

# *Vancouver Through the Eyes of a Hobo: Experience, Identity, and Value in the Writing of Canada's Depression-Era Tramps*

Todd McCallum

It came to an end; the mouths opened by themselves.... What a downfall! For the fathers, we alone were the speakers; the sons no longer even consider us as valid intermediaries: we are the objects of their speech.

Jean-Paul Sartre, preface to Frantz Fanon's  
*The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961<sup>1</sup>

IN THE AUTUMN OF 1930, after exhausting all possible avenues of support, Harold Whyte slept outdoors in the False Creek area of Vancouver, British Columbia, fashioning his bed from abandoned wooden boards.<sup>2</sup> The civic Relief Department had already refused his requests for relief on several occasions, the last time after he met in person with the Relief and Employment Committee. Recognizing that his prospects for justice were now slim, Mr. Whyte broke with the time-honoured convention of deference to those with political power, authoring a blistering missive to Alderman Atherton, the committee's chair. "I have been trying for some time," he began, "to be given a chance or at least a fair hearing. but so far I havent found a politician in Canada big enough to grant the request that them selfs should have attended to with out any effort on my part." At his meeting with the committee, Mr. Whyte had found it difficult to convey his needs, since it was "the hardest task" to "plead ones own case." Nor had he had anything to eat in the preceding 24 hours,

<sup>1</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, Preface to Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York 1968), 7, 10.

<sup>2</sup>Vancouver City Archives [VCA], City Clerks' Papers, Series 20, Box 15-C-1, File 2, Harold Whyte to Alderman Asherton [sic], 23 October 1930. Subsequent quotations are from this letter; the original language has been maintained throughout.

Todd McCallum, "*Vancouver Through the Eyes of a Hobo: Experience, Identity, and Value in the Writing of Canada's Depression-Era Tramps*," *Labour/Le Travail*, 59 (Spring 2007), 43-68.



“A Tramp Waiting for a Photographer to Leave So That He Can Return to Dreaming.” Courtesy City of Vancouver Archives, CVA 677-382.

and was thus “in no shape to stand the hot air and BS” coming from the committee, “about as dirty a bunch of politicians as ever stepped in shoe leather.” “I always knew you were a bunch of fox,” he asserted, “but did not know you were such dam cowards.” Following this inauspicious beginning, the bulk of his letter darted from topic to topic: the “childish excuses” of department officials; the substantial sums allotted by the provincial government for unemployment relief, a share of which Mr. Whyte rightly deserved; and the fraud perpetrated by a former convict just “out of the can” who collected municipal relief in Vancouver while living in the interior of the province.

With both subject matter and tone, Mr. Whyte acknowledged the trifling value of his letter for its prospective readers. Still, he remained confident of his ability to extract a measure of justice from the committee, a “bunch of blood suckers that will

stop at nothing.” He had, after all, faced down the Devil himself: “I will now close by quoting the dream I had the night of Oct 13 & 14 on the soft side of a plank in a mill on old false creek here goes I dreamt I had moraged my self to the devil and he called to foreclose. I asked him for another chance. he replied Ill give two and if you can name one thing I can not do you are free.” A battle with the Devil, politicians as vampires: it takes little imagination to see that Mr. Whyte’s dreams weighed like a nightmare on the brain of the living. For his first attempt, he asked the Devil if he could name a “dirtyier black mail sheet” than *Information*, a local manifestation of the yellow press. The Devil responded by recalling how the *Vancouver Sun* had reversed its opposition to monopolies after the new owner of the BC Electric Railway Company, Sir Herbert Holt, purchased large amounts of advertising space in the paper to dry the “crocodile tears” it shed on the editorial page. Mr. Whyte had lost the first round, causing him to despair:

there I stood on the brink of Hell had given up hope. I turned to him and said I guess youve got me. but be for I take the leap I would like to know if there are on earth a cheaper bunch of blood sucking politicians then in vancouver BC as I looked at the devil his face turned red his eyes rolled in the top of his head. and the last words he said as he fell dead was it cant be did. it can not be did.<sup>3</sup>

Harold Whyte had gloriously vanquished the Devil. Unfortunately, Vancouver’s Relief and Employment Committee proved a tougher adversary, voting to take “no action” on this letter “of an abusive character.”<sup>4</sup>

Mr. Whyte’s dream is a wonderful example of the profound emotional impact that unemployment and homelessness could have, and of the powerful allegories of resistance nourished in their soil. In articulating his exploitation at the hands of state officials in overtly religious terms, Mr. Whyte was not alone. As Michael Taussig and others observe, wage workers on the colonial peripheries of capitalist development often reconfigured their exploitative encounter with the emerging capitalist order through mythic tales of Devil figures and Hell.<sup>5</sup> In the metropolis, the experience of North America’s jobless and homeless transients — who starved amid excess because of a series of economic calamities seemingly beyond human control — produced in some a similarly intense estrangement from the ruling order.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>VCA, City Clerks’ Papers, Series 33, Volume 61, Minutes of the Relief and Employment Committee, 27 October 1930.

<sup>5</sup>The classic statement on this relationship is Michael T. Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America* (Chapel Hill 1980). Useful recent discussions can be found in Bryan Palmer, “Working for the Devil: Dark Dimensions of Exploitation,” in *Cultures of Darkness: Night Travels in the Histories of Transgression* (New York 2000), 257-274; Andrew Smith, “Reading Wealth in Nigeria: Occult Capitalism and Marx’s Vampires,” *Historical Materialism*, 9 (2001), 39-59; Steve Shapiro, “Capitalist Monsters,” *Historical Materialism*, 10 (2002), 281-290.

Unemployment thus entered many 1930s narratives as an overwhelming force, irrevocably transforming lives with a power reminiscent of a vengeful, Old Testament God. The apocalyptic visions that visited Mr. Whyte during his nights on a makeshift wooden bed, propertyless but not without a *Weltanschauung* to call his own, explained both the present erosion and the coming restoration of value: this was a dialectic of dehumanization and transcendence.

In committing to paper these fragments of a life story, Mr. Whyte produced an account of experience that is the stuff of social history. In recent years, “experience” in this Thompsonian sense has been one of the key targets of the poststructuralist critique of social history. In an oft-cited article in the *Canadian Historical Review*, Joy Parr captures the antihumanist sentiments that inform this critique. On one hand, Parr cautions against a facile acceptance of life stories at face value:

Historical portraits of experience told us much, but unmistakably these were portraits. They were rendered in the style of their time, products of hierarchically ordered understandings rather than pristine data against which those understandings could be definitively tested. They were interpretations, reclamations of sensations which first had been organized and then claimed as experience ...<sup>6</sup>

With this statement most historians would agree, mindful as we are of the myriad conflicts of the past decades, waged in lecture halls and seminar rooms, in bars and around kitchen tables, about how best to place these “portraits of experience” within broader narratives of the past. Seen through this lens, Mr. Whyte’s letter is not so much a “pristine” account of the sum total of his life — what other types of experience, we might wonder, led him to his improvised bed on False Creek? — as an interpretation of the aspects of that life that struck him as relevant to the matter at hand, the condemnation of Vancouver relief officials.

Yet, Parr’s critique goes deeper than this. The dilemma, as she sees it, is not that accounts of experience are themselves historical and in need of careful treatment. Instead, experience itself is reconfigured as a consequence of already existing discourses; the latter, and not the former, are the proper subject of our inquiries:

Experience was not foundational or originary. It did not come from “outside the loop.” Meaning preceded experience, and people had experiences, sorted and selectively registered sensations, through learned systems of meaning.... Experiences are formed through webs of connected meanings. They are organized by understandings about what parts of life have influence on one another and what parts are elements from some other story. They are made of combinations known in advance to be fitting or anomalous, fortuitous or forbidden. Experience, this is to say, is formed through discourses. Experiences are not made by discourses,

<sup>6</sup>Joy Parr, “Gender History and Historical Practice,” *Canadian Historical Review*, 76 (September 1995), 364-365.

but discourses are the medium through which experiences are comprehensible. The study of discourses is the study of how events are made sensible.<sup>7</sup>

This declaration, which echoes international discussions of Thompson's paradigm of experience, dramatically shifts the grounds for social history's future.<sup>8</sup> But while Parr effectively conveys the poststructuralist critique of Thompsonian social history, her language also captures some of the emotional flatness of this antihumanist critique of agency. "Formed through webs," "organized by understandings," and "made of combinations": here, the absence of a subject means that the work involved in organizing experience is accomplished by language, not as the product of "sensuous human activity" but as an autonomous and originary system of meaning.<sup>9</sup> With this abstraction, language is fragmented and separated from life, becoming a distinct, free-floating layer where "events are made sensible" by forces unknown. People do not create words or their meanings, but rather are organized by them, a conception that denies the subaltern the "epistemic independence" granted them in classical social history.<sup>10</sup>

This is not to suggest that experience should be conceived of as existing apart from discourse or language. Instead, it is to point out a blindspot in Parr's formulation: what are we to do when the experience in question is that of making discourse?

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>The foundational works of this critique are Gareth Stedman Jones, "Rethinking Chartism," in *Languages of Class: Studies in English Working Class History, 1832-1982* (Cambridge 1983), 90-178; Joan Wallach Scott, "On Language, Gender and Working Class History," *International Labor and Working Class History*, 31 (Spring 1987), 1-13; Scott, "Women in *The Making of the English Working Class*," in *Gender and the Politics of History*, rev. ed. (New York 1999), 68-91; William H. Sewell Jr., "How Classes are Made: Critical Reflections on EP Thompson's Theory of Working-Class Formation," in Harvey Kaye and Keith McClelland, eds., *EP Thompson: Critical Perspectives* (Philadelphia 1990), 50-77. Parr's analysis echoes Joan Scott in "The Evidence of Experience": "it is precisely this kind of appeal to experience as uncontested evidence and as an originary point of explanation — as a foundation on which analysis is based — that weakens the critical thrust of histories of difference." Scott, "The Evidence of Experience," *Critical Inquiry*, 17 (Summer 1991), 773-797, quotation from 777.

<sup>9</sup>"Sensuous human activity" is from Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach." Quoted in Francis Wheen, *Karl Marx* (London 1999), 93.

<sup>10</sup>For a discussion of this term, see Ruth Roach Pierson, "Experience, Difference, Dominance and Voice in the Writing of Canadian Women's History," in Karen Offen, Ruth Roach Pierson and Jane Rendall, eds., *Writing Women's History: International Perspectives* (London 1991), 89-93. In the Canadian context, the debate over experience, discourse, and social history has largely taken place in journals: see, for instance, the *Left History* exchange on women's and gender history initiated by Joan Sangster in the Spring-Summer 1995 issue; the articles by Bryan Palmer and Mariana Valverde in the May 2000 issue of *Histoire Sociale/Social History*; and the forum on *On the Case*, especially Shirley Tillotson's contribution, in the *Canadian Historical Review* June 2000 issue.

In such cases, meaning precedes experience, not because meaning is outside experience but because meaning is itself the product of previous human activity. In our context, tramps such as Harold Whyte made sense of events through the often conflicted and always social praxis of writing, an act of working through contradictions that required a host of creative choices which, in the making, transformed authors as well as the world around them.<sup>11</sup> In what follows, I explore a book that resulted from such choices, *Vancouver Through the Eyes of a Hobo*, the 1934 text authored by “V.W.F.” that might have the distinction of being the only extant book about hobboing in Canada written during the Great Depression by a self-identified transient. In so doing, I hope to demonstrate the implicit authorial activity in the production of meaning by discussing the contextual materials from which “V.W.F.” fashioned his text.

If Harold Whyte’s dream symbolized the white-hot intensity of alienation, Victor Wadham Forster’s *Vancouver Through the Eyes of a Hobo*, published under the pseudonym “V.W.F.,” signified the possibilities of a reconciliation with the ruling order.<sup>12</sup> At its outset, this book celebrated the tramping life, mapping for its readers a dialectic: Nature — an antimodern pastoral refuge where hoboes lived in freedom — stood against the City — a wholly modern capitalist nightmare, home to economic exploitation and its attendant moral degradations. This conceptual framework owed much to the traditions of English Neo-Romanticism.<sup>13</sup> Yet, by the book’s end, “V.W.F.” had also articulated (and powerfully so) his desire to destroy this way of life — and the foundation of his claims to authority as a writer — in order to effect his and every hobo’s reintegration with society. Casting off his avowed allegiance to tramping, “V.W.F.” divined for his readers a third social formation, a new kind of capitalism infused with a Christian ethos of brotherhood and cooperation, and propped up by an unbounded white supremacy and a rigidly patriarchal division of labour. The contradictions that produced the hobo would dissolve, effecting his complete reintegration into and identification with society. Herein lies

<sup>11</sup> My argument is indebted to the work of Fredric Jameson. See especially *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca 1981), esp. 281–299.

<sup>12</sup> V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes of a Hobo* (Vancouver 1934). Most scholars rely on a tripartite scheme in classifying transient homeless men. As explained by Ben Reitman, “There are three types of the genus vagrant ... the hobo, the tramp and the bum. The hobo works and wanders, the tramp dreams and wanders and the bum drinks and wanders.” Quoted in Nels Anderson, *The Hobo: The Sociology of the Homeless Man* (Chicago 1961), 87. I have used the labels of “hobo” and “tramp” in reference to Forster because of his contradictory forms of self-identification, as discussed in the text.

<sup>13</sup> On the changing nature of the vagrant figure in English Romanticism, see Toby Benis, *Romanticism on the Road: The Marginal Gains of Wordsworth’s Homeless* (London 2000). For the broader context of British writings by and about tramps, see Anna Davin, “Waif Stories in Late Nineteenth-Century England,” and Mark Freeman, “‘Journeys into Poverty Kingdom’: Complete Participation and the British Vagrant, 1866–1914,” both in *History Workshop Journal*, 52 (Autumn 2001), 67–122 (67–98, and 99–122, respectively).



the tragedy of *Vancouver Through the Eyes of a Hobo*: to be born, Forster's imagined social order required the destruction of the hobo way of life. Despite his portrait of the basic freedoms at the heart of the hobo experience, Forster ultimately refused identification with them and with Nature. In his vision of the future, it would not be possible for virtuous men to live outside of the capitalist order; all would be absorbed into sedentary productive relations. This scheme entailed the destruction of not just a name or a category, but of an entire way of life.

Unfortunately, Canada's homeless wanderers of rails and roads never gained the minor stardom afforded hobo writers in other countries. There is no Canadian equivalent to America's Boxcar Bertha or Jack Black; our tramps lack what the dispossessed Okie travellers had in Woody Guthrie.<sup>14</sup> As for the Industrial Workers of the World, the much-celebrated social movement of and for itinerants: its most famous statement about the struggles of Canada's transients was penned by Swedish-American boxcar tourist Joe Hill, who once visited British Columbia for the strikes.<sup>15</sup> True, transients published a wealth of material in the radical press: in the 1930s, Vancouver's *Unemployed Worker* and Toronto's *The Worker* and *The Daily Clarion*, all run by the Communist Party, provided column-inches to tramps looking for a publication credit. But full-length studies of the jobless transient were the luxury of professionals — academics, administrators, and social workers, all with rooms of their own in which to perfect the product. Instead of George Orwell's brilliant personal account, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, Canadians got Leonard Marsh's dry sociological tome, *Canadians In and Out of Work*.<sup>16</sup> In fact, the bulk of knowledge about Canadian Depression-era homeless men lies in government archives, in documents produced within the framework of relief administration. The writing of tramps like "V.W.F." is thus of central importance because it brought to life a public, self-fashioned presence for vagrants — one of the building blocks in the development of unemployed political movements across North America — and allowed them to turn the world upside down, at least on the page.

The Depression transformed millions of workers the world over into spectators. Per capita income in British Columbia decreased by almost 50 per cent from 1929 to 1933. A census taken in June 1931 revealed that one-third of those who

<sup>14</sup>Boxcar Bertha and Ben L. Reitman, *Boxcar Bertha: An Autobiography* (New York 1988); Jack Black, *You Can't Win* (San Francisco 2000); Woody Guthrie, *Bound for Glory* (New York 1995); Ed Cray, *Ramblin' Man: The Life and Times of Woody Guthrie* (New York 2004).

<sup>15</sup>Mark Leier has produced several valuable works on transients in British Columbia: *Where the Fraser River Flows: The Industrial Workers of the World in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1990); and *Rebel Life: The Life and Times of Robert Gosden, Revolutionary, Mystic, Labour Spy* (Vancouver 1999).

<sup>16</sup>George Orwell, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (London 1989); Leonard Marsh, *Canadians In and Out of Work: A Survey of Economic Classes and their Relation to the Labour Market* (Toronto 1940).

worked in manufacturing, two-thirds of those in construction, and one-quarter of those in transportation were currently unemployed.<sup>17</sup> British Columbia also had higher jobless rates in every employment category in the federal census than any other region in Canada.<sup>18</sup> Seasonal unemployment, especially in the resource industries, soared to new heights: 58 per cent of unskilled working men reported being unemployed for six months or more in 1930-1931.<sup>19</sup> As a traditional stopping point for migrant workers and the unemployed, Vancouver saw more than its share of these “boxcar tourists.”<sup>20</sup> In addition to the network of hotels, restaurants, flop-houses, and pool rooms geared to serving working men during the winter off-season, the city was also home to numerous jobless organizations that offered material support and sociability. Transients also made themselves at home in “hobo jungles,” the makeshift settlements that grew up within city limits. In October 1930, the same month in which Harold Whyte wrote, Relief Officer H.W. Cooper, the official in charge of municipal relief, complained that there “cannot be less than 10,000” unemployed persons in the city. By year’s end, Vancouver City Council proclaimed the situation “beyond our control.”<sup>21</sup>

Faced with long stretches of unemployment, whether involuntary or not, a small number of homeless men — in Canada, very small — sought to escape both poverty and wage work at the same time by making their idle time productive, as had others before them. Walter Benjamin’s suggestive fragments on the *flâneurs* of 19th-century Paris, written as part of the *Passagen-Werk*, stressed their origins in the profound reaction against the widespread *ennui* which had its roots in the soil of modern factory methods.<sup>22</sup> To live in the city free of the chains of wage labour, one needed to translate the acts of occupying space and observing life into an object that could be exchanged with others in order to create value.<sup>23</sup> Loitering, in this sense, was working, and just as hundreds of thousands of hoboes before him had begged

<sup>17</sup>Allen Seager, Introduction to Working Lives Collective, *Working Lives: Vancouver, 1886-1986* (Vancouver 1985), 15.

<sup>18</sup>Paul Phillips, *No Power Greater: A Century of Labour in BC* (Vancouver 1967), 101.

<sup>19</sup>James Struthers, *No Fault of Their Own: Unemployment and the Canadian Welfare State, 1914-1941* (Toronto 1983), 4.

<sup>20</sup>Patricia Roy, “Vancouver: ‘The Mecca of the Unemployed,’ 1907-1929,” in Alan Artibse, ed., *Town and City: Aspects of Western Canadian Urban Development* (Regina 1981), 393-413.

<sup>21</sup>VCA, City Clerks’ Papers, Series 20, Box 15-B-4, File 1, H.W. Cooper to Alderman Atherton, 13 October 1930; Box 15-A-6, File 7, William McQueen to R.B. Bennett, 31 December 1930; VCA, City Council Minutes, MCR 1-31, 31 December 1930.

<sup>22</sup>Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA 1999), esp. 416-455.

<sup>23</sup>See the perceptive comments on Benjamin’s work in Susan Buck-Morss, “The Flâneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering,” *New German Critique*, 39 (Fall 1986), 99-140; Enzo Traverso, “Bohemia, Exile and Revolution: Notes on Marx, Benjamin and Trotsky,” *Historical Materialism*, 10, 1 (2002), 123-153.



for money, food, and shelter, “V.W.F.” too was panhandling, in this case for some cultural capital. All he had to exchange was his experience, which he translated into chapter-form so that it could be bought and sold in the marketplace: Forster literally commodified his experience in a quest for upward mobility.

Little is known of Victor Wadham Forster before the publication of *Vancouver Through the Eyes*. Born in Rhodesia in 1905, Victor moved to Scotland with his family following the death of his father. He started working for wages in 1919, and for the next decade travelled and worked his way through England. In 1929, he sailed to Canada, where five years later, he appeared in Vancouver with text in hand.<sup>24</sup> Almost 60 pages in text totalling approximately 25,000 words, *Vancouver Through the Eyes* contains eighteen chapters, plus a foreword and conclusion. Printed by union labour, it was published under the pseudonym “V.W.F.,” although any desire on Forster’s part to hide his identity was contradictory given his decision to include a photograph of himself, complete with suit jacket and tie, after the title page. For Forster and others seeking to engage and politicize Depression-era readers with a portrait of exploitation, the relationship of identity and authority was an ever-important consideration. Interestingly, Forster began his book by genuflecting: “In putting this little booklet before the citizens of Vancouver, I know that it is not the work of Genius. I am no author, neither have I had a college or University education. I am just one of the Unemployed, wandering here and there, with a vague hope in my heart that someday I may succeed in this Life.... Perhaps it will interest you, perhaps not.”<sup>25</sup> That he denigrated himself and his “little booklet” — adopting rhetoric quite different from that of Harold Whyte’s rambling tale of redemption — suggested a different understanding of the relationship of hobo writing to power.<sup>26</sup> Forster’s was a particular claim to authority rooted in the experience of the road instead of the credentials of formal education, in that he also desired acceptance from the same society that had forced his adoption of the ways of the hobo. The writing of the book, declared its foreword, “is the first step in the Ladder of my Ambition. So, in reading this work, I ask you to bear with me in the lack of finish, or perhaps diplo-

<sup>24</sup>This detail is taken from the back cover of Victor Forster, *Conning the Canadians* (Vancouver 1989), and from V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 25-26. Obviously, if these biographical details are correct, Forster travelled a considerable distance. Yet, we do not have information about how his passage was made. Did he ride in passenger cars, or did he tramp? How did he support himself?

<sup>25</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 5.

<sup>26</sup>Rhetoric similar to Forster’s ran through other texts by British itinerants in Canada; the following passage began G.H. Westbury’s *Misadventures of a Working Hobo in Canada*: “No doubt there will be many who will disparage my efforts of last summer, and will enquire whatever good can possibly arise therefrom; but I am convinced that eventually they will prove to be mistaken in their views. I did the best I could to find out the true conditions in Canada ...” See G.H. Westbury, *Misadventures of a Working Hobo in Canada* (London 1930), 1-2.

macy, and it is my sincere hope that you will at least be satisfied with the value received.”<sup>27</sup>

Yet, the value of this manuscript, “V.W.F.” well knew, was only partly to be found in the meaning of the words on the page. Where Forster secured his financial stake, and how many copies he had printed, remains unknown, as does the actual cost of the book. We do know that Vancouver’s streets served as his storefronts: after completing the manuscript, he recruited a workforce of 60 mostly local down-and-out young men to canvass neighbourhoods and deliver the product. The very act of purchasing his literary work — and the author emphasized this point — helped to combat the Great Depression with a minor miracle of supply and demand. With wages in their pockets (and Forster with his profits), his workers would be able to purchase “necessities,” in turn “creat[ing], however small, a demand, and so your money, by travelling in a circle, will in the end come back to you.” Buy his book, and “You [will] have knocked a chip from off the Wall of Depression,” he enthused.<sup>28</sup> The words he had produced thus possessed a two-fold value: they were both signs of meaning and commodities, whose worth in both cases stemmed from the exchange with his buyers and readers. With this novel idea, the issue of value would never be far from the surface.

One of the most powerful aspects of *Through the Eyes* was its sustained focus on the profoundly social character of identities, created through interactions with others in relationships that more often than not were alienating and exploitative. There is a generic, universal quality to its stories, a series of moralistic episodes woven together under the dialectic of city and country, capitalism and the hobo life. The *flâneur* and the bohemian were most at home in the city, where imaginations could be constantly stimulated by what Benjamin described as the city’s “vast reservoir of electricity.”<sup>29</sup> As advertised in the title, most of Forster’s book was devoted to Vancouver itself, a place populated by stock characters, personifications of social problems rather than flesh-and-blood people. *Through the Eyes* ran the gamut: the rapacious uncaring business man, the power-hungry politician, the stupid violent cop, the clever underworld boss, the deceitful forlorn prostitute, the manly loveless business woman, and the Chinese opium addict. In a handful of scenes, these characters were individualized and given some measure of depth, especially the prostitute figure, but most characters did not even have proper names. And all of these social identities were understood in relational terms: each group exploited the homeless man in some way or another. At the centre of the narrative was “V.W.F.,” whose position as storyteller was riddled with tensions; Forster drifted in and out of a relationship of identity with hoboes in the stories he told. He claimed that his eyes were their eyes, that his story was that of a hobo life, only to re-

<sup>27</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 5.

<sup>28</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 64.

<sup>29</sup>Walter Benjamin, quoted in Traverso, “Bohemia, Exile and Revolution,” 125.

fuse this relationship at key points.<sup>30</sup> Some hoboes had had their character wholly destroyed by the City and were beyond redemption, while Forster clung to his hope of advancement. He had seen through the petty scams and deceits that flourished on the streets, while lesser men were cheated, drugged, robbed, beaten, and tossed in jail. Some hoboes were suckers, victims. Forster, with his initiative and talent, could still be a success.

At the same time, Forster's desire for upward mobility never meant a blind acceptance of life under the "wheel of Commerce." Hobo life began, he explained, when men took to the road to escape the oppressions of the City, where most of humanity was "caught in the maelstrom of a civilization that was making them into automatons. A system of Life that was killing their joy, their happiness. Life that was but an existence." In the here-and-now, Forster lived as a tramp, finding both freedom and pleasure in the natural world:

And the strangeness lay in the fact that they looked down upon me, a Hobo. While they toiled and slaved, that another could have a little more luxury, I roamed in a sunlit valley. While they wearily listened to the monotonous hum of a machine of iron and steel, I listened to the crooning of mountain waters.... I lived and laughed, they lived and sighed. I was free, gloriously free, they were chained to the wheel. That wheel of Commerce, of yellow, glittering gold! A wheel whose spokes were hate and fear, and greed and lust. A wheel that slowly soiled and crushed the human soul.<sup>31</sup>

Forster characterized the hobo life with the terms of a pastoral romance, in which Nature was understood as morally and aesthetically superior to the economic modernism of the City. The reasons men took to the road were diverse, as were their social backgrounds, but the collective experience of mobility enabled their identification as a distinct group:

The hobos, a race of men apart. There were parsons in their ranks, professors, artists, business men, and those who were just naturally bums. Men from all walks of life. Some just imbued with the urge to travel, rolling stones. Some there, through failure in the world of Commerce. Others, trying to run away from a haunting tragedy in their lives. A mixture of Creeds and Colours. Behind each grimy face lay a human story. A story of Life, of Laughter, of Tears. Of Success and Failure, of Love and Hate.

The common "human story" that defined hoboes was, in Forster's eyes, principally a tale of economics. All had left a "system of Life" founded on "one passion, the

<sup>30</sup>In the chapter entitled "Saved," V.W.F. wrote a vignette about hoboes in a mission. Here, he adopted a different style of writing, using phonetic grammar and spelling and telling ribald stories about Adam and Eve and what really happened after Adam ate the apple. This "tramp-speak" served only to distance Forster further from the tramp. V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 52-55.

<sup>31</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 62.

Greed of Gold,” and chosen Nature as their new home, where their exclusion from the mainstream of economic life was transformed into a source of strength:

Perhaps they were lost. Lost from a civilization that was imbued with but one passion, the Greed of Gold. A system of Life that was slowly but surely destroying itself. Yes, perhaps they were the Legion of the Lost, but as long as the sun shone, and the birds sang, and the fish played in the creeks, why should they worry?<sup>32</sup>

The opposition of city and country was powerful in both British Columbia and Britain, and found expression in *Through the Eyes* as a way to demarcate the differences between the natural world of tramping and the “Greed” of City life.<sup>33</sup>

The City was a place of economic exploitation, gender and racial upheaval, and moral decay — a “shyster town” in need of a new morality. As a counterpoint to urban conflict, *Through the Eyes* celebrated the antimodern, experiential spaces of hobo life on the road; travelling gave tramps the opportunity of “seeing the beauty and mightiness of the world.” Forster’s use of antimodernism tapped into one of the strongest ideological undercurrents of the 1930s.<sup>34</sup> Nature in his eyes was a refuge from the capitalist order, and the authentic experiences of the road helped many to recuperate from the ills of exploitation in the City:

When you stood still with the beauty and wonder of it all, and a feeling of peace and contentment pervaded your being. When your heart sang, and your blood tingled, and a voice seemed to whisper inside of you, “Isn’t Life a mighty thing”.... Days when you were glad that you were a Hobo, free to wander whither you pleased, to breathe in the pure air and bask in the sunshine. Far away from the world and its commerce, its humdrum existence, its eternal fight for Dollars and Cents, its false smiles and honeyed tongues. Yes, those were the days when a Hobo lived and laughed, and knew the value of the life that had been given him.<sup>35</sup>

True, any life on the margins was “hard,” even “depressing” at times. On occasion, the hobo found himself disconsolate and alone, and “wondered at the why of it all”: “When the world seemed far away, and you were apart, and like a little child, with a strange longing in your soul to be enfolded in the all-embracing arms of your

<sup>32</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 9-10.

<sup>33</sup>“The landscape — British Columbia’s mountains, forests, seas and skies — were the dominant interwar subject matter, as artists sought the essential structures and vital forces of the nature around them”: Douglas Cole, “Leisure, Taste and Tradition in British Columbia,” in Hugh Johnston, ed., *The Pacific Province: A History of British Columbia* (Vancouver 1996), 358.

<sup>34</sup>On Canadian antimodernism during the interwar years, I have relied on Ian McKay, “Among the Fisherfolk: J.F.B. Livesay and the Invention of Peggy’s Cove,” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 23 (1988), 23-45; and *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Kingston and Montreal 1994).

<sup>35</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 9-10.

Mother. When you cursed the life that had been given you and you wished that you were dead.” But these feelings faded when surrounded by your brethren. On the outskirts of town, as a group of tramps waits for the sun to mark the transition to night, a train appears. “You feel Alive!,” he exclaimed. “The world is far away. Somewhere a voice starts singing. Soon the voices of a hundred men are heard above the roar of the locomotive. Hobos! The Legion of the Lost!”<sup>36</sup> This was truly an enviable life.

Yet, in practical terms, it was also a narrow life: the trope of Nature was the essence of Forster’s vision of tramping because it was the only one he employed. Frank Trentmann observes that nature hikes formed a central part of English Neo-Romanticism in the initial decades of the 20th century. In this context, rambling took on an antimodern inflection, providing an opportunity for one to escape what was understood as a deadened industrial civilization, a view not far from Forster’s own, as we shall see.<sup>37</sup> This reliance on English romanticism, however, marked “V.W.F.”’s distance from the tramping literary conventions of 1930s North America.<sup>38</sup> Those to take up the pen in Canada in the early 1930s generally produced character-centred tales of experience, as new travellers were initiated into the life by older tramps with colourful names and a more colourful past. Forster’s book had few of the typical characters (“Lefty” and “Shorty”) in his work, and little of the language found in the extant texts of other hoboes. Apart from several pages detailing the wondrous natural beauty to be found on the road, Forster provided none of the standard detail: the techniques of train-hopping, the exchanges of food and cigarettes, the social customs of the jungles, the linguistic games around campfires, and the trickery in dealing with cops and social workers, all common reference points in the vast majority of 1930s texts, and all absent from *Through the Eyes*.<sup>39</sup> If anything, “V.W.F.”’s version of the hobo life owed its greatest debt to Wordsworth’s vision of the tranquil contemplation of nature, which Forster fleshed out with generic scenes of green trees and babbling brooks. The

<sup>36</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 9-10.

<sup>37</sup>Frank Trentmann, “Civilization and Its Discontents: English Neo-Romanticism and the Transformation of Anti-Modernism in Twentieth-Century Western Culture,” *Journal of Contemporary History*, 29, 4 (October 1994), 583-625. For an example of how rambling through nature could be politicized, see Ben Harker, “‘The Manchester Rambler’: Ewan McColl and the 1932 Mass Trespass,” *History Workshop Journal*, 59 (2005), 219-228.

<sup>38</sup>For recent work on transient subcultures and forms of self-representation in America, see Todd DePastino, *Citizen Hobo: How a Century of Homelessness Shaped America* (Chicago 2003); and Frank Tobias Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts: Hobo Workers and Community in the American Midwest, 1880-1930* (Urbana 2003). Of particular note is Tim Cresswell’s discussion of Ben Reitman in *The Tramp in America*, 71-77.

<sup>39</sup>I discuss the writings of 1930s Canadian hoboes and tramps in “‘Still Raining, Market Still Rotten’: Homeless Men and the Early Years of the Great Depression in Vancouver,” PhD thesis, Queen’s University, 2004, 270-287.

hobo as child of Nature, however, had long been out of fashion in 20th-century North America.

Along with the distinctiveness of his portrait of hobo life, Forster's individualist ethos — his singular struggle to survive — flowed against the collective currents of life in the jungle and on the road. While far from harmonious, jungle life was characterized by an "ethic of reciprocity and mutualism" rooted in "unapologetic rejections of acquisitivism," to quote American historian Todd DePastino.<sup>40</sup> Sydney Hutcheson, who spent several stints on the bum in British Columbia during the 1930s, argued that the principle of mutual assistance was rooted in the material realities of the tramping life: "A man needed company at a time like this as we had to stick together to live."<sup>41</sup> Extant evidence suggests that tramps in the jungles sustained each other in several ways. Every tramp begged on street corners periodically, although one had to be wary of local police. They also partook of the local produce grown for market, what Hutcheson labelled "grazing."<sup>42</sup> Others engaged in petty theft. Hoboes also relied on civic relief; many towns gave several days worth of scrip to transients to be redeemed at local grocery stores. These resources they distributed among their fellow tramps, in the recognition that tomorrow, someone else would rustle up food and other necessities. Tramps who preferred to travel and live in groups were thus often spared from having to scramble for sustenance every day. Instead, they could assert their right to be lazy and "live the life of Riley."<sup>43</sup> Jungle life was thus not labour-intensive. The monetary value of the goods tramps acquired was of little relevance, and the exchange was usually conducted face to face, without recourse to a medium such as money. The organization of the means of life was thus immediate and relatively consensual, a direct contrast not only to the ethos of capital accumulation but also to the restrictive regulations of public charities and private shelters in the city. In his study of hobo workers in the American Midwest, Frank Tobias Higbie concludes that mutuality represented a "marker of community among migrants and between migrants and nonmigrants who chose to help them."<sup>44</sup> Forster's one-note record of his experiences as a hobo signalled his separation from the multitude.

Like other British migrants before him, Forster had held out hope that Canada would allow him to improve his station. But while initially struck by the country's natural beauty, "V.W.F." found himself "confronted again with cities, factories

<sup>40</sup>DePastino, *Citizen Hobo*, 69-70.

<sup>41</sup>Stanley Hutcheson, *Depression Stories* (Vancouver 1976), 64.

<sup>42</sup>Hutcheson, *Depression Stories*, 27.

<sup>43</sup>Hutcheson, *Depression Stories*, 60; Paul Lafargue, *The Right to Be Lazy*, trans. Charles H. Kerr (Chicago 1989). For examples of Canadian hoboes supporting a group until their resources were exhausted, see B.C., "Down in Con's," *The Worker*, 23 January 1932; One of Them, "Riding The Rods Proves Easy If You Know The Ropes," *Vancouver Daily Province*, 3 August 1931; A. Bundle-Stiff, "The Old Lumberjack," *The Worker*, 6 July 1929.

<sup>44</sup>Higbie, *Indispensable Outcasts*, 176.



and Profit and Loss, and poverty and unemployment, and hate and crime. So I roamed once again.”<sup>45</sup> Forster mapped a journey — one taken by hundreds of thousands of transients — from personal freedom in Nature to collective subordination in the City, where the individual tramp quickly became subsumed by the “weary multitude, seeking guidance, help.” The majority of single young men found themselves in “crisis”: “They are ignored. Shunted here and there like cattle. Given a beggarly food allowance that is fast breaking them, body and soul. Treated with contempt by the Government, the People, the so-called Church.” This almost universal callousness could be traced to the aforementioned “Greed of Gold.” Forster knew of what he wrote, for he too had once lived in the “world of Commerce,” where, of necessity, he had had to hurt people:

You could not be sympathetic or charitable in the business world. You had to be hard. To trample on, or be trampled upon. A world, where to climb up the ladder of success, you had to step over the heads of your fellow men. A world where you had to ignore the sufferings of Humanity, and concentrate on Self. Where Love was suppressed and Greed reigned supreme, and your God was Gold! Where brother fought brother and son stole from father, and religion was but a cloak of respectability. That was the system of a world of Capital and Labor. The world of Profit and Loss, built upon a foundation of greed and lust and hate and crime.<sup>46</sup>

This was nothing if not class struggle, all the capitalized words existing in dialectical pairs.

Forster’s compelling portrait of the workings of Greed punctured the business community’s rhetoric of “achievements” as nothing more than “false pride,” since “progress” had been built on the backs of workers.<sup>47</sup> Forster laid the blame for the crisis on the “upper classes”: “The irony, to me lies in the fact that the very class whose safety depends upon the contentment of the masses are the ones who are feeding the flames of revolt.... YOU are the cause. YOU, the women of the luxury class. YOU, the business men in the city. YOU, the employers.”<sup>48</sup> Wage workers laboured under “slave conditions” because the elite failed to realize that “their prosperity, their very existence, depends upon the prosperity of the workers.” Forster elaborated on this theme with a number of scenarios. Provincial minimum wage legislation, he claimed, was violated as a matter of routine, with twelve-and-a-half to fifteen cents an hour the wage rate for many workers. Domestic service he singled out as “one of the greatest scandals in this city”: working days of fourteen to sixteen hours still left these women a wage of only \$10 to \$12 per month. Their bosses were the “heartless women of the luxury class” who “must be devoid of all

<sup>45</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 26.

<sup>46</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 25. Because of the sparseness of detail about Forster, it is difficult to ascertain what period in his life was characterized in this description.

<sup>47</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 22.

<sup>48</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 23-24.

human understanding,” while the “girls” themselves would just as soon quit their jobs, but could not afford to live without them: here, the prosperity of the upper-class women depended upon the continuing poverty of those who served them.<sup>49</sup> To characterize the experience of white working men, Forster drew upon the time-honoured “coolie” in the British Columbia briarpatch: “Here, a white man is brought to the level of a Chinaman [...] Has the manhood of this city been brought down so far that they have to compete in the labour market with Chinamen? ... Then your press has the supreme insolence to tell you of conditions in Russia. What a joke!”<sup>50</sup> In general, however, the book was short on factual detail: Forster stuck to the capitalized words to make his point about economic exploitation.

“V.W.F.” was not so dogmatic as to deny the pleasures to be had in Vancouver. There was a vitality to the urban experience which he clearly appreciated; one “thrill” was visiting Vancouver’s collection of bookie joints. Betting on the ponies enveloped one’s senses in an “exhilarating dream,” both “hypnotising” and “glamorous.”<sup>51</sup> “We want to lay our money down, and root for our selection with the world forgotten, with our minds far away as if in a dream,” he enthused.<sup>52</sup> The thrill of gambling allowed for the transcendence of exploitation, at least for a brief moment. Forster claimed to have participated in wide-ranging forms of sociability, and he conveyed these experiences with a sensationalist narrative style. “I have stood in no man’s land and watched,” he wrote. “I have penetrated the shadows, entered the hells and the sinks [of] iniquity.”<sup>53</sup> Rather than the “artificial” reality to be found on film, “V.W.F.” had seen “Life in the raw.”<sup>54</sup> This urban explorer sounded a cautionary note, warning readers of the dark recesses of Vancouver’s “underworld,” where “disease, death, and madness are forever by your side.” “There are two worlds in a city,” he explained, “a world of light and a world of shadows.” In this bifurcated experience of modern life, “citizen[s]” lived in the world of light where “each day is the same as its predecessor, and no endless ripples disturb the calm waters of the Lake of Life.” The world of shadows was its polar opposite, a place of insecurity “where nerves are for ever tense, and the brain alert, and fear forever disturbs the peace of the mind. Fear of the Law, with its police, its prisons ...

<sup>49</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 22-23. There is some truth to this portrait. See Gillian Creese, “The Politics of Dependence: Women, Work and Unemployment in the Vancouver Labour Movement before World War II,” *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 13 (1988), 121-142.

<sup>50</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 22. On perceptions of the Chinese “coolie” labourer, see Gillian Creese, “Exclusion or Solidarity? Vancouver Workers Confront the ‘Oriental Problem,’” *BC Studies*, 80 (1988-1989), 24-51. For hoboos with similar views about racial hierarchies, see Westbury, *Misadventures*, esp. 8-12, 107-109, 117-118.

<sup>51</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 16, 50-51.

<sup>52</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 16.

<sup>53</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 18.

<sup>54</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 60.

and its rope. Fear ever growing, destroying, crushing, which makes each shadow a danger, each man and woman an enemy.”<sup>55</sup> Many attempted to escape from the conscious realization of their plight by seeking “forgetfulness in a night of debauchery or drug-leadened sleep.” The meanings of City life for tramps were thus understood relationally, set against both the comfortable, placid lives of “citizens” and their past experiences on the road.

In part, the attraction of such illegal activities could be traced to the failure of the government, the church, and the citizenry in general to provide educational, recreational and other cultural activities for the unemployed.<sup>56</sup> By default, tramps became caught up in an “Underworld” of desire. Here, Forster’s exposé shone:

you may enter freely, openly, gambling joints, brothels, speakeasies, dope dens and Chinese lottery houses. Here you meet gunmen, thugs, safecrackers, pimps, smash and grab artists, and a thousand and one others who make up life in the Underworld ... In almost any block downtown, you can enter a speakeasy, brothel or gambling joint. You can buy dope, morphine, cocaine, cod[e]ine, heroin, laud[a]num, and other such drugs. You can buy for half price, stolen goods, from diamond rings to automobiles. You can hire a man to set fire to your house. You can hire a thug to knock over one of your enemies. In fact, you can do most anything. The police know it, the press know it, the citizens don’t know it. Yes, the City of Vancouver is wide open. Its Underworld is growing. Day by day it is getting bigger and stronger. Hundreds are entering its fold from the ranks of the unemployed. The depression is boosting it up. It is getting beyond control!<sup>57</sup>

The tone throughout his discussion of the “Underworld” was a cross between moral reform literature and hardboiled noir, both sentimental and sensational at once. Forster claimed to have polled “five known criminals” as to the extent of the problem, with sensational results: Vancouver was purportedly home to 4,000 speakeasies and bootlegging joints, 1,500 houses of prostitution, 450 gambling houses, 75 dope dens, and 60 Chinese lottery houses — all this in a city of 150,000!<sup>58</sup> “It will take you a day to cover the lottery houses,” he noted. “It will take you two days to cover the dope dens, five days for the gambling joints, three weeks for the speakeasies, and a month and a half to cover the brothels.” Then, with a flair for the dramatic: “Button up your coat. Pull your hat low over your eyes. Walk in the Shadows. Penetrate the Underworld, and where you have been blind, your eyes will be opened.”<sup>59</sup> One chapter, “The Line Up,” told the story of a young homeless man wrongly identified by a woman as a thief. Thrown in jail “just like a wild beast” on a

<sup>55</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 17.

<sup>56</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 31.

<sup>57</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 17-18.

<sup>58</sup>For basic statistics on crime in Vancouver in the 1930s, see James Huzel, “The Incidence of Crime in Vancouver During the Great Depression,” *BC Studies* (Spring/Summer 1986), 69/70, 211-248.

<sup>59</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 18.

twelve-month sentence with hard labour, the youth is forever lost to society: “A human soul in torment ... a heart filled with Hate.... A Youth in a prison cell.... A life that was wrecked!”<sup>60</sup> Each jobless man sent to jail was in fact introduced to a “school of crime.”<sup>61</sup> The detailed portrait, built with tragic scene after tragic scene, gave emotional weight to his analysis of social relations in the City.

One of the pillars of Forster’s chapter-and-verse critique of City life was his attack on the Christian churches, in which we can see the workings of the opposition between Nature and the City as well as his desire to leave behind the transient life. “The creed of the Hobo and the Religion of the Church are vastly different,” he wrote. “It may seem strange to you, but after coming into contact with them both, I find the Hobo’s Creed the best.” “The Hobo has no God,” Forster explained. “To him, Nature is supreme.” Simplicity and truth were the keywords of the hobo “philosophy,” a paradigm with more than its fair share of Enlightenment reasoning: “With his senses, his intelligence, his physical perfection, and the world before him, he is master of his own Life, his own Destiny.” Forster claimed for the hobo world roots in humanist thought: the ideal tramp was autonomous in both mind and body. Yet, this same tramp lived in the state of nature, a world outside the corrupted social contract. “Here on Earth, just as he chooses to make it, is his Heaven or his Hell,” he asserted.<sup>62</sup>

Organized religion had unfortunately drifted from the true path. For Christians, the basics had been clearly established in the Ten Commandments. Since then, there had been only sectarianism. Instead of “one faith, one church, one God,” there were:

Countless opposing and conflicting sects and denominations. A bewildering mass of contradicting theories and interpretations of His teachings, that has confused the human race, and divided them into groups, each one scorning and opposing the other. Religious organizations that have become commercialized, that have made of a glorious Christianity a business of Dollars and Cents. Religions that have left a trail of Hate, of Wars, Death and Destruction.<sup>63</sup>

To illustrate his critique of “religious rackets,” Forster used two examples of the church’s corruption, the first of which was its hypocritical practice regarding the First Commandment. He described World War I as a “Holocaust” that had tragically proved to be “good business.” The next war, too, would also be rooted in “the seeds of Greed and the lust of Gold.”<sup>64</sup> In these wars, Christianity had played its role:

<sup>60</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 19-21 (his ellipses).

<sup>61</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 29.

<sup>62</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 11.

<sup>63</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 11.

<sup>64</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 46-49.

Picture a preacher, preaching to the people on the Laws of God. "Thou shalt not kill!" He speaks as if his whole heart and soul were back of the words he was uttering. His eloquence holds his congregation. "Love ye one another." Picture the same preacher. He is in France, dressed in a drab khaki uniform. He is standing on a little dais. In front of him are drawn up an array of soldiers. Standing at attention, gleaming bayonets fixed ready in their rifles. Each rifle is loaded with death dealing bullets, each bayonet ready to be thrust into the hearts of their fellow men, to tear and to torture. They are going out to Kill! To kill, and to keep on killing, until they themselves go down in a holocaust of blood and flesh. The preacher is praying. Praying to God for success! The irony of it! Praying for strength that the soldiers may go out to blow out the brains of their fellow humans, to thrust bayonets into their bodies and scatter their entrails on the soil. To maim and to blind, to go with their hearts filled with the lust of blood and of hate! A strange Christianity!

The church also failed to meet its moral responsibilities in the current depression, which he characterized as an "economic war" rooted in "the struggle going on between the bankers and financiers of the various nations throughout the world."<sup>65</sup> Instead of following the true word of Christ, the churches had succumbed to a selfish materialism:

Picture a Church. It is a beautiful and costly structure.... In no detail of the picture can you find anything that conveys the impression of want. It is a picture of luxury. Across the street there is a house. In a room of this house lives a family. The father is unemployed, and so that family is on relief. The two little children are young, blessed with the healthy appetites of youth. They want lots to eat, but the sum allowed the father and mother on relief does not permit them to satisfy their appetites and so they are doing without.... The father and mother are in the throes of mental agony. In the mother's mind is the question, "Why — why — why?" In the thoughts of the father are being bred the germs of crime. But the church across the street is not interested in the sufferings of little children. They look down from their lofty heights with a distant pity. They believed the words of Christ, "Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not." But to follow his teachings you had to bear the cross. Christians without the Cross! So they sat there, their automobiles waiting outside, their bellies full, their bodies clothed, ironically thanking God for the Faith that was in their hearts, while across the street two little tots suffered, and hungered, and waited for death! A strange Christianity!<sup>66</sup>

Forster yoked capitalism's destruction of the family with Christianity's adoption of "commercialism"; caught up in the spectacle — worshipping form at the expense of content — Christians had failed to practice true charity by helping Vancouver's homeless men. This in turn led to an increase in non-believers, sowing fertile ground in which subversive organizations could flourish.

The hobo was no Communist, Forster asserted. But while rejecting Bolshevism, Forster's thought process occasionally verged on a radicalism that

<sup>65</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 48.

<sup>66</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 11-12.

would have made some Marxists proud. “As long as we have Gold,” he told his readers, “as long as we have profit and loss, with all its evils, its hates and its passions, as long as we have rich and poor, we can never have Christianity.”<sup>67</sup> Yet, the answer lay neither in socialism nor in Vancouver’s citizens adopting the life of Nature *en masse*. Here, Forster ultimately rejected identification with the hobo life, mapping instead a third position, capitalism with Christian morality imbued in its heart, to resolve the dialectic of city and countryside. The “Greed for Gold” would disappear; gold itself would not. A working-class revolution would mean “horrible destruction.” He explained that “the British races are blessed, fortunately, with an abhor[r]ence of revolt and the bloodshed and violence with which it is coupled.” But, he warned that the crisis was “fast driving the masses to the breaking point.” In the short term, the church could offer aid to the poor as an antidote to the “discontent and rebellion [that] flames in the hearts of the masses.” With a “real and practical Christianity, we will draw the hearts of men and women back to the Love of our Father.”<sup>68</sup> “Love of our Father”: this was a key element in Forster’s solution to the crisis. This new Christian spirit would draw the poor back into the fold of the church, which would now be worthy of this allegiance, having demonstrated that it had renewed its true mission.

This renewed Christian economic order would reinvigorate the patriarchal family and white supremacy, British institutions Forster believed had been undermined by the crisis. *Through the Eyes* ranged across the City, stopping to spout xenophobic and misogynistic parables about the upheaval of the social order. Vancouver’s businessmen, he believed, had brought about the downfall of white working men in part by hiring white women and Asian men. And capitalism itself had lost its legitimacy because it demanded both uncaring and unchristian attitudes in order to thrive. The solution Forster chose, however, involved not a rejection of the capitalist marketplace, but the removal of these subordinate groups from the labour market. In other words, Forster claimed for white men an entitlement to jobs that would allow them to develop their individual capabilities; the “Yellow man” would be forcibly deported to Asia, and white women would be firmly chained to the home.

As a seaport, Vancouver was home to what “V.W.F.” described as a “conglomeration of white and yellow races.”<sup>69</sup> This racial divide was one of the great crises plaguing the City:

<sup>67</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 13-14. Forster’s ideas overlapped with radical sections of the social gospel movement in Canada. For the Canadian context, see Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion & Social Reform in Canada, 1914-1928* (Toronto 1990); Michael Gauvreau and Nancy Christie, *A Full-Orbed Christianity: The Protestant Churches and Social Welfare in Canada, 1900-1940* (Kingston and Montreal 2001).

<sup>68</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 23.

<sup>69</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 28.



The White man and the Yellow man are opposites. They can never unite, nor live in harmony. Their ways of living are different. They think differently. Where white men and yellow men meet, there is friction. A feeling of superiority and contempt on the one hand, an underlying hate on the other. The City of Vancouver is faced with this problem. Here, white men and yellow men meet on equal grounds, and in the world of finance, the yellow man is in the ascendant. Daily, he is taking away from the city, one-twelfth of its income. Daily, he is advancing in the field of commerce. Daily, he is ousting the white man out of a job. The white men have lost control of the yellow men!<sup>70</sup>

For readers familiar with the history of the “Asiatic” or “Oriental question” in North America, this passage is positively ordinary.<sup>71</sup> Like others before him, Forster thought that separation was the only “solution” to the *existence* of races, because “friction” was the inevitable result of racial intermingling. His sketch of Asian life was drenched in noirish overtones, entreating its readers to follow “a Hobo into the highway and byways of Chinatown.” While strolling down Pender Street, “the weird strains of Oriental music fall strangely on our ears. Yellow men, their almond eyes seemingly blank, their faces an expressionless mask, shuffle past us.” Readers ended up at “a dimly lit shop” where lounged “a motley assembly of Chinamen. They are gambling, as only the Oriental can gamble.” In the air hangs the “sweet, sickening smell of opium.” The next establishment was home to a numbers-running racket. Men of all classes filled the room, while their “wives and mothers, sisters and daughters [were] waiting and hoping and fearing” at home.<sup>72</sup> Forster estimated that the 50 houses earned an average of \$300, all of it “taken in PER DAY by yellow hands,” most of which, he charged, was sent to China by an international crime syndicate.<sup>73</sup>

In *Through the Eyes*, the “Oriental question” was thus one of crime and social disorder. It was also inseparable from class politics: “the worker, too, is faced with the yellow menace.” Here, the cheaper cost of Asian labour — a differential Forster saw as created by “Canadians” — served to divide Canadians along class lines. “Every man or woman employing yellow labour is striking their own countryman in the back, and are, to put it bluntly, traitors to the Canadian people. As you sow, so shall you reap,” he warned:

The Chinaman has forced his way into the painting trades, gardening, laundry, cooking and truck driving. The hotels are full of them. Seamen are walking the streets because the CPR think that a Chinaman is cheaper and better than a white man. Soon they will be entering the

<sup>70</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 36.

<sup>71</sup>For historical perceptions of Asians in British Columbia, see Kay Anderson, *Vancouver's Chinatown: Racial Discourse in Canada, 1875-1980* (Kingston and Montreal 1991); Peter Ward, *White Canada Forever: Popular Attitudes and Public Policy Toward Orientals in British Columbia*, 2nd ed. (Kingston and Montreal 1990).

<sup>72</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 36-37.

<sup>73</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 38.

highly skilled trades and by reason of their cheap wage value, will oust the white man. They have already pushed hundreds of white men out of jobs and the Trade Unions had better get together before they push any more out. They have brought down the Wage Standard, they have lowered the Standard of Living, and if the Union leaders fail to see it now, they will see it when it is too late.<sup>74</sup>

Asians would never be full members of the future community Forster envisioned because their presence, by definition, alienated white men from their birthright, forcing them to escape to Nature. Only an Asian expulsion would allow the prodigal sons to return to the City.

In the end, Forster believed in total identification, an organic community with every white man and woman united behind a progressive Christian economic agenda. This new order was predicated on the nuclear family, endlessly replicated in every home across the landscape, in contradistinction to the hobo life, which for "V.W.F." meant male sociability if not solitude. While separation from women was painful for some, it appealed to those in search of refuge from the current upheaval in gender relations, he argued. One of his central themes was what he saw as the loss of men's power in the modern world. Like his sensationalized drama of racial conflict, his writing on gender took on the scope of a world-historic struggle, "Men Versus Women":

There is an unseen War going on, not only in the City of Vancouver, but all over the universe. A war between Man and Woman for a place in the world of commerce. A struggle which is slowly changing the woman of today. A struggle in which man is fighting for his very existence. Woman is gaining, and as Woman gains so does Man sink lower in the scale of Life.<sup>75</sup>

Believing the hobo to have been victimized in his relations with women, Forster openly advocated misogyny as the appropriate response.

Forster organized women into different categories according to class. He criticized the "women of the luxury class" for their treatment of female domestics, and told stories about victimized "working girls" exploited by Chinese restaurant owners. He decried the ignorance of Vancouver's elite, who "sit back in your armchairs and wonder why there are women and girls selling their bodies on the streets."<sup>76</sup> Nonetheless, most of the women in *Through the Eyes* appeared in an unsympathetic light. There were the prostitutes who "put knockout drops in the glass of a fool" to rob him; the man could not "squeal, for shame will clamp his tongue."<sup>77</sup> There were the gossips, older women who were "a menace to Humanity." And there were the flappers, each of them "a plaything, destined for a life of unhappiness."<sup>78</sup> Each

<sup>74</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 38.

<sup>75</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 39.

<sup>76</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 24.

<sup>77</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 18, 29.

<sup>78</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 61.

character symbolized what Forster saw as the detrimental effects to stem from women's entry into the public sphere. The economic crisis, too, was understood by Forster as a partial by-product of women's emancipation. The proof of this was obvious: since there was no unemployment in eras when women did not work, their employment in the 1930s caused men's joblessness:

When man is in steady employment, he creates wealth by purchasing useful and creative materials. He builds a home, and selects a woman to share that home, then both man and woman have their place in the scheme of life. Man toils in the world of commerce, woman bears children and devotes her time to making a happy home. Life goes on as God in his wisdom planned it. They are blessed with health. They are content. The opposite is the result when woman is working and man idle. There is no hope of marriage. Woman feels a false superiority. She becomes masculine in her ways of thinking. The instinct of motherhood is crushed. Marriage is distasteful to her new found freedom. Immorality increases. She creates chaos amongst the working classes by lowering the wages and standard of living. She loses the respect and admiration of man.

Again, just in case the reader had any doubt as to women's responsibility for the crisis:

Woman is responsible of the millions of men walking the streets. Half the depression can be traced to the same cause. Vice and crime are rampant. Dissatisfaction amongst the working masses is at its peak. Disease and insanity have taxed the hospitals and mental institutions to overflowing. Christianity is losing ground daily. You can trace all this to the beginning of Woman's so-called Emancipation.<sup>79</sup>

Forster's economic plan called for the replacement of women by unemployed men, who "in turn, would take care of the women by marriage." With the products of men's labour circulating, "in two years the Depression would end."<sup>80</sup> Economic prosperity would return, and so would natural gender arrangements. The exploitation of working women would be resolved, then, not by abolishing class relations, but by returning these women to the home, by definition a sanctuary from economic hardship.

This new-fashioned patriarchy would allow women to satisfy their most-cherished desire, that of motherhood. In one chapter, Forster interviewed a "Woman of the Streets" named "Blondy." After buying her dinner, in essence paying for her services, he began asking questions. To his smug self-satisfaction, he discovered that her character had not wholly been broken, and that she still wanted what all women wanted: "We may sneer at it, but we women all wish for the same thing. A wish that is deep in every woman's heart, however they try to hide it. A man ... to love you, and comfort you ... a home ... and a couple of kids ... to call you

<sup>79</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 39-40.

<sup>80</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 39-40.

...’ her voice faltered with the intensity of her emotions ... ‘to call you ... Mother!’”<sup>81</sup> This trinity of marriage, family and domesticity and its destruction by working women appeared often in *Through the Eyes*. In a scene where Forster situated himself on the corner of Hastings and Abbott streets, near Chinatown, and described the social characters of modern Vancouver, the “business girl” figured prominently:

I saw the smart business girl.... Independent, looking on marriage with disdain. Thinking that being a wife was a life of drudgery. She was free, her own master. No squalling kids for her. No cooking, washing, ironing. She stood on an equal footing with Man. She was part of the World of Commerce. I saw her as the years crept on. Thirty-five years of age. Looking old, tired. Thrown out of employment to make way for youth. Alone in the world. No man on whom to depend. To love her, protect her. No home, no cozy fireside. Looking wistfully at the carefree, joyous children. Wishing she had a little one to call her mother. Empty arms, empty heart. A yearning in her soul that would never be fulfilled.<sup>82</sup>

This tragedy rooted in women’s involvement in the “World of Commerce” was also the downfall of Vancouver’s men. On the same corner, Forster spotted a young jobless man, desperate enough to consider stealing. The man was “thinking bitterly that a girl could find employment and he couldn’t. The long tentacles of Communism taking hold of him.”<sup>83</sup> Men without families became criminals or radicals, or else took to the road and a life of tramping. Women without families “would never be fulfilled.” To “V.W.F.,” the solution lay in uniting the “unemployed man” with the “business girl” in the bonds of matrimony. *Vancouver Through the Eyes* offered a future vision that combined a new economic morality with dreams of patriarchy and white supremacy. Vancouver would be freed of its Asian population. Its women would be at home fulfilling their destiny of motherhood, and its men would seek fulfilment in work. All would be united under one religion, a non-sectarian Christianity, and progress would be ensured. Victor Forster’s road out of the Great Depression was not revolution, but reconciliation, an organic, whole identity purchased at a heavy cost, the death of transient communities.

That *Vancouver Through the Eyes* was an atypical book is obvious. Yet, neither Forster’s understanding of the social geography of the City nor his struggles therein were unique. Indeed, elements of his vision are not all that distant from our own. From a presentist standpoint, it is striking how much of Forster’s treatise explores the subjects and themes, if not the politics, to which North American social historians are currently drawn — antimodernism and modernism, class exploitation, racial supremacy, and patriarchal values. If one wanted to plan a book on Vancouver’s social history, one could be forgiven for drawing liberally from Forster’s roadmap. Yet, from this standpoint, I cannot help but see this book as a tragedy:

<sup>81</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 44-45 (his ellipses).

<sup>82</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 60.

<sup>83</sup>V.W.F., *Vancouver Through the Eyes*, 60.

what began with a utopian portrait of hobo life amidst the wonders of Nature — a vision of freedom for those alienated by City life — would reverse course and erase that alternative, proposing instead a world in which tramping itself would become extinct. Forster was in this regard no bohemian, and more closely resembles Walter Benjamin's characterization of the *flâneur* as "the observer of the marketplace.... He is a spy for the capitalists, on assignment in the realm of consumers."<sup>84</sup>

*Through the Eyes* offered for consumption a reactionary admixture of labour reform and social gospel language in its analysis of the social relationships articulated on Vancouver's downtown streets. Ultimately, its author was a dialectical prophet who foretold of the destruction of the hobo way of life through a truly Christian renovation of capitalism. This new economic order was conjoined with Forster's devout belief in the supremacy of English civilization and his longing for a rigid patriarchal division of labour as the foundation of a classic "separate spheres" vision of heterosexual domesticity. Some pages, too, seethed with race hatred, advocating the cleansing of British Columbia of all Asians as a solution to unemployment. Such ugly political positions, however, should not prevent us from granting Forster the epistemic independence at the core of the now-ancient "new social history." As Fredric Jameson reminds us, the contradictions within utopian narratives — that which brought these dreams back to earth — reveal much about the struggles of cultural producers to come to terms with the contradictions of the world around them.<sup>85</sup> In this case, Forster grappled with the opposition of Nature and the City through the dialectic of identity and non-identity. The positioning of "V.W.F." as one of the "Legion of the Lost" was the cornerstone of his legitimacy as an author: this experience, he argued, gave his vision value in the marketplace. Nonetheless, if his book found a wide audience, the resulting economic value would allow him to leave behind the tramping life and return to the City, this time as a success. In commodifying his experience as a homeless man in order to resolve on a personal level the conflicts that prevented his becoming one with society, Forster's writing was a socially symbolic act that heralded the death of that which gave it life. What's more, each potential reader could help to make this Horatio Alger story a reality by purchasing the book, continuing the circulation of commodities that would revive the fortunes of "V.W.F.," if not Vancouver itself. With *Vancouver Through the Eyes of a Hobo*, Victor Forster had a work of art of real value to sell. If only Harold Whyte had been there to broker the exchange.

What happened to Forster after the publication of *Vancouver Through the Eyes*? Whether he felt he had climbed high enough on the "Ladder of [his] Ambition" remains unknown. In the midst of World War II, he again self-published a pamphlet, this time to attack the Labor Progressive Party's class-collaborationist

<sup>84</sup>Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 427.

<sup>85</sup>For Jameson's major statements, see especially *The Political Unconscious*; "Class and Allegory in Contemporary Mass Culture," "Reification and Utopia and Mass Culture," and "Historicism in The Shining," all reprinted in *Signatures of the Visible* (London 1992).

stance.<sup>86</sup> In British Columbia's 1953 provincial election, Forster stood for the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation in the riding of Vancouver-Point Grey, finishing third with just over 10,000 votes. Later in the decade, he would serve as Secretary-Treasurer of the Greater Vancouver and Lower Mainland Labour Council of the Canadian Congress of Labour, which some would argue made him an intellectual of sorts.<sup>87</sup> By the early 1980s, Forster had travelled far from his previous incarnation as a hobo, and had found an audience among Canada's far-right community. 1984's *Let Quebec Go* was followed up in 1989 by *Conning the Canadians*, which Forster billed as an account of "Quebec's drive to be a SOVEREIGN STATE with Canadians PAYING THE BILL!" On the copyright page of *Conning the Canadians* is the following aphorism: "To a Vision of Canada: ONE COUNTRY — ONE PEOPLE = ONE LANGUAGE: A NATION INDIVISIBLE."<sup>88</sup> This act of subtraction to make a singular organic nation had figured in the calculus of Forster some 55 years before, in the midst of economic crisis. "V.W.F." may have disappeared, but the desire for wholeness never left the author who created him.

*I have received valuable comments on this paper from many colleagues at Dalhousie and Queen's. Special thanks to Alisa Apostle, Mike Dawson, Ian McKay, James Wishart, Jerry Bannister, Michael Cross, Jordan Penney, Shirley Tillotson, Mark Leier, Bryan Palmer, and Krista Kesselring for discussing "V.W.F." on numerous occasions.*

<sup>86</sup>University of British Columbia, Special Collections, Angus MacInnis Memorial Collection, Box 32, File 4, Victor Forster, *Attention Workers: Who is the so-called Labor-Progressive Party working for?* (Vancouver n.d. [1940]).

<sup>87</sup>Electoral statistics can be found online at [www.elections.bc.ca/elections/electoral\\_history/24ge1953-8.html](http://www.elections.bc.ca/elections/electoral_history/24ge1953-8.html). See also MacInnis Collection, Box 33, File 8, Victor W. Forster, Submission of the Greater Vancouver and Lower Mainland Labour Council, Canadian Congress of Labour, to the Public Utilities Commission of British Columbia, 15 July 1955. For critical analyses of the labour bureaucracy and intellectuals in Vancouver, see Mark Leier, *Red Flags and Red Tape: The Making of a Labour Bureaucracy* (Toronto 1995); Bryan Palmer, *Solidarity: The Rise and Fall of an Opposition in British Columbia* (Vancouver 1987).

<sup>88</sup>Victor W. Forster, *Conning the Canadians*, ii. My copy of *Conning the Canadians*, purchased second-hand in Kingston, Ontario, was circulated by The National Association for English Rights. Forster would publish two additional volumes in this series, in 1991 and 1993.