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Office Hours by Appointment

## Flux Americana: Tramps and Tramping in American Literature

*Day/Time/Building*

### OVERVIEW:

*Tramps like us. And we like tramps.*—the Hold Steady

The 1870s marked the emergence of a new figure in American culture, the tramp. Vagabonds and itinerants predate the period, but the tramp was unique, appearing amidst territorial expansion and economic turmoil. Dubbed a social “evil” upon his emergence, the tramp underwent a positive transformation over the course of the twentieth century, largely as a result of representations in film, music, and literature. From Chaplin’s “Little Tramp” to Kerouac’s Dean Moriarty (young and old), the tramp is a figure with whom countless Americans identify. But are there limits to this identification? What happens to the verb *tramp* (what one does) when it becomes the noun *tramp* (who one is) as it did in the 1870s? Can the process of tramping be distinguished from the figure of the tramp? If so, what does a shift in focus from figure to process reveal about American attitudes toward class, race, sex, and mobility?

### TEXTS:

Beck, *Hobohemia*  
Dos Passos, *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel*  
Kerouac, *On the Road*  
London, *The Road*  
Reitman, *Sister of the Road: The Autobiography of Boxcar Bertha*  
Robinson, *Housekeeping*  
Toomer, *Cane*

\*Texts are available at the Seminary Co-Op bookstore. All other readings are available on E-Reserve. Expect some secondary criticism (no more than an essay or chapter) each week. \*

### REQUIREMENTS:

1. *Short Paper* (5-7 pgs.): First draft due WEEK 3, Revised draft due end of WEEK 5 (20%)
2. *Criticism Excursus* (one-page, single-spaced): Select a piece of criticism that makes a claim about a text discussed in class; resources for finding a suitable piece of criticism will be discussed when the class visits the research librarian during WEEK 4. Summarize the piece’s

argument and construct a question that complicates/challenges a claim made by this argument. Post your summary and question to the discussion board on CHALK by the end of WEEK 7 (10%)

3. *Long Paper* (8-10 pgs.): Due end of WEEK 11 (35%)

4. *Group Presentation*: Starting WEEK 6 (30%)

5. *Class Participation*: You are expected to have read the assigned materials by the date due and to be prepared to participate in classroom discussions. **Two excused absences** are allowed; excessive absences and tardiness will be penalized with points deducted from the participation grade. (5%)

## READINGS:

**Week 1 (The Vanishing American Hobo)** screening of Alison Murray's *Train on the Brain* (2000) and "Contributor's Club: Tramps," *Atlantic Monthly* (May 1880); Whitman, "Song of the Open Road" (1856) and "The Tramp and Strike Questions" (1879); Harte's "My Friend, the Tramp" (1878), Kerouac, "The Vanishing American Hobo," *Holiday* (1960), and DePastino, "The Great Army of Tramps" from *Citizen Hobo* (2003)

**Week 2 (Trampology)** Riis, "A Raid on the Stale-Beer Dives" (1890); Crane, "An Experiment in Misery" (1894); Flynt, "The City Tramp" and "A Tramp's Jargon" from *Tramping with Tramps* (1899); Hapgood, "King of the Hoboes" from *Types from City Streets* (1910); Hacking, "Making Up People" from *Historical Ontology* (2002)

**Week 3 (Holding Her Down)** London, *The Road* (1906); Livingstone, *From Coast to Coast with Jack London* (1917); Deleuze and Guattari, "1227: Treatise on Nomadology" from *A Thousand Plateaus* (2004) DRAFT OF SHORT PAPER DUE

**Week 4 (Chicago Sociology)** Park, "The Mind of the Hobo"; Anderson, selections from *The Hobo* (1923) and *The American Hobo: An Autobiography* (1975); Cresswell, "Knowing the Tramp" from *The Tramp in America* (2001); **visit to special collections and research librarians**

**Week 5 (Hobohemia)** Beck, *Hobohemia* (1956); **walking tour of Chicago's Hobohemia, West Madison Street** REVISED DRAFT OF SHORT PAPER DUE

**Week 6 (Intellectual Vagabondage)** selections from Dell, *Intellectual Vagabondage* (1926), Dos Passos, *The 42<sup>nd</sup> Parallel* (1937); De Certeau, "Walking in the City" from *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984)

**Week 7 (Meek Adjustments)** Crane, "Chaplinsque" and *The Bridge* (1930); screening of Chaplin's *City Lights* (1931); Cresswell, "Laughter and the Tramp"; **required conference to discuss final paper** EXCURSUS DUE

**Week 8 (Forgotten Women)** Reitman, *Sister of the Road: the Autobiography of Boxcar Bertha* (1937); Robinson, *Housekeeping* (1981); Weiner, "Sisters of the Road: Women Transients and Tramps" from *Walking to Work: Tramps in America, 1790-1935* (1984)

**Week 9 (Hallelujah! I'm a Bum)** Music and lyrics by Dylan, Guthrie, McClintock, Jefferson, Leadbetter, and Waters; Salerno, "Sizzlooks, Scissorbills, Sab Cats and Songs: Language and Image in Wobbly Expressive Art Forms" from the *Big Red Songbook* (2007); Garron, "Hobo Blues" from *What's the Use of Walking if There's a Freight Train Going Your Way? Black Hoboes & their Songs* (2006); Toomer, *Cane* (1923)

**Week 10 (The Great American Mythological Drama)** Kerouac, *On the Road* (1957); Lane, "Spirit: An Autobiography" from *Abandoned Cars* (2010) LONG PAPER DUE at END OF WEEK 11

### Online Course Description:

This course explores the shifting cultural attitudes toward the American tramp and tramping as represented in literature, film, and popular music. How do these texts help explain the tramp's transformation from outcast to everyman? Texts include those by Chaplin, Crane, Dos Passos, Dylan, London, Reitman, Robinson, Toomer, and Whitman.

### Brief Course Description:

*Flux Americana: Tramps and Tramping in American Literature* has the shape of a highly specialized survey that allows upper level students to trace the appearance of a particular figure/type/identity over a long period of American literary history. By foregrounding the tramp, I want students to examine assumptions and expectations regarding character types in general and then tweak them by considering a process, tramping, as the starting point for making claims about particular texts. The course makes use of representations from a variety of media (novels and short stories but also feature films and popular songs) and encourages students to bring the proper critical tools to bear on these texts by producing two papers, one short and one long, and collaborating in a presentation that addresses a text's circulation and reception. The syllabus follows a rough chronology that reveals a gradual shift in understanding from process to identity but that also allows for this claim to be challenged and complicated.

Various sociologists and historians have argued that the tramp emerges in the 1870s when a verb begins to be used as noun to designate a particular type of itinerant individual. The course begins with Whitman whose poetry and prose make a distinction between tramping, viewed positively, and the tramp, regarded with suspicion and fear. Bret Harte's "My Friend the Tramp" (1878) reveals the extent to which the figure of the tramp emerges almost fully formed in 1870s but also the difficulty of representing the tramp fictionally within a regional short story. The following week focuses on bumming in the industrial city in order to reflect upon how mobility can be controlled and disciplined. Week three examines the wave of nonfictional tramp literature that appeared in popular periodicals throughout the 1890s and early twentieth century, in particular the essays by Jack London, which address but fail to resolve the distinction between identity and process. Weeks five, six, and seven make the case for a kind of "tramp modernism," an aesthetics of tramping present in the work of Hart Crane, John Dos Passos, and, most importantly, Charlie Chaplin. Chaplin's "Little Tramp" also marks the radical transformation of the tramp from "human parasite" into loveable everyman. Having charted this transformation and having marked two poles (the tramp *as who one is* and tramping *as what one does*), the remainder of the course oscillates between these poles while examining how representations change (or fail to change) in different contexts and over the course of the twentieth century. The final three weeks mirror the first three: the Northern city returns, although experienced differently, in Toomer's *Cane*; London's boxcar and railroad reappear as the automobile and highway in Kerouac's *On the Road*; and the ideals of Whitman are enacted in the radically different landscape of graphic novelist Tim Lane's *Abandoned Cars*. By the end of the course, students should be thinking critically about identity formation and about whether a narrow focus on a particular topic can open up broader discussions concerning class, race, sex, and mobility in twentieth-century America.