



## **Embodiment, Power and the Politics of Mobility: The Case of Female Tramps and Hobos**

Tim Cresswell

*Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, Vol. 24, No. 2. (1999), pp. 175-192.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0020-2754%281999%292%3A24%3A2%3C175%3AEPATPO%3E2.0.CO%3B2-B>

*Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* is currently published by The Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers).

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/rgs.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

---

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

# Embodiment, power and the politics of mobility: the case of female tramps and hobos

Tim Cresswell

Mobility and travel have recently attracted the interest of many people, both inside and outside geography. This interest has often focused on issues of gender. Mobile women, in particular, have been seen to be indicative of wider social and cultural themes of power, exclusion, resistance and emancipation. In this paper, I consider the gendered dimensions of a moral panic in the United States between 1869 and 1940, known as the 'tramp scare'. I argue that the construction of the panic around threats to women's bodies and the actual experience of female tramps illuminates a clearly gendered and embodied politics of mobility.

**key words** tramps United States embodiment mobility gender moral panic

---

Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences, University of Wales, Llandinam Building, Penglais, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion SY23 3DB  
email: tim.cresswell@btinternet.com

revised manuscript received 22 October 1998

## Introduction

On 11 June 1886, readers of the *Minneapolis Tribune* would have come across a small item at the bottom of page 5 that read in a matter of fact way:

Last evening a poor Swede girl, aged 23 years was arrested for being found dressed in man's clothing. She was in the employ of a dairyman named Farnquist, who lives about four miles out of the east side. He paid her \$10 a month, and her duties were to herd cattle and do a man's work. Finding a dress inconvenient in the brush she put on a man's suit of clothes, without knowing that she was offending against the law.

In all likelihood, the nameless woman was a migrant labourer – one of the millions who travelled the country looking for work during the cycle of depressions that hit the United States between 1873 and 1939. I believe that her story – one that is all the more poignant for its brevity – can allow us to begin to explore the wider geographical issues of mobility power and embodiment. My immediate reaction, on reading this, was to think of the travels of Mary Kingsley in Africa with her 'good thick

skirt' and dread of appearing masculine – a dread that resulted from the connection between her forays into empire and Victorian masculinity. Much has been said about Mary Kingsley and the cohort of female travellers who wandered the colonial world (Blunt 1994; Robinson 1989; Stevenson 1982); little has been said about travelling women in other situations. Clearly the clothes they wore are indicative of wider disparities in the connections between mobility and power. Female tramps and hobos led their lives on the margins of many more familiar categories. The ways in which they negotiated their lives (and reactions to them) differentiate them from both the men with whom they shared the boxcars and female travellers from imperial Britain. The above story points towards both the relative invisibility of women on the road (the men's clothing and the size and location of the story within the paper indicate this) and the theme of embodiment. In this paper, I explore the relationships between mobility, power and embodiment though an examination of the world of female tramps and hobos in the United States

around the turn of the century. I consider how mobility is embodied differentially – how the act of moving is reflected in and constructed through different bodies. I do this by providing an account of female travellers, which broadens the scope of previous work on generally middle- and upper-class women. However, my purpose is not merely descriptive: I also show how the combination of themes of mobility and embodiment point towards the transgressive potential of differently embodied mobilities. To this end, I draw on recent feminist theorizations of the body and gender identity by Iris Marion Young (1990), Elizabeth Grosz (1990; 1993; 1994), Judith Butler (1990; 1996) and others.

The main part of the paper considers issues of gender during the 'tramp scare' of 1869–1940 in the United States. I show how a moral panic was constructed through and about a threat to women, home and domesticity by male tramps. Following this, I consider the world of the female tramp/hobo and the way in which they negotiated their lives on the road through such strategies as cross-dressing. I argue that the presence of such women, though mostly overlooked, produced a crisis in anxious onlookers as they tried to make sense of these bodies-out-of-place. Towards the end of the paper, I consider this crisis in the light of feminist theories of embodiment. First, though, I provide a preliminary sketch of the connection between mobility, embodiment and gender.

### **Mobility, embodiment and gender**

Although the themes of mobility, embodiment and gender are clearly linked in a number of ways, the connections have not been clearly drawn in the geographical literature. Travel and mobility have been prominent themes in recent social and cultural thought (Chambers 1994; Clifford 1992; Morris 1988; Robertson *et al* 1994; Wolff 1992). Geographers have long been concerned with mobility and movement, most famously in migration studies, spatial interaction theory and time-space geography (Abler *et al* 1971; Hagerstrand 1967; Lowe and Moryadas 1975). It is only recently, however, that geographers have begun to examine the relationships between movement, power and meaning that have become prominent in the wider fields of social and cultural thought (Blunt 1994; Cresswell 1993; McDowell 1996a; Morin 1995). Far less has been said about the spatiality of mobility

than about the comparatively rooted concepts of space, territory, landscape and place. The apparent unboundedness of mobility, which makes it attractive to post-structuralist theorists of culture and society, appears to make it somewhat suspect to traditional geographers, who, as David Sibley (1995) has argued, have traditionally been concerned with ordering, separating and disciplining. In this paper, I take mobility to mean socialized movement. Just as abstract space can be transformed into social space (or place) by taking power seriously, so it is possible to think of human movement as a social phenomenon – as a human geographical activity imbued with meaning and power.

Embodiment refers to the process whereby the individual body is connected into larger networks of meaning at a variety of scales. It refers to the production of social and cultural relations through and by the body at the same time as the body is being 'made up' by external forces (Grosz 1994; McDowell 1996b). Bodies are used to act out roles in various settings, which confirm and resist (at different times in different places and sometimes simultaneously) wider sets of expectancies. Linda McDowell, for instance, has shown how female merchant bankers use their bodies in a gendered performance that negotiates aspects of both masculinity and femininity as they are conventionally defined (McDowell 1995). Gender, like mobility and embodiment, is implicated in social power both as a product of power and as a producer of it. In this paper, I take gender, following Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (1991, 3),

as what we make of sex on a daily basis, how we deploy our embodiedness and our multivalent sexualities in order to construct ourselves in relation to the classifications of male and female.

Mobility, embodiment and gender are all inter-related in complex and varied ways in moving, gendered bodies.

Much of the work on embodiment and mobility is rooted in phenomenology. Iris Marion Young and Elizabeth Grosz have drawn on the phenomenological philosophy of Merleau-Ponty to draw together mobility, embodiment and gender. Merleau-Ponty, in his conception of the 'body-subject', wanted to direct attention to the elementary movement of the body in order to challenge the phenomenological preoccupation with consciousness as the locus of intentionality. In

Merleau-Ponty's words, 'The plunge into action is, from the subject's point of view, an original way of relating himself to the object, and is on the same footing as perception' (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 110–11). Mobility, then, is the most basic form of intentionality:

Consciousness is in the first place not a matter of 'I think that' but of 'I can' ... Consciousness is being towards the thing through the intermediary of the body. A movement is learned when the body has understood it, that is, when it has incorporated it into its 'world', and to move one's body is to aim at things through it; it is to allow oneself to respond to their call, which is made upon it independently of any representation. (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 137–9)

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of the 'body-subject' is situated in the realm of human universals, and no attention is given to gender difference. Iris Marion Young (1990) has a quite different take on the phenomenology of bodily movement. Her starting point is the observed difference between the throwing actions of boys and girls. What, she asks, are the implications of such differences? If, as Merleau-Ponty has claimed, the relation of a subject to its world is revealed in the purposive movements of the body towards its environment, then surely a focus on the feminine body as it moves might reveal some essential facet of feminine existence? Thinking further about the movements of women, Young notes a more general difference in body comportment between men and women than that revealed by throwing: women, she suggests, walk differently, stride differently, sit differently and hold things differently. While men maintain a more open stance to the world, women are typically more closed and protective of their bodies:

Not only is there a typical style of throwing like a girl, but there is a more or less typical style of running like a girl, climbing like a girl, swinging like a girl, hitting like a girl. They have in common, first that the whole body is not put into fluid and directed motion, but rather, in swinging and hitting, for example, the motion is concentrated in one body part; and second that the woman's motion tends not to reach, extend, lean, stretch, and follow through in the direction of her intention. (Young 1990, 146)

The movements of a woman's body, in Young's account, are indicative of the 'feminine', not as a natural condition but as the structures and conditions that delimit the typical situation of being a woman in a particular society – in the mobility of

the body, the feminine is actually lived. Young argues that the conditions of being a woman, in contemporary Western society at least, include the development of imaginary space over time that surrounds the body and constructs the space of possible movement.

Returning to Merleau-Ponty, Young questions his phenomenology of perception by pointing to the differentiated experiences of men and women in terms of their 'primordial structures of existence' – their bodily subjectivities. If the body is the first locus of intentionality, then the act of orienting the body to its surroundings, of moving, reveals more than a universal act of transcendence. Rather, she argues, the female body is trapped, to some degree, in immanence, even when it is moving. In other words, feminine intentionality is in some way inhibited – feminine bodies act against the intended outcome (such as throwing the ball). Feminine movement is most often located in a specific body-part rather than the whole body. The moving part of the body is 'transcending toward an aim ... in relative disunity from those that remain immobile' (Young 1990, 150). In this way, the feminine body cannot be described as a body-subject (as discussed by Merleau-Ponty) but as an 'object-subject'. In Young's essay, she succeeds in bringing together mobility, embodiment and gender in a way that pulls apart Merleau-Ponty's universalism.

Another place to look for the intersection of embodied mobility and gender is in the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1985; 1990). Throughout his work, Bourdieu has attempted to delineate how agents have 'dispositions' that, more often than not, serve to reproduce particular structures of common sense that produce and are produced by the relatively powerful in society. Bourdieu uses the term 'strategy' to talk about human action. A strategy, in his lexicon, is a view of human action that marks a break from structuralist suppositions of 'agentless actions', which are more or less unconscious (Bourdieu 1985). But neither, he asserts, are strategies the product of conscious and rational calculation; instead, they are 'a practical sense, of a particular social game' (112). Bourdieu uses the term 'habitus' to describe 'the social inscribed in the body of the biological individual' (113). Unlike Merleau-Ponty, though, Bourdieu does not dislocate the movements of the body in the game from the social (which is always implicated by the limits to the game, since it is produced by the players'

adherence to the rules and strategies). Bourdieu extends upon this theme in *The logic of practice* (1990, 70) in a way that echoes Young:

Bodily hexis is political mythology realized, *en-bodied*, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable way of standing, speaking, walking, and thereby of feeling and thinking. The opposition between male and female is realised in posture, in the gestures and movements of the body, in the form of the opposition between the straight and bent, between firmness, uprightness and directness . . . and restraint, reserve and flexibility.

The logic of practice, for Bourdieu, is clearly a logic that favours social stability and mitigates against dramatic change. It is in the body that the social framework becomes activated, through practice that tends towards reproduction of the social framework. Social space tends to shape bodily dispositions (such as ways of walking), which themselves constitute social identity. The fundamental structures of groups are rooted in the primary experiences of the body. Power is a key factor in Bourdieu's discussions of bodily dispositions – the power that emerges from the actions and reactions of people as they act in the world. Bodily movement, far from being divorced from questions of power, is one of the key ways in which power is constituted. Indeed, in Bourdieu's work, the *habitus* represents the internalization and embodiment of the social order, which in turn reproduces the social order. Power, then, is reproduced through the practices of people who act in accordance with internalized (embodied) schemes of perception. As Judith Butler (1996, 32) has argued,

Bourdieu understands the body as a form of engagement with the world, where this engagement is understood as a kind of regularized activity that conforms to the 'objective' demands of a given field.

It is clear from the discussions of embodiment and mobility above that gender plays a key role in determining exactly how mobility is embodied. While Merleau-Ponty has argued that human mobility represents a form of transcendent intentionality, Young and Bourdieu give examples of the ways in which the embodied mobility is differentiated according to gender. But it is not just in the microscale geography of the body that evidence is provided of differential embodiments of mobility – it has also been identified in other kinds of motion.

Discussions about the relationship between mobility and power almost inevitably revolve around issues of gender. The equation that links

mobility to freedom in the case of women is one that is linked to other dualistic typologies, the most prominent of which is public versus private space. While the private realm has been associated with stability, rootedness and femininity, the public realm has been described as fluid, mobile and masculine. Feminist and other critiques of this equation have asserted that women have played public roles and experienced mobility in all kinds of ways (Ryan 1990), that the private sphere can be a space of resistance and agency (see McDowell 1996a) and that the public and private spheres are permeable, with each enabling and constraining in different ways (Milroy and Wismer 1994). It has also been pointed out that the male/female, public/private binaries are often discussed from a white, middle-class perspective (Blunt and Rose 1994).

The two areas within which the mobility of women in public space has most frequently been discussed are the *flâneuse* and the imperial lady traveller. The *flâneur* is a masculine literary figure associated with the poet Charles Baudelaire. The opening-up of Paris and the construction of the boulevards created new archetypal modern spaces where pedestrians could stroll anonymously, taking in the scenes in the new shop windows, gazing at fellow strollers and revelling in the everyday. When the activities of these pedestrians were combined with a bohemian desire for the low and the marginal, the *flâneur* was created. This (imaginary) figure became the object of some controversy: while historians such as Marshall Berman (1988) claimed that the *flâneur* was a 'modern hero' moving easily through the spaces of modernity, feminist critics pointed out that the freedoms were clearly masculine ones (Buck-Morss 1986; Wolff 1990). Women still could not venture out alone easily, and if they did it was only at certain times and in certain clearly defined spaces. Modernity and mobility were both marked as masculine. A sure sign of the restrictions placed on women, it was argued, were the actions of George Sand, a female literary figure, who dressed up as a man in order to enjoy the streets of Paris: 'no-one knew me, no one looked at me . . . I was an atom in that immense crowd' (cited in Wilson 1991, 52). Elizabeth Wilson has more recently argued that there were, in fact, many opportunities for middle-class women to enjoy the new freedoms of the city, especially in the new department stores and feminized consumption spaces (Wilson 1991).

The imperial lady traveller<sup>1</sup> has also been the object of much speculation, and her mobility held up as a sign of the new, if ambivalent, freedoms available to respectable, middle-class women from imperial centres (Blunt 1994; Domosh 1991; Ingemanson 1993; Russell 1986). Travellers such as Mary Kingsley and Isabella Bird were able to shake off some of the constraints imposed on them at home by engaging in various travels to colonial margins or national frontiers. This mobility allowed them to produce new kinds of knowledge through their travel writing, which often contradicted or revised commonly held assumptions produced by masculine exploration. The freedom that such mobility gave them was ambivalent, in so far as these women were usually from imperial centres and carried the privileges of home with them. In some senses, these privileges were experienced as constraints rather than freedoms, as women were forced to take 'home' with them as they moved. One way in which these privileges were expressed was clothing, as the women typically retained a sense of propriety by dressing in Western feminine clothing. Birgitta Ingemanson (1993) has commented on the odd disjuncture between the increased freedoms associated with the mobility of women in Edwardian and Victorian times and their reluctance to rebel against the inhibitive clothing of Victorian homelife. She points out that,

even in a period of dress reform and budding interest in women's sports the great women travellers coolly persisted in donning their corsets and hats, dining in open nature on white linen cloths, and taking their stoves and often-intricate household utensils – in effect their homes – with them. (Ingemanson 1993, 5)

Ingemanson's suggestion is that these polite lady travellers were pursuing a strategy of using a 'facade of propriety' to hide and legitimate the freedom that came with their mobility. The paraphernalia of 'home', including clothing, enabled the women to be mobile by providing a disguise that helped them to overcome any obstacles.

Mobility and travel, like anything else, are marked by the structures of gender, class and race, in addition to the forces of nationalism, imperialism and colonialism. The adoption of feminine clothing by these generally middle-class women also reaffirmed their whiteness and thus supported a racial distinction between themselves and the inhabitants of the nations they explored. The material mobility of female tramps was quite different

from that of Victorian lady travellers and the *flânerie* of George Sand. While the maintenance of femininity provided a guise for the travels of Mary Kingsley, the guise of masculinity helped poor, white, female tramps to avoid some of the dangers of the road. The clothing that women wore in order to enable mobility helps us to differentiate between forms and experiences of mobility.

Linking the discussion of the *flâneur/flâneuse* and the imperial traveller are the discussions of the geography of female fear, which is often described in relation to mobility and urban streets. George Sand dressed as a man in order to avoid the potential threat to a solitary female presence on the streets of Paris. A significant amount of work in geography and beyond has focused on this threat and the fear associated with it (Deegan 1987; Pain 1991; Valentine 1989). Gill Valentine, in particular, has shown how women avoid certain uses of contemporary urban space at specific times, particularly at night. This geography of fear is contrasted with the geography of danger, which reveals that women are most likely to be subjected to physical harm by people they know in domestic spaces. The mobility of women as they walk down the street is clearly negotiated in ways quite distinct from that of men.

Mobility is embodied in different ways by different bodies. While Young and Bourdieu point towards the movements of individual bodies and their parts, the discussions of women as they move around the world and in the city also indicate the different ways in which mobility is operationalized by women and men. What then of the tramp? My argument here is that the mobility of the female tramp transgressed some familiar assumptions about the gendering and classing of mobility and produced anxiety in a number of onlookers who had no place for such people in their comfortable and comforting schemes of perception. Before considering the gendering of the tramp, it is important to put the panic surrounding the tramp in context.

### The tramp scare in context

On 10 May 1869, the Union Pacific Railroad was completed, connecting the West Coast of the United States to the Missouri River, and thus the East Coast. The railway brought North American agricultural commodities, ore, lumber and finished goods to the ports of the West Coast and returned

to the Midwest with foodstuffs and products not indigenous to the region. The landscape of the American West changed on a massive scale as wheat farms spread across the plains and irrigated fruit and vegetable plantations appeared in New Mexico and California. By 1900, the trans-Mississippi West possessed an intricate rail network connecting the United States to Canada and Mexico, and via the steamship routes of San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, Portland and Galveston to Asia, Latin America and Europe. The United States were connected in new ways to a global economy (Agnew 1987; Robbins 1994).

The technology of the railroad provided the conditions for a new social type – the tramp – to exist. Not only did it provide a form of transportation that meant that people could be on the East Coast one day and within a week turn up on the West Coast, it also enabled the development of western agribusiness where fruit plantations demanded 200 workers one month and 20 000 the next (Mitchell 1996; Stein 1973). The advent of the railroad was linked to other structural conditions that helped produce and situate the tramp. Many commentators point towards the end of the civil war as a reason for the sudden large, mobile group of homeless people. Reverend Hale (1877), at the 1877 Conference of Charities at Saratoga, claimed that military life had produced men who were hardened to life outdoors, used to living off the land and disposed to not thinking too far into the future. Shortly after the civil war and the construction of the transcontinental railroad came the financial ‘panic’ of 1873, itself a symptom of industrial transformation in the United States. This followed a period of massive stock speculation, rapid expansion of the agricultural West (a product, in part, of the new trans-Mississippi railroad network), a worldwide drop in prices and the collapse of the railroad giants Jay Cooke and Company. The crisis was felt throughout the 1870s in an ongoing depression that threw hundreds of thousands out of work. This was repeated in 1893, when the national economy was threatened by a series of bank failures and industrial collapses, contributing to the ever-growing band of homeless and destitute people looking for work, or just getting by. As with most depressions, the already poor and unskilled, on the margins of the economy, were disproportionately effected. As Monkkonen (1984) has argued, working-class people ‘incorporated tramping as a rational response to underemploy-

ment as well as unemployment’ (Monkkonen 1984, 8). During the financial panic of 1873, for instance, work at the Great Northern Railroad terminal at Duluth, Minnesota ceased and 3700 of the city’s 5000 people left within a month.<sup>2</sup> The period was also marked by unusual levels of labour unrest in the United States, including the strikes of 1877, the Pullman strike of 1894 and the march in 1893 of Coxey’s Army of the unemployed on Washington.<sup>3</sup> All of these were, in one way or another, associated with and blamed on the tramp.

The definition of what constitutes a tramp is a contentious issue. In part, this is because the definition itself was constructed by such images and representations as those discussed in this paper. While I focus on the gendering of the tramp and the way in which that facet of the tramp’s identity (and definition) was constructed through a number of discursive strategies, other facets of the ‘tramp’ label would attract different discussions. It might therefore be helpful to refer to some contemporary definitions. One of the first uses of the word ‘tramp’ as a noun appeared in the *New York Times* in February 1875 (Ringenbach 1973) and was used to describe the homeless unemployed. While such people had previously been referred to as vagrants, the word ‘tramp’ had not been common. It was in the period following the crash of 1873 that the word ‘tramp’ became part of common usage in the United States. The most famous and often-repeated (formal) definition is said to originate from the work of the Chicago anarchist Ben Reitman. Reitman claimed that the general condition of vagrancy is divided into three main classes: bums, tramps and hobos:

A tramp is a man who doesn’t work, who apparently doesn’t want to work, who lives without working and who is constantly travelling. A hobo is a non-skilled, non-employed laborer without money, looking for work. A bum is a man who hangs around a low class saloon and begs or earns a few pennies a day in order to obtain drink. He is usually an inebriate. (cited in Bruns 1987, 44)

This definition was a more elaborate version of that used by men on the road and repeated in a number of contemporary accounts: the hobo was a migratory worker, the tramp a migratory non-worker and the bum a non-migratory non-worker. But such subtle differences were often lost on outside observers, who took anyone riding a freight train to be a tramp and dealt with them accordingly.

Similarly, texts often alternate between the words 'tramp' and 'hobo' for no apparent reason. While mobility united tramps and hobos, work differentiated them. The tramp, according to historian Roger Bruns (1980), turned the Protestant work ethic upside down and worshipped idleness. Another set of contemporary definitions come from law: while vagrancy laws, borrowed wholesale from Britain, had been in existence in the books of most states since their formation, no law explicitly defined tramps until 1876, when New Jersey institutes the first 'tramp law'. Eighteen further states introduced such laws in the next ten years. A tramp was defined as an idle person without employment, a transient person who roamed from place to place and who had no lawful occasion to wander. Making the tramp-railroad connection explicit, the vagrancy law of Massachusetts made riding a freight *prima facie* evidence of trampoohood. Punishment varied from 90 days of hard labour in New Mexico to being sold into servitude for up to a year in Kentucky. In Missouri, the tramp could be hired out to the highest bidder with cash in hand.

In terms of legal definitions, tramps were, in most states, men. Chapter 159 of the general statutes of Connecticut 1902 states that:

All transient persons who rove about from place to place begging, and all vagrants, living without labor or visible means of support, who stroll over the country without lawful occasion, shall be deemed tramps. (Lewis 1907, 13)

Section 1337 makes the link with excessive mobility explicit, stating that:

Any act of begging, or vagrancy, by any person not a resident of this state, shall be *prima facie* evidence that such a person is a tramp.

Finally, Section 1341 points out that:

These provisions shall not apply to any female, or minor under the age of 16 years, nor to any blind person, nor to any beggar roving within the limits of the town in which he resides. (Lewis 1907, 14)

More succinctly, the 1897 code of Iowa, Section 5134 asserts that:

Any male person, sixteen years of age or over, physically able to perform manual labor, who is wandering about, practising common begging, or having no visible calling or business to maintain himself, and is unable to show reasonable efforts in good faith to secure employment, is a tramp. (Lewis 1907, 20)

Technically, then, the majority of tramp laws did not apply to women who, legally, could not be tramps. In the eyes of the court, tramps were men.

Clearly, then, the tramp is a made-up figure who came into existence in around 1870 and disappeared at around the time of the Second World War. The main characteristics of the tramp were said to be mobility over a large, possibly continental, area, and lack of work.<sup>4</sup> It was the mobility in particular that distinguished the tramp from the earlier figure of the vagrant. People did not use the word 'tramp' to refer to homeless people before the option arose to travel the kind of distances that the new railroads allowed.

The connection between the construction of railroads and the existence of tramps is born out in the songs of the new migrants and in the commentary of social observers. Josiah Flynt in *Century Magazine* in 1899 commented that:

the railroads spread the tramp nuisance over a much greater stretch of territory than would be the case if the tramps were limited to the turnpikes. As matters now stand you may see a beggar one day on Fifth Avenue in New York City, and a fortnight later he will accost you in Market Street in San Francisco. (Flynt 1899, 265)

Flynt, and other social commentators postulated that young boys became victims of a 'railroad fever', which gripped them at a young age and doomed them to life on the rails.

By 1880, the whole country was in the middle of what became known as the 'tramp scare' or 'tramp evil', as, displaced by the depressions, people took to the road in search of work. Reactions to the tramp spawned a moral panic in the nation, and newspapers across the land prescribed radical measures for the unwanted wanderers (Allsop 1993). These ranged from poorhouses, to rural character-building labour camps, to doses of arsenic. The 1877 annual meeting of the Conference on Charities suggested similar measures. Vagrancy laws were rewritten all over the country, becoming tramp laws. The moral panic that met the new mobile workers was heavily gendered. The form the threat took was one to home and women. The tramp was clearly supposed to be male.

## The gendering and embodiment of a moral panic

Stories appeared in many states during the years following 1870, describing the threat posed by the



'tramp evil'. In many instances, the general threat was reduced to a specific one against domesticated women and the homes they inhabited. The *Philadelphia Press* of 14 July 1907 reported that, for the preceding two-week period,

the newspapers have each day printed one instance, and often two, of women walking on county roads in and around Philadelphia, or in the rural districts of Eastern Pennsylvania or Southern New Jersey, who have fled in terror from some tramp or vagrant. (quoted in Lewis 1908, 746)

Newspapers were replete with stories of young girls walking in the country being exposed to tramps, or women at home being threatened by a tramp appearing at their doors asking for food or money. These stories were repeated by charity workers and politicians in their quest to have labour camps created or whipping posts restored. Professor Francis Weyland of Yale, in a report on tramps delivered to a conference of the boards of Public Charities in 1877, had described the tramp as,

a lazy shiftless, incorrigible, cowardly, utterly deprived savage . . . he seems to have wholly lost all the better instincts and attributes of manhood. He will outrage an unprotected female, or rob a defenceless child, or burn an isolated barn . . . (Weyland 1877, 112)

Weyland went on to dismiss the possibility of rehabilitation for the tramp. Even the hardened criminal, he argued, could be saved by 'the strength and sacredness of family ties, the love of mother or wife, or child' (112). The tramp, however, by definition, had no such hope of redemption, as he had cut himself off 'from all influences which can minister to his improvement or elevation' (112). A Massachusetts correspondent to the Committee on Tramps reported the reaction of a minister to the presence of tramps in his area. He asserted that:

Twenty years ago any woman within two miles of his church would have been willing to come, without escort, to any evening service in it, and to return home in the same way . . . [now however] no woman in the town would willingly go alone after dark a quarter of a mile from home. (quoted in Katz 1983, 159)

The moment that was portrayed as the biggest threat to women during the tramp scare was when the tramp would come to the door of the house to beg for food or money. The woman at home,

without a husband, was seen as particularly vulnerable. Henry Rood, in the *Forum* in 1889, observed that there were,

few mothers and fewer daughters who, under such circumstances, would refuse to give food or clothing to a burly, unkempt tramp, who accompanied his request with threatening expression. (Rood 1898, 92)

He continued by recounting the story of a representative in congress whose wife insisted that he leave the door to his safe unlocked, as she had seen too many tramps around to feel safe, and would rather be burgled than confronted by a tramp in the middle of the night.

The tramp, then, constituted a moral panic that demanded extreme measures. The tramp was also constituted as a threat that was gendered as masculine, and was primarily portrayed as a young or middle-aged white man. Discourses on respectability at the time painted a happy picture of secure family life as the source of a moral culture that formed the bedrock for social stability. By their homelessness, tramps threatened one of the central images in American ideology and national mythology. The home was seen as the locus for moral individuals and good citizens, and the mother and the home combined to ensure the moral education of the young. It was the time of the *Ladies Home Journal* and the rise of 'domestic science'.<sup>5</sup> The masculine tramp, rootless and wandering, was thus a particularly menacing image. What was threatened were, among other things, the bodies of women and children.

As well as appearing in editorials and learned papers, the tramp was a favourite figure for cartoonists and illustrators. He appeared as either a foolish clown or a hostile threat – sometimes both at once. The tramp was made to appear threatening in these cartoons by placing him at the boundary of the home, usually occupied by a mother and/or child. Take the illustration (Figure 1) from the Exhibition of the Philadelphia Society for Organising Charity in Philadelphia (1916). It is a typical example of the menacing image of the tramp that prevailed in the United States between the mid-1870s and the 1930s. In the picture, we see the dark figure of the tramp at the door of the home, the hearth filled with bright whiteness and inhabited by the silhouette of a woman, her femininity made obvious by the shape of her body. What constitutes the menace here and what is being menaced? Most literally, the woman is being threatened – the body



**Figure 1** Illustration from the Exhibition of the Philadelphia Society for Organising Charity in Philadelphia, 1916

(Courtesy of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania)

of the woman is threatened with rape, the inside by the outside. The anonymous body of the woman is, of course, a sign for a huge array of other comforts imagined from the point of view of men. The home, morality, stability, innocence – all that is sweetness and light. Another illustration, this time from *Harper's Magazine* in 1876 (Figure 2), paints a similar picture. In this illustration, the tramp is both pathetic and threatening – a bedraggled man asking for money or food. The woman, this time less sexualized, protects her child and brandishes a wooden spoon. Outside we can see more men walking past, while inside dinner is cooking and the table is laid – a vision of homeliness. These two pictures represent the often schizophrenic (but logically linked) representations of female sexuality through their respective bodies. While one appears to signify a primarily sexual body, the other is encoded as, first and foremost, a mother in a stable home and hearth. Both of these – the

sexualized body and the maternal body – are threatened by the tramp at the door.

While there is no doubt that women would have felt threatened by the presence of tramps, there is also little doubt that this fear was developed and drawn upon by men in order to amplify the tramp evil and support the need for desperate measures. Such methods may also have had the effect of dissuading women from going outside the home by creating a geography of fear that associated 'outside' with threatening mobile men.

The construction of the tramp evil, then, was dependant in part on a resource of familiar categorizations derived from and reinforcing assumptions about the proper place of men and women. The existence of tramps was understood in terms of schemes of perception. An assumption that prevails in this construction of the tramp evil is that tramps and hobos were all *men*. Recall that tramps were legally defined as men by the various tramp laws instituted by 19 states in the ten-year period following 1876. A similar process of definition was at work in the field of eugenics at the time: eugenicists were fascinated by the world of the tramp or hobo, and sought to provide explanations rooted in heredity for their activities. A leader in the field was Charles Davenport, the director of the Eugenics Record Office and the Station for Experimental Evolution in Long Island. One of his first forays into discussions of Mendelian ratios was his book *The feebly inhibited* (1915). It included his work 'Nomadism, or the wandering impulse, with special reference to heredity', in which he expressed his view that tramps suffered from an inbred desire to wander, which he referred to as Nomadism. In this work, Davenport considered a number of medico-psychological conditions related to the desire to move, and came to the conclusion that nomadism is the result of a simple recessive sex-linked gene associated with a number of psychoses. His workers discovered 168 male nomadics and only 15 female. In the extreme case of tramps and vagabonds, Davenport suggested that 'the inhibitory mechanism is so poorly developed that the nomadic tendency shows itself without waiting, as it were, for the paralysis of the inhibitions' (Davenport 1915, 25). In other words, people who led a nomadic lifestyle were in the same category as babies, 'primitive people' and others who had none of the inhibitions typical of intelligent adults and 'civilized' people. Importantly, then, eugenics came to the conclusion that



Figure 2 Illustration from *Harper's Magazine*, 1876

tramps were genetically disposed to be male, affirming the legal definition of tramps as male. Female tramps, it seems, formed an impossible category.

### Female tramps – an impossible category<sup>6</sup>

It was not only the formality of law and eugenics that had difficulty in admitting the possibility of women riding the rails. The more general construction of the geography of fear around tramps equates a certain type of threatening mobility with masculinity. However, the fact is that not all riders of the rails were men – indeed, a very large number of women took to the road in the period following 1873.

Thomas Minehan (1934, 133) suggested that:

Never does a freight pull out of a large city without carrying some girls, disguised in overalls or army breeches, but just as certainly and just as appallingly homeless as the boys.

A number of social reformers did mention the existence of female tramps in passing, often noting that between 5 and 15 per cent of tramps were female. Based on observations made in 1933, Caplow noted that: 'Both prostitutes and female hobos were on the road in considerable numbers at this time. In addition, between 10 and 25 per cent of the child tramps were girls' (Caplow 1940, 733). Forbes noted the increase in the number of women among the tramp population:

Of late even women have definitely abandoned the discipline of employment and lived as outcasts and wanderers, in defiance of society. But so far the number of female vagrants is negligible, and there seems little danger of individual tendencies developing into a popular movement. (Forbes 1911, 870)

The Chicago anarchist and social reformer, Ben Reitman, did spend some time attempting to gather statistics and information on women on the road. Figures he obtained from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration indicate that around 5 per cent of transients under care

nationwide were women. A survey of 93 women transients recorded by Chicago's Cook County Service Bureau for Transients showed them originating from 31 states, with the largest number (13) being from California. More illuminating than these figures, though, is Reitman's (1937) record of the life of Bertha Thompson, alias Boxcar Bertha, in the book *Sister of the road*.<sup>7</sup> Boxcar Bertha was the nearest a female hobo came to being a romantic heroine. She certainly recounts many meetings with other female hobos on her travels:

The most frequent reason they leave is economic ... they usually come from broken or from poverty-stricken homes. They want to escape from reality, to get away from misery and unpleasant surroundings. (16)

Particularly notable are the numerous references to the ambiguous gender and sexual identities of the sisters of the road. Women that Bertha meets are more often than not dressed as men or look like men in some other way: 'Dorothy Mack', for instance, 'was a stout girl of twenty-four with dark brown eyes and hair combed back from the face like a man's' (52); two other women 'had their hair cut short like men's and at first glance they didn't look much like women' (38) – indeed, one of them was dressed in 'torn men's trousers and shirt' (38). Chicago was the central meeting point for sisters of the road, as it was for men. According to the author of *Sister of the road*,

They came in bronzed from hitch-hiking, in khaki, they came in ragged in men's overalls, having ridden freights, decking mail trains, riding the reefers ... (68)

The observation of women dressed in men's clothing is supported by other social commentators and tramps-turned-writers such as James Forbes:

'Good people' deprecate the admission of women to their ranks. Yet the 'hay bag' (female tramp) is by no means an uncommon type. The best known of her kind is 'Peg Leg Annie' or 'Cow-Catcher Annie' who lost a leg while riding on the pilot of a locomotive. Female tramps usually wear men's clothes to avoid detection by the police. (Forbes 1911, 875)

This gender ambiguity, reflected in clothes, haircuts and the act of mobility itself, brings us back to the story I started with, of the Swedish woman in Minnesota. Railway magazines and newspapers during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were replete with stories of tramps and the threat they posed to trains, passengers and railroad property. Usually the menace was mascu-

line. Occasionally a reference to a female tramp would appear. On 23 April 1880, in the *Railroad Gazette*, the simple heading 'Tramps' was followed by the following story:

A tramp captured at Rahway New Jersey on the platform of a Pullman car on a Pennsylvania train, turned out to be a woman in men's clothes, and was handed over to the police. (*Railroad Gazette* 1880, 127)

More colourfully, the *New York Times* of 7 August 1901 told the story of 'Jimmie McDougall the handsome leader of the large and dreaded band of marauders and tramps who have been the terror of Monroe County farmers', who had been caught and put safely behind bars. He turned out to be a woman. 'Jimmie', the story went on, 'was attired in white cloth shoes, several sizes too large, blue overalls, and a red flannel shirt.' Jimmie claimed that she had 'adopted men's attire to beat her way from Cleveland to Rochester' (*New York Times* 1901, 1). Finally there was the case of Miss Shelly, reported in the *Railway Conductor* magazine in 1901:

Dressed in a ragged pair of trousers, blue flannel shirt and threadbare coat, she would slouch into town in the typical hobo gait, and there levy on the citizens for food, clothing and money in true tramp style. She delighted in having the police on her trail and seemed to get greatest enjoyment out of their peremptory orders to move on to another town. (quoted in Golden 1992, 137)

The description of Miss Shelly focuses on a body that crosses categories. Her movements are described by a 'typical hobo gait', reproducing the traditional image of a slouching, furtive tramp/hobo, never described as 'upright' and certainly not indicative of expectations of female bodily comportment. In addition, her clothing is 'unfeminine', signifying a further threat to traditional categories of masculine and feminine. In many ways the story could have been about a man or a woman – but as Golden (1992) points out, the judgements of her actions are quite different from the usual tales of threat and fear that arise from the transgressions of male tramps:

Pity alone was perhaps the incentive which induced trainmen to permit her to remain upon their trains, but it is safe to say that they felt no necessity of offering her any protection because of her sex. Thus it will be seen that she was wholly without protection, and, if possible, more obnoxious than the male hobo whom she impersonated. (quoted in Golden 1992, 138)

There is a clear sense in this report that Miss Shelly had committed a kind of gender treachery and had thus abrogated her rights as a woman. The trainmen no longer felt it necessary to afford her the protection that her sex would normally demand – the protection (we can assume) that included all the moral trappings of home. Women were supposed to be threatened by and protected from tramps, not to be tramps themselves. Miss Shelly had become worse than a male hobo and wholly without protection. If the picture in Figure 1 uses the female body and the threat of rape as symbols for the threat posed by masculine mobility, then Miss Shelly's disguised body is thoroughly deserving of whatever it gets. Golden's suggestion is that her status, lower than that of a hobo, is that of the prostitute.<sup>8</sup>

#### *Prostitutes, lesbians and loathsome bodies*

In fact, many commentators during the period 1875–1939 referred to female tramps and prostitutes in almost the same breath, often making the assumption that the two were more or less equal. Laubach (1916) claimed that a principle reason for women not becoming 'vagrants' in as great a number as men was that 'they do become the female kind of vagrant, namely, prostitutes, in many instances' (71).<sup>9</sup> Other commentators were more forthright. In reference to female tramps, Noble (1896, 255–6) wrote:

They seem to have no idea of personal purity whatever. I knew of one instance of a woman tramp who was supported by several male tramps with whom she travelled . . . (t)he women on the road seem to be much more irreclaimable than the men. They have less true politeness, less sense of honor, and if dishonest are much more subtle . . . Male agents, as a rule, will be fair with each other and have a strong *esprit de corps*, but for the female agent everything is fish that comes into her net.

Bertha Thompson, in *Sister of the road* (Reitman 1937), notes that many female tramps sell sex for money. Indeed, her 'autobiography' recounts time she spent as a prostitute in Chicago. The theme of prostitution links the experiences of the female tramps with the discussions of the *flâneur/flâneuse*. Elizabeth Wilson and Susan Buck-Morss (Buck-Morss 1986; Wilson 1991) have both made the argument that one of the ways women were able to inhabit the streets of Paris in the nineteenth century was as a prostitute. The mobility of both the street prostitute and the female tramp was thus an

ambiguous mixture of freedom and constraint, expressed in the presentation of their bodies as objects of consumption as well as mobile agents. This, in turn, raises the issue of female mobility, as discussed by Young. Just as the female body never achieves transcendence in the act of throwing, so the mobility of the body of the female tramp is that of an 'object-subject' rather than a 'body-subject'. Their bodies, in other words, can never be interpreted as presentations of pure will and intentionality.

The matter of what clothes to wear when riding the rails was wrapped up in the strategies used by women on the road for dealing with sex and sexual abuse. Rape was apparently a common feature of life for these women. One female tramp recounted her life to a curious reporter:

With a suitcase and a bundle she started on a Southern swing from Washington DC, riding the rails, picking up rides in trucks, walking the highways . . . She never had a female companion on the road. She has slept in the open, starved for days, ridden in box cars with as many as fifty men, camped out at night alone and with men. She has been attacked and raped on several occasions and has given in on several more. She has asked for food, clothes and a chance to wash. She has shared food and money with men. But she has never begged for money, never stood in bread lines, and never taken money for sex. (Reckless 1934, 176)

Reckless is clearly fascinated with tales of sex on the road and encourages his interviewee to expand on the subject. Following a series of stories about meetings on the road where she is either attacked or agrees to sex, she tells him that sex is a constant feature of life on the road for female hobos:

Men on the road never have a woman and when there is a woman they always come around every time . . . It ain't the looks of me but it's just because I'm a woman. (178)

He asks her 'Why don't you travel in knickers?', to which she replies:

I only used them once and gave them away. I would rather travel in a dress. All other women I see on the road wear knickers or pants. I like dresses. They (other hobo women) wear pants so they won't be molested and pass off for men in getting on and off trains. (179)

Female tramps constantly had to negotiate their positions vis-à-vis men while on the road. Strategies adopted included travelling with a male companion, working as a prostitute and disguising their bodies in men's clothes. Occasionally women

would also travel in groups, and there are accounts of a secretive lesbian subculture amongst female tramps (Reitman 1937). Ben Reitman wrote a series of prose poems about the tramps he met in his work. One of these concerned a female tramp called Eve:

Eve was a short, red-headed Jew girl,  
Born in Russia 25 years ago.  
She has a pale, freckled, masculine face  
With an ambitious nose and restless chin.  
...  
She got tired of the New York factory life  
And decided to tramp around the country.  
She had several experiences with men  
But soon found that they had no joy to give her.  
Quite accidentally she slept with a lovely eighteen year  
old  
And suddenly life began to take on new meaning and  
purpose.  
She worked like hell and hoarded her money  
Until she found some female of the right type;  
Then she would pursue and lavish presents and affec-  
tions upon her.  
She traveled around the country in search of types  
And had about twenty affairs with the ladies  
She said, 'Why do you object - what harm am I  
doing?'<sup>10</sup>

At the end of *Sister of the road*, Reitman provides an encyclopaedic appendix of types of female tramps and the causes for their lifestyle. While (as a comparatively radical reformer) he cites economics as the primary reason for their condition, he also lists 'secondary factors', including 'vices' such as drink, dope and 'sex irregularities' - 'the nymphomaniacs, the masturbators, those who run away to have an abortion, well marked homosexuals, perverts' (Reitman 1937, 283). *Sister of the road* is full of references to the sexual activities of both men and women on the road. For the most part, references to a lesbian subculture are hints rather than clear descriptions. At one point, Bertha gives an account of homosexuality on the road, pointing out that the tea shops and bootleg joints of the near northside of Chicago were something of a node for homosexual tramps. She became acquainted with one such tramp who called herself 'Yvonne the Tzigane': Yvonne claimed to be a gypsy and migratory entertainer who originated from Paris,

Her first trip from coast to coast in 1925 took her eighteen days. When she was thirteen years old she was seduced by a woman and lived with her for two years. Since then she had several lesbian relationships

which lasted various lengths of time . . . She said there were a number of lesbians on the road and usually they travelled in small groups. (Reitman 1937, 66)

In addition to lesbians, Bertha notes a high incidence of bisexual women who led a tramping life. Occasionally, such people would have 'women sweethearts' but earn money through prostitution. Bertha indicates that the number of lesbian couples on the road together is quite high (Reitman 1937, 69). These hints at a lesbian subculture begin to indicate some of the subversiveness of the female tramp. While the gendering of the tramp scare was based (in part) on familiar sets of categorizations and assumptions about private and public space, home and away, the women tramps were developing identities that challenged the core values of American society in ways that even the male tramp could not.<sup>11</sup>

However, the majority of these women constantly had to negotiate their sexuality in relation to the men they would undoubtedly meet. Their sexuality was often controlled in 'an objectified and externalised way' (Golden 1992, 136) while trying to avoid rape, and they used their bodies as a form of mobile capital.

A footnote here, of course, is that the contemporary use of the word 'tramp' to describe a woman means prostitute. Note, though, that Miss Shelly attracted the trainman's pity and was thus allowed to remain on the train; even though they felt no need to protect her because of her sex, they did react differently to her as a woman than they would if she had been a male hobo. As is usually the case with women on the road, reactions are riddled with ambivalence and ambiguity, as observers try to maintain the categories they are accustomed to even as such categories are transgressed before their eyes.

The very idea of a female hobo was ludicrous to some observers. Cliff Maxwell (1929), writing in *Scribners* magazine, made an explicit connection between the hobo lifestyle and its masculinity. He declared that:

The hobo deliberately chooses a life of hardship, privation, poverty and ostracism; because, without the money to pay his way he must beat it, and beating his way on the railroads he becomes in the eyes of the law a minor criminal and is treated as such by the municipal authorities and citizens alike. In short his life as a hobo is everything that life shouldn't be. This, in itself, is argument enough against any woman ever becoming a chronic hobo. (Maxwell 1929, 289)

The hobo lifestyle, then, was one for men that was logically inappropriate for women. It was thus impossible for a woman to be a hobo. 'Show me a lady hobo' wrote Maxwell, 'and I'll show you an angular bodied, flint eyed, masculine travesty upon her sex' (292).

Maxwell appears to have been faced with a crisis in the logic of the category. Female hobos, if they existed, would be 'travesties' – bodies containing a mixture of unlike attributes to produce an unnerving (for him) and unlikely hybrid. Perhaps such thoughts indicate his belief that female tramps were lesbians. Returning to Miss Shelly again, it is surely possible that the anxious commentator in the *Railroad Gazette* was suggesting not so much that she was a prostitute, as Golden proposes, but that she was a lesbian. Marjorie Garber's (1992) wonderful history of cross-dressing, *Vested interests*, maps the ongoing cultural anxiety produced by bodies whose gender is not immediately identifiable. It is suggested that the transvestite, or female dressed as a male, embodies an ongoing crisis of a dualistic categorization at the heart of human culture – that of man and woman:

one of the most important aspects of cross-dressing is the way in which it offers a challenge to easy notions of binarity, putting into question the categories of 'female' and 'male', whether they are considered essential or constructed, biological or cultural. (Garber 1992, 10)

Mobility adds another layer to this observation, as women were not supposed to lead a life on the road, just as they were not supposed to wear men's clothes. The combination of clothing and the spatiality of these women's lives led to fundamental crises in onlookers' ability to categorize them. Labels such as 'prostitute' and 'lesbian' allowed observers to regain a sense of order. For women to take to the road, then, was, in the eyes of Cliff Maxwell and others, essentially to renege on being a woman. The categories that existed in early twentieth-century America had no place for the poor female wanderer. Bodies, as Grosz has argued:

*speak*, without necessarily talking, because they become coded with and as signs. They speak social codes. They become *intextuated*, narrativized; simultaneously, social codes, laws, norms, and ideals become *incarnated*. (Grosz 1993, 199, italics in original)

Here, Grosz is referring to how meaning is inscribed onto bodies. Clothing is just one way in which bodies are marked, thus binding them to

'systems of significance in which they become signs to be read' (199). Mobility, too, as Young has shown, provides meanings and norms that allow social categorizations to be incorporated into the very physiology of the body. The presence of the disreputable bodies of female tramps triggers a categorization crisis. The codes, norms and ideals that Grosz mentions were transgressed by female tramps, and observers sought to instate understandings – reinscriptions – that brought the women back into the realm of legibility. Categories such as 'lesbian' and 'prostitute' served to fit the tramp's bodies back into texts and codes that were in some sense known. Indeed, Elizabeth Wilson (1995) has suggested that the figure of the prostitute was used to stand for any 'public woman' who, by their public existence, threatened male power and frailty.

One attempt to classify female tramps – to codify their bodies – was made by Ben Reitman at the end of *Sister of the road*. He focuses on both external and internal characteristics of their bodies. Internally, they are, in Reitman's eyes, likely to have syphilis, wasting diseases, handicaps and 'glandular disturbances', in addition to a whole host of psychoses. Externally, they are marked by 'deformities and lack of physical attraction'. His list (Reitman 1937, 283) includes:

- 1 Consciousness of lack of attraction and beauty.
- 2 Deformities, handicaps and injuries.
- 3 Extremes of leanness and stoutness.
- 4 Extremes of shortness or tallness.
- 5 Extreme awkwardness – 'Miss Gawky'.
- 6 Cross-eyes and eye lesions.
- 7 Hypertrichosis (excessive growth of hair) and Hypotrichosis (slight growth of hair).
- 8 The tiny and massive breast.
- 9 A natural appearance of being unkempt, tough and unpleasant.'

Iris Marion Young's discussions of embodiment have shown how the body is central to dominant cultural designations of certain groups as the 'other'. Such groups are frequently constructed through their bodies, according to standards that designate them as 'drab, ugly, loathsome, impure, sick or deviant' (Young 1990, 123). Clearly, Reitman is implicated here in the reinscription of the female tramp's body. Just as the labels 'prostitute' and 'lesbian' seek to make sense of the female tramp, so too does the list of bodily characteristics that serves to label them as 'other'.

The use of terms like 'prostitute' and the description of loathsome bodies point towards the threat posed by women on the road. Post-structuralist accounts of the gendered body highlight exactly this potential for bodies to transgress the categories that attempt to produce them in the first place. While Bourdieu's neo-structuralist account reveals how the body recreates the categories that are inscribed on it, post-structuralist feminist accounts tend to point out how bodies frequently refuse and complicate such inscription. For Judith Butler, for instance, the key question is how configurations of power construct the subject through the binary relations of man and woman. She wonders,

What happens to the subject and to the stability of gender categories when the epistemic regime of presumptive heterosexuality is unmasked as that which produces and reifies these ostensible categories of ontology? (1990, viii)

In the observations of female tramps I have recounted, 'these ostensible categories of ontology' are clearly being brought into question. The discovery of cross-dressing tramps and the questioning of their sexuality produces panic in anxious observers. In the troubled words of Cliff Maxwell and others, there is a clear attempt to reinstate dearly held categories before they fall apart. Such 'gender trouble' allows us to begin what Butler, following Foucault, calls a genealogical critique – an investigation of,

the political stakes in designating as an origin and cause those identity categories that are in fact the effects of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin. (1990, ix)

In some ways, Butler's project shares some of Bourdieu's concerns. She is, for instance, interested in the way in which constructed categories are naturalized through repeated performance. As Gillian Rose has argued, Butler has delineated how 'discursive power performs its productive effect through its reiteration of naturalizing forms; it enacts what it names' (Rose 1996, 58). Gender and the moral geography that equates mobility with masculinity is constructed through performance (or, in Bourdieu's terms, practice). Cross-dressed female tramps are using their bodies to perform a transgressive role that disrupts the easy inscription of gendered bodies, and thus produces a categorization crisis. 'Gender trouble' occurs when bodies are not in compliance and the bodies of Miss Shelly

and others are out of compliance in a number of ways that connect mobility to clothing and to sexuality.

Elizabeth Grosz has described the idea of a body as a site of social inscription – as a bodymap. Material power, she argues, makes up social bodies that, through their practices, produce forms of consciousness. The body, to Grosz, is constantly the object of power in so far as it is 'the strategic target of systems of codification, supervision and constraint' (Grosz 1990, 64). Yet, crucially, the body in Grosz is never fully controllable and thus frequently becomes a threat to these 'systems of codification, supervision and constraint'. Bodies such as those of female tramps are never fully inscribed and often produce effects that defy attempted inscriptions. Bodies, in other words, produce their own effects that travel beyond the confines of those who seek to insert them into easy categories:

As well as being the site of knowledge-power, the body is thus also a site of *resistance*, for it exerts a recalcitrance, and always entails the possibility of a counter-strategic reinscription, for it is capable of being self-marked, self-represented in alternative ways. (Grosz 1990, 64)

## Conclusions

Chicago sociologist Nels Anderson (1923) produced possibly the most famous account of the American hobo. Very little reference is made in it to women, except in relation to sexual outlets for male hobos. They do appear, however, in one of those endless classification schemes so beloved of turn-of-the-century social scientists. In a classification of hobos, women appear under Category 5, appropriately titled 'Others'. This category, so central to post-structuralists at the end of the twentieth century, also includes the insane, people with venereal disease and dope-fiends. In a further subcategorization, women tramps are divided into prostitutes, dope-fiends and drunks and mental defectives. Women on the road appear to have produced a categorization problem for the noted sociologist in much the same way as they did for Cliff Maxwell and the captors of Miss Shelly. The female tramp simply does not fit in. In many ways, she produces in anxious male observers a crisis of the male/female binary and a crisis of category itself. Female tramps are clearly outside the normal spaces and social roles ascribed to women, and neither do they fit into the male world of the



tramp/hobo. Female tramps are perceived as a community of double outsiders – a neither/nor group on the margins of a margin.

What, then, of the aims I set out at the beginning of this paper? Clearly the world of the female tramp/hobo adds empirically to previous discussions of women who travel. The contrast between the imperial woman traveller such as Mary Kingsley and the female tramp could not be more stark. It is a contrast that is reflected in the bodies (haircuts, clothing, levels of comfort) of the two groups. While Mary Kingsley and others emphasized their femininity in order to carry with them some of the privileges that came with imperial travel, female tramps often dressed in a masculine manner in order to avoid the attention of the men with whom they travelled. They had very few 'privileges' to begin with, as poor, working-class women. Indeed, the embodiment of mobility in the female tramp points towards the differential politics of mobility. Just as mobility is carried through the bodies of women in their everyday movements (as Young and Bourdieu have suggested) in ways that differentiate them from men, so too do the movements of female tramps across the United States indicate the different ways in which new forms of mobility are activated by different bodies.

Finally, the lives female tramps led and the reactions to them point towards both the ways in which bodies are given meaning through the deployment of categories such as 'prostitute' and how people are able to deploy their bodies in ways that transgress the categories that are imposed on them. The inscription of the body is never a completed task, but one that needs revision and re-inscription in order to bring disruptive influences back into the fold of intelligibility.

### Acknowledgements

I am grateful to David Atkinson, Catherine Nash, Karen Morin and the anonymous referees for their help, advice and encouragement. This paper has also benefited from the questions and queries of seminar participants at the University of Kentucky, Harvard and the Newberry Library. I also acknowledge support from the British Academy.

### Notes

- 1 The term 'Victorian lady traveller' has been widely used to describe such people. It is a term that overly

generalizes the various positions of a number of women who actually had quite different experiences of movement (for a critique of this term, see Mills 1991). I use the term 'imperial lady traveller' to denote a literature about women travelling from imperial centres into the empire during the nineteenth century. Morin (1995) divides such accounts into celebratory modernist travel adventure accounts and critical post-structuralist accounts.

- 2 The Great Northern Railroad was owned and operated by Jay Cooke, the man whose company's failure was responsible for the panic in the first place (see Monkkonen 1984).
- 3 For economic and historical accounts of the tramp, see Monkkonen (1984) and Ringenbach (1973).
- 4 While the work versus non-work distinction made sense to many of the tramps and hobos themselves and to some social reformers, it did not mean much to other observers, who simply classed them together as a new breed of supermobile itinerants. Thus the words 'hobo' and 'tramp' are used interchangeably in many of my sources and in my own text.
- 5 A full discussion of 'home' is beyond the remit of this paper, but for an interesting recent account of feminist conceptualizations of home, see Young (1997, Chapter VII).
- 6 The literature on female tramps is not vast, reflecting the common perception that tramps are men. See, however, Golden (1992) and Weiner (1984).
- 7 *Sister of the road* is actually written by Chicago reformer Ben Reitman, despite its claim to be an autobiography. The cover reads 'Sister of the road: the autobiography of Boxcar Bertha. As told by Ben L. Reitman'.
- 8 The reactions to Miss Shelly and other female tramps dressed as men also seems to have created a kind of 'cultural anxiety' often seen in relation to cross-dressing. For a detailed history of such reactions, see Garber (1992).
- 9 Interestingly, Laubach (1916, 71) also makes the claim that:

most women do not have the same roving disposition as men. It has been men who have done most of the exploring in history, who have manifested most of the spirit of adventure and love of taking chances, and who have constituted the radical wing of society, while women have been domestic and conservative. It may be that *wanderlust* is an allurements to which the male sex is most susceptible.

- 10 This account is to be found in the Reitman archives at the Circle Library in the University of Illinois, Chicago – Supplement I, Box 96 – Outcast narrative number 61.
- 11 As with most accounts of subordinated social groups, it is very difficult to establish their own views of themselves through the historical archive. These

women were most often poor and illiterate and unlikely to have the time or inclination to tell their own stories in written form. What we have, then, are a series of female tramp autobiographical accounts that are heavily refracted through a number of lenses. *Sister of the road* is actually told by Ben Reitman and is probably as much about him as it is about her. Other accounts are actually by middle-class women who take to the road as a picturesque adventure (Lynn 1917; Starke 1931).

## References

- Abler R Adams J and Gould P** 1971 *Spatial organization: the geographer's view of the world* Prentice Hall, Englewood Cliffs NJ
- Agnew J** 1987 *The United States in the world economy* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Allsop K** 1993 *Hard travellin': the story of the migrant worker* Pimlico, London
- Anderson N** 1923 *The hobo: the sociology of the homeless man* University of Chicago Press, Chicago
- Berman M** 1988 *All that is solid melts into air: the experience of modernity* Penguin, Harmondsworth
- Blunt A** 1994 *Travel, gender and imperialism: Mary Kingsley and West Africa* Guilford Press, New York
- Blunt A and Rose G** 1994 Introduction: women's colonial and postcolonial geographies in **Blunt A and Rose G** eds *Writing women and space: colonial and postcolonial geographies* Guilford Press, New York 1–25
- Bourdieu P** 1985 From rules to strategies: an interview with Pierre Bourdieu *Cultural Anthropology* 1 1 110–20
- 1990 *The logic of practice* Stanford University Press, Stanford CA
- Bruns R** 1980 *Knights of the road: a hobo history* Methuen, New York
- 1987 *The damndest radical: the life and world of Ben Reitman, Chicago's celebrated social reformer, hobo king, and whorehouse physician* University of Illinois Press, Urbana
- Buck-Morss S** 1986 The flâneur, the sandwichman and the whore: the politics of loitering *New German Critique* 39 99–141
- Butler J** 1990 *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* Routledge, London
- 1996 Performativity's social magic in **Schatzki T and Natter W** eds *The social and political body* Guilford Press, New York 29–48
- Caplow T** 1940 Transiency as a cultural pattern *American Sociological Review* 5 5 731–9
- Chambers I** 1994 *Migrancy, culture, identity* Routledge, London
- Clifford J** 1992 Traveling cultures in **Grossberg L Nelson C and Treichler P** eds *Cultural studies* Routledge, London 96–111
- Cresswell T** 1993 Mobility as resistance: a geographical reading of Kerouac's 'On the road' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 18 2 249–62
- Davenport C** 1915 *The feebly inhibited: nomadism, or the wandering impulse, with special reference to heredity* Carnegie Institution, Washington DC
- Deegan M** 1987 The female pedestrian; the dramaturgy of structural and experiential barriers in the street *Man-Environment Systems* 17 79–86
- Domosh M** 1991 Toward a feminist historiography of geography *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 16 95–104
- Epstein J and Straub K** 1991 Introduction: the guarded body in **Epstein J and Straub K** eds *Body guards: the cultural politics of gender ambiguity* Routledge, London 1–28
- Flynt J** 1899 The tramp and the railroad *Century Magazine* 58 258–66
- Forbes J** 1911 The tramp; or, caste in the jungle *Outlook* 98 (19 August) 869–75
- Garber M** 1992 *Vested interests: cross-dressing and cultural anxiety* Routledge, London
- Golden S** 1992 *The woman outside: myths and meanings of homelessness* University of California Press, Berkeley
- Grosz E** 1990 Inscriptions and body-maps: representations and the corporeal in **Threadgold T and Cranny-Francis A** eds *Feminine/masculine and representation* Allen and Unwin, London 62–74
- 1993 Bodies and knowledges: feminism and the crisis of reason in **Alcoff L and Potter E** eds *Feminist epistemologies* Routledge, London 187–215
- 1994 *Volatile bodies: towards a corporeal feminism* Indiana University Press, Bloomington
- Hagerstrand T** 1967 *Innovation diffusion as a spatial process* University of Chicago Press, Chicago
- Hale E** 1877 Reports on tramps *National Conference on Charities and Corrections* IV 102–10
- Ingemanson B** 1993 Under cover: the paradox of Victorian women's travel costume in **Frederick B and McLeod S** eds *Women and the journey: the female travel experience* Washington State University Press, Pullman 5–24
- Katz M** 1983 *Poverty and policy in American history* Academic Press, New York
- Laubach F** 1916 Why there are vagrants Unpublished PhD thesis Faculty of Political Science, Columbia University
- Lewis O** 1907 *Vagrancy in the United States* Self-published, New York
- 1908 The American tramp *Atlantic Monthly* 101 744–53
- Lowe J and Moryadas S** 1975 *The geography of movement* Houghton Mifflin, Boston
- Lynn E** 1917 *The adventures of a woman hobo* George H Doran Company, New York
- Maxwell C** 1929 Lady vagabonds *Scribners* March 288–92

- McDowell L** 1995 Bodywork: heterosexual gender performances in city workplaces in **Bell D and Valentine G** ed *Mapping desire: geographies of sexualities* Routledge, London 75–95
- 1996a Off the road: alternative views of rebellion, resistance, and the 'beats' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 21 2 412–19
- 1996b Spatializing feminism: geographic perspectives in **Duncan N** ed *BodySpace* Routledge, London 28–44
- Merleau-Ponty M** 1962 *The phenomenology of perception* Routledge and Kegan Paul, London
- Mills S** 1991 *Discourses of difference* Routledge, London
- Milroy B and Wismer S** 1994 Communities, work and public/private sphere models *Gender, Place and Culture* 1 71–90
- Minehan T** 1934 *Boy and girl tramps of America* Farrar and Rhinehart, New York
- Minneapolis Tribune** 1886 Untitled note 11 June 5
- Mitchell D** 1996 *The lie of the land: migrant workers and the California landscape* University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis
- Monkkonen E** ed 1984 *Walking to work: tramps in America 1790–1935* University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln
- Morin K** 1995 A 'female Columbus' in 1887 America: marking new social territory *Gender, Place and Culture* 2 2 191–208
- Morris M** 1988 At Henry Parkes' motel *Cultural Studies* 2 11–24
- New York Times** 1901 Tramps' leader found to be a woman 7 August 1
- Noble C W** 1896 The border land of trampdom *Popular Science Monthly* 50 252–8
- Pain R** 1991 Space, sexual violence and social control; integrating geographical and feminist analysis of women's fear of crime *Progress in Human Geography* 15 4 415–31
- Railroad Gazette** 1880 Tramps 23 April 127
- Reckless W C** 1934 Why women become hoboos *American Mercury* 31 122 175–80
- Reitman B** 1937 *Sister of the road: the autobiography of Boxcar Bertha* Sheridan House, New York
- Ringenbach P** 1973 *Tramps and reformers 1873–1916* Greenwood Press, Westport CT
- Robbins W G** 1994 *Colony and empire: the capitalist transformation of the American West* University Press of Kansas, Lawrence
- Robertson G Tickner L and Bird J** eds 1994 *Travellers' tales* Routledge, London
- Robinson J** 1989 *Wayward women: a guide to women travellers* Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Rood H** 1898 The tramp problem: a remedy *Forum* 25 90–94
- Rose G** 1996 As if the mirror had bled: masculine dwelling, masculinist theory and feminist masquerade in **Duncan N** ed *BodySpace* Routledge, London 56–74
- Russell M** 1986 *The blessings of a good thick skirt: women travellers and their world* Collins, London
- Ryan M** 1990 *Women in public: between banners and ballots, 1825–1880* Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore MD
- Sibley D** 1995 *Geographies of exclusion* Routledge, London
- Starke B** 1931 *Touch and go: the story of a girl's escape* Jonathan Cape, London
- Stein W J** 1973 *California and the dust bowl migration* Greenwood Press, Westport CT
- Stevenson C** 1982 *Victorian women travel writers in Africa* Twayne, Boston
- Valentine G** 1989 The geography of women's fear *Area* 21 4 385–90
- Weiner L** 1984 Sisters of the road: women transients and tramps in **Monkkonen E H** ed *Walking to work: tramps in America 1790–1935* University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln 189–211
- Weyland F** 1877 The tramp question *National Conference on Charities and Corrections* IV 111–33
- Wilson E** 1991 *The sphinx in the city* University of California Press, Berkeley
- 1995 The invisible flâneur in **Watson S and Gibson K** eds *Postmodern cities and spaces* Blackwell, Oxford 59–79
- Wolff J** 1990 The invisible flâneuse: women and the literature of modernity in **Wolff J** ed *Feminine sentences: essays on women and culture* Polity Press, Oxford 34–50
- 1992 On the road again: metaphors of travel in cultural criticism *Cultural Studies* 6 224–39
- Young I M** 1990 *Throwing like a girl and other essays in feminist philosophy and social theory* Indiana University Press, Bloomington
- 1997 *Intersecting voices: dilemmas of gender, political philosophy and policy* Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ