in comparison to hobo historical displacements on the rails that the social history on hoboes suggested. However, all 'dirty kids' interlocutors revealed their occasional involvement in casual or migrant work when necessary in addition to other means of getting by such as panhandling, flying a sign and dumpster diving. Most did not talk enthusiastically about the liminal experiences that characterized their train hopping journeys. Yet, I did not fail to notice the overwhelming sense of pride in their tone of voice and body language when they were describing or relating stories about their previous train hopping journeys.

Accordingly, I have previously noted elsewhere that most train hopping interlocutors verbalized their travel experiences on the rails in an intense way. Their words were pregnant with meaning. Despite the constraints and difficulties involved in navigating train hopping routes, most train hopping travelers are likely to manifest an unusual willingness and determination to move about the uninviting space or paths likely to facilitate their 'catching out'. In other words, before

reaching the flatness of the rail tracks, they always have to deal first with an unflattened space or one that resists flatness. It took me a while to realize that most train hopping interlocutors highly emphasised the experience of moving about such an uncertain space and managing to forge out a fleeting path for the purposes of ‘catching out’. In addition, there is more chance that train hopping travelers identify static hop out spots where they can squat and hide prior to ‘catching out’, but there is little chance that their walking boots tread on the same paths leading to a freight train. My point is that the uncertain train hopping paths are not necessarily concentrated in specific lines but rather forged and performed out instantaneously as and when navigation to the operational track sustaining a departing freight train takes place. Perhaps, a railroad Atlas and a CCG document could be useful in indicating landmarks or mapping fixed areas of freight train layovers, but I doubt that they indicate exact routes to follow and where or when to embark on and off a freight train. Therefore, potential train hopping travelers are often advised to assume the role of apprentices and travel with an experienced train hopping traveler. Perhaps, such a way of passing train hopping knowledge could be interpreted as a process that contribute to the persistence of train hopping travels.

Finally, this thesis asked: what are the material conditions that encouraged aspects of the persistence or perseverance of train hopping travels in North America? Certain travelers continue to hop freight trains despite the fact that it is illegal, dangerous, uncomfortable, noisy, dirty, time consuming and uncertain. Perhaps I should have added that the existing population of train hopping travelers for the most part consists of white male young adults from working or middle class environments who consider themselves advantaged and privileged to know how to navigate inaccessible train hopping routes. Perhaps their sense of pride or privilege suggests that the peripheral space of the train hopping traveling culture is a manifestation of a certain willingness ‘to free the related term “travel” from a history of European, literary, male, bourgeois, scientific, heroic, recreational meanings and practices (Wolf, 1993)’ (Clifford, 1997: 33).

The kind of knowledge that train hopping travelers derive from their journeys is fascinating and rather too complex to be put in a scientific framework of investigation. Perhaps future studies of train hopping should be attentive to its intricacies as a traveling culture beyond understandings of drifting, deviance and illegality mostly derived from the fact that social and political life is still organized in terms of states, nations, borders etc. In addition, I have noticed in various social media

venues that the rate of mortality among young adult train hopping travelers, especially those who self-identify as 'dirty kids', is extremely high. This sad reality about the train hopping traveling culture is too important to be ignored or relegated to statistical registers, if they ever existed. Perhaps, future studies could address the wellbeing of North American train hopping travelers and strive to better understand their views and perspectives on moving about freight lines.

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