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Agency and Community in Sister of the Road and Down & Out in Paris & London

"To hell with such a society," "We must, somehow, destroy it, if we have to be thieves, crooks, weaklings and slaves just to exist! Who can remain quiet and peace-loving and be content just to vote. Even now in these deadly days of depression, all we have out of the chaos is the rich growing richer and more powerful and more arrogant and the bulk of the poor growing more submissive and adapting themselves by force to a lower scale of living! The only hope I see left is the refusal of the transient type to take what is given them. You and your kind are the only ones left with a real sense of freedom in American."

The demand for change exhibited in this quote from Sister of the Road contrasts starkly with the bleak attitude Orwell has about the life of transients. In all cases this underclass is a result of many variables from being born into poverty, being a minority in terms of racial, sexual, religious, or political identity, but were all made worse by periods of economic depression. Yet these two accounts paint very different images of the life that followed. Orwell's portrayal of vagrants and transients appears to be negatively colored due to a lack of tools that are employed by Bertha. The American scene of vagrants is reliant on thievery, personal ties, and political networks.

"The books I had read and the professors I had talked to gave the world the impression that professional criminals were entirely different from normal people. They inferred that crooks looked and dressed differently and had a language all their own, but this was not my experience." (Reitman) Orwell presents a similar view of the bourgeois' fear of vagrants and mobs of unemployed, stating that a vagrant is simply a British man without a job. Yet they respond very differently to this error. Orwell still does not condone begging and thievery and starves or ends up homeless rather than accepting a less than honest living. Even when he loses his last cents, Orwell is constantly calculating what belongings he has got, and how far his material things can take him. Bertha speaks little of what belongings she carries, aside from gifts she receives during her relationship with Otto, and appears less concerned with the specifics of her possessions. Bertha learned not to be ashamed of thievery, and became accustomed to stealing food and necessities while Orwell did not.

However, by omitting details of roach infested quarters and days of starvation is Reitman romanticizing a truly awful existence? If not, what made Bertha's living quality better than Orwells? It appears that stealing was one helpful tool. But even for the times that Orwell and Bertha were employed, it is interesting to think about who was paying, and supporting the livelihoods of the vagrants. Orwell succeeds in restaurant work thanks to a bustling tourism industry, while Bertha benefits more from individual men: doctors, scientists who hire her on, as well as by all sorts of middle class men who buy the services of prostitutes. But thievery alone, is not enough to keep a transient clothed, fed, housed, as well as happy and motivated. There are agreements among workers, and outsiders of various identities, as well as information pools and community places that keep spirits high for Bertha, the lack of which leave Orwell depressed and exhausted. He sees groups of people and individuals who are unable to understand that they share a common concern, condemning themselves to individual enslavement, the best example being waiters' belief that they have more in common with patrons than plongeurs. Whereas the outsiders in Reitman's Sister of the Road seem able to commingle and at least tolerate each other, if not share political ideas and actions. Even the prostitutes, although exploited by pimps, drivers, and other middlemen, have standards of decency and proper payment between themselves that allow them all to make a fair trade from their work, an informal union of sorts.

American underclass nomads also benefited from decentralized but organized information sources including the network of Hobo Colleges. In many ways, a Hobo College is like a college, more like the most radical liberal arts college (Nonstop?) than any other, offering not only basic survival help, but a haven of information and education for critical, free-thinking individuals. By the time Bertha was dabbling in social work, she knew that all transients (especially women) needed access to information about meals, comfortable

lodging, jobs, prophylactics, healthcare, and transportation. The same basic needs a government would attempt to aid its citizens in, but in some cases fall short. When the system fails, outsiders of different marginalized groups and affiliations have historically created their own networks, from Hobo Colleges to the social programs of the Black Panther Party. This sort of underground networking and recognition of each other is something the vagrants and impoverished of Orwell's Paris seem to lack. In *Down & Out*, Orwell's vagrants never seem to progress past drunken Patriotism and socialist rants.

In *Sister of the Road* even boarding houses are not mere dormitories, but "a training school for female roughneck anarchists," (142) with noted artists and activists passing in and out. Her own Home Colony was filled with railroad hands and I.W.W. men and "Every night there would be a discussion about sex and strikes and socialism." (15) There were many opportunities for education, from books to lecturers, as well as required work from everyone.

Bertha's political strength and personal welfare was also benefited by having a geographically expansive group of friends, and by making bonds easily. A thread throughout *Sister of the Road* is a question of whether Bertha will choose love of a person (Baby Dear or a lover) or love of the people. Reitman portrays this as an irresolvable paradox. However, Orwell seems to lack love for the people, or for a person. Although there are characters and relationships in Orwell's tale, from the irritating Charlie to his friend Boris, he focuses less on any emotional bonds and consequences of relationships, than on information such as the number of francs in his pocket. The resulting symptoms of near starvation and ill health were detrimental to relationships, igniting petty arguments and leaving energy for little less than survival, let alone political organization and bond building.

Boxcar Bertha notes that underclass transients share a wanderlust with the upper class, made distinct only by economic means of achieving mobility. "The rich can become globe-trotters, but those who have no money become hoboes." (17) With the upper classes the American and British vagrants share a number of other features including a need for friendship and love, agency, and community. Their ability to fulfill those needs plays large part in the experience of transient individuals, and is markedly important for survival. In this example, the only difference between vagrants and the rich is that without a concern for physical survival, the bourgeois is able to hide apathy and loneliness behind dinner parties and vacation homes.